House of Commons
Foreign Affairs Committee

The UK's relations with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain

Fifth Report of Session 2013–14

Volume I: Report, together with formal minutes, oral and written evidence

Additional written evidence is contained in Volume II, available on the Committee website at www.parliament.uk/facom

Ordered by the House of Commons to be printed 12 November 2013
The Foreign Affairs Committee

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The current staff of the Committee are Kenneth Fox (Clerk), Peter McGrath (Second Clerk), Zoe Oliver-Watts (Senior Committee Specialist), Dr Brigid Fowler (Committee Specialist), Louise Glen (Senior Committee Assistant), Vanessa Hallinan (Committee Assistant), and Alex Paterson (Media Officer).

Contacts

All correspondence should be addressed to the Clerk of the Foreign Affairs Committee, House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA. The telephone number for general enquiries is 020 7219 6105; the Committee’s email address is FAC@parliament.uk.
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Summary

The Gulf region remains critical to the UK’s interests. The Government is correct to place emphasis on the UK’s long-standing relationships with partners in the Gulf and to seek to further extend these ties. The ‘Gulf Initiative’ launched by the Government in 2010 is largely a re-branding exercise but as a sign of the UK’s commitment to its relationships in the region it appears to have been appreciated.

The Arab Spring in 2011 brought about a renewed focus on the UK’s approach to supporting human rights and democratic reform. The Gulf States were particularly challenging for FCO policy in this regard: although their domestic situations vary, some Gulf States are among the least democratic in the world, and they generally have poor human rights records. However, most are also wealthy and powerful, and vitally important to many of the UK’s interests in the region. The Government had to reassure its old allies in the Gulf of its reliability while simultaneously pressing them more urgently for change and reform. In this context, the Government’s emphasis on gradual reform based on participation and consent is a realistic approach, though the FCO should continue to monitor the effectiveness of its policy closely.

The Government is correct to seek to strengthen its diplomatic relationship with Saudi Arabia, which is important to the UK’s defence, security and commercial interests. Despite some efforts by the UK to establish a ‘strategic partnership’, official arrangements for a UK-Saudi annual dialogue have lapsed since 2011, for reasons largely outside the Government’s control. There is value in such structured relations and the UK should continue to pursue a formal dialogue arrangement with Saudi Arabia.

There is limited but worrying evidence of a poor public perception of the UK in Saudi Arabia, including among its young population, as well as a negative perception of Saudi Arabia among the UK population. This is a matter of concern, particularly at a time when public opinion and public diplomacy is rising in importance. The Government should make public engagement a priority for its Embassy in Riyadh.

Democratic governments such as the UK face a challenge in trying to reconcile their liberal constituencies at home with the need to maintain relationships with undemocratic and conservative regimes that are important to their interests on a regional and global level. We understand that to encourage a government such as that of Saudi Arabia towards reform, a combination of private and public pressure is required. By their very nature, private conversations are difficult to explain publicly. However, we are particularly concerned that some witnesses not only disagreed with UK policy but appeared to disbelieve the Government’s account of its private conversations with Saudi Arabia on reform. The Government appears to have a credibility problem and must do more to explain its policies and consider where it can point to specific progress as a result of its human rights work.

Saudi Arabia is a large and growing market for the UK, and the Saudi government’s large-scale spending programmes offer huge opportunities for British businesses. Saudi Arabia is also an important if controversial buyer for the UK defence industry. We have seen no conclusive proof that Saudi Arabia has misused the equipment sold by the UK, and the UK
provides training alongside its sales programmes which enhances the UK-Saudi defence relationship and benefits Saudi forces’ training. Ending defence sales would have significant costs for the UK-Saudi relationship and there is little evidence to suggest that it would have any positive effect, particularly given the presence of other sellers in the market.

Saudi Arabia continues to be a vital but complicated counter-terrorism partner for the UK and wider international community. Counter-terrorism co-operation has proven to be of great and practical benefit to both sides and has been instrumental in protecting British lives and interests. However, Saudi Arabia is part of the problem as well as part of the solution. We recommend that the Government make it a priority to engage with its counter-terrorism partners in Saudi Arabia to improve the monitoring of the funding flowing from Saudi Arabia to organisations with an extremist message so that it can be more effectively disrupted. The Government should also encourage Saudi Arabia to ensure that its legitimate promotion of religious values does not inadvertently contribute to the furtherance of extremism, especially with regard to states in North Africa that have been particularly vulnerable to the influence of extremist groups, as well as in states in other regions such as Pakistan, Bangladesh and Indonesia.

We note the reported supply of arms by Saudi Arabia to groups in Syria; the Government should set out in its response to this report its assessment of the situation and the actions it is taking to monitor any groups that are receiving funding and arms from Saudi Arabia, and its efforts to engage with the Saudi authorities regarding any concerns about those groups.

The aggressive manner in which Bahrain’s security forces handled events in 2011 has deeply damaged Bahrain’s international reputation and complicated its relationship with the UK and others. Its failure quickly to implement the recommendations of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry further damaged good faith and good will toward Bahrain. The Government was correct to take a firm line in 2011 with regard to the unacceptable violence, but it has successfully re-established relations since then and the UK is now well placed to help Bahrain shape its future.

Bahrain is subject to intense pressure from Saudi Arabia and Iran, which have strong and opposing interests in what happens in Bahrain and which somewhat limit the freedom of movement of Bahrain’s leadership. This regional and sectarian context is not always well understood or explained by Western press. However, it cannot excuse the continuing stalemate and slow rate of progress in Bahrain.

Nonetheless, the UK is right to be understanding of Bahrain’s dilemmas. For its region, prior to the protests Bahrain was relatively liberal and reforming, and there is not an easy answer to its internal political issues. However, many of Bahrain’s problems are of its Government’s own making. The UK must press with greater urgency and force for Bahrain to implement the BICI reforms, engage seriously in dialogue and welcome UN mechanisms in order to re-establish good faith in its intentions. If there is no significant progress by the start of 2014, the Government should designate Bahrain as a ‘country of concern’ in its next Human Rights Report.

Although the UK and Bahrain share warm and long-standing ties, public opinion has
hardened in both states since 2011. The UK has received criticism from various directions in Bahrain both for being too critical and for being too supportive. The UK has a very high profile in Bahrain and must be careful about the message it sends to the broader public in Bahrain and internationally as it positions itself as a ‘critical friend’.

Defence cooperation and sales with Bahrain have proved controversial since the violent events of 2011. However, we are persuaded that Bahrain provides an immensely valuable home in the Gulf for UK naval assets which would be difficult to find elsewhere, and the UK provides important training to Bahraini forces which can help to raise standards and embed best practice. Nevertheless, we are disappointed that the Government was able to provide so little detail of its recent Defence Accord with Manama.

There is a continuing problem with a lack of Arabic language skills among FCO diplomats though the FCO has taken some steps to address this, including the opening of its language school. It will take time to re-build Arabic language capacity but the goal must be for all senior diplomats in the region to speak Arabic.
Conclusions and recommendations

Broader context: UK ties with the Gulf

1. The Gulf is a region that remains important to the UK’s defence interests and offers substantial commercial opportunities. The UK has benefited from its historical links with the Gulf States, including with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. The UK’s long-standing relationships in the Gulf place it in a good position to extend and benefit from these ties in the coming years. (Paragraph 12)

2. The UK is correct to prioritise its Gulf relations, which remain key to the UK’s national interests. We are satisfied that the Gulf Initiative is being appreciated by the UK’s partners in the Gulf. It is largely a re-branding exercise, but that does not invalidate its worth as a signal of the UK’s commitment to the region. However, we find no conclusive proof of neglect by previous governments. (Paragraph 18)

3. The Arab Spring in 2011 revealed some of the differences between the UK and the Gulf with regard to differing domestic governance systems and approach to the revolutions. The Government had to reassure its old allies in the Gulf of its reliability while simultaneously pressing them more urgently for change and reform. In this context, the Government’s emphasis on gradual reform based on participation and consent is a realistic approach, though the Committee believes the FCO should continue to monitor the effectiveness of its policy closely. (Paragraph 26)

Bilateral relations with Saudi Arabia

4. The UK-Saudi relationship continues to be important for the UK. We have no reason to suspect that the failure so far to establish a formal ‘Strategic Partnership’ indicates that the friendship between the UK and Saudi Arabia has suffered. It appears that practical reasons have prevented progress. However, we agree with the Government’s original position that structured relations can provide a useful forum to enhance co-operation on common interests and to raise issues of concern, and the lapse of regular annual talks is therefore regrettable. The FCO should include the reinstatement of talks via a strategic partnership, or the reinstatement of the Two Kingdoms Dialogue, as a goal in its business plan and should continue to represent the benefits of such structured talks to the authorities in Saudi Arabia. (Paragraph 34)

5. Evidence of negative perceptions of the UK among young Saudis is deeply concerning, particularly in a state in which over 60% of the population is under 30 years old. It is difficult with so little evidence to draw conclusions as to the reason for the low level of trust in the UK, but we recommend that the Government set out in response to this report any research it has conducted on the public perception of the UK in Saudi Arabia, and its views on the reasons for the poor public perception of the UK. (Paragraph 39)

6. We recommend that the Government make public engagement with the wider Saudi population a priority for its digital diplomacy team in the Gulf and Embassy in Saudi Arabia. The Government should also set out in response to this report its public
engagement strategy, including the steps it is taking to engage with Saudi youth on social media, how it is representing the UK to the younger generation in Saudi Arabia, and what staff and resources it is dedicating to this task. (Paragraph 44)

7. The work of the British Council is particularly useful in Saudi Arabia as it is one of the only channels of direct contact between the UK and Saudi public. As a provider of valued language training services, it is able to co-operate with and support the Saudi authorities at the same time as engaging directly with the Saudi public and promoting a positive image of the UK. (Paragraph 45)

8. The growing Saudi market and the Saudi government’s spending plans offer huge opportunities for British businesses across a wide range of sectors. Given the large-scale opportunities available, we see no reason why the UK should not set ambitious targets for growth in UK-Saudi trade and investment. (Paragraph 56)

9. We recommend that the Government facilitate a leading role for British businesses in international consortia to bid for projects in Saudi Arabia. In its response to this report, the Government should set out what resources it is dedicating to this task. (Paragraph 57)

10. We recommend that the Government assess whether it would be beneficial to lower the costs of its introduction services to British businesses for a temporary period in order to boost the UK’s participation in the Saudi market, particularly for small and medium sized enterprises. (Paragraph 59)

11. The current visa regime is a significant source of difficulty and inconvenience for both Saudi and British businessmen and undermines the UK Government’s stated priority of increasing trade with Saudi Arabia. The improvement of the visa terms would be of benefit to both states and we are disappointed that the UK has not managed to secure reciprocal terms for its business visas. We recommend that the Government make improving the visa regime a priority in its discussions with the Saudi government when seeking to establish a strategic partnership. (Paragraph 62)

12. Saudi Arabia is an important buyer for the UK defence industry, and defence sales are important to the overall UK-Saudi relationship. The UK provides valued training alongside its defence sales that is beneficial to both UK and Saudi forces. With other competitors in the market, there is little to suggest that ending the UK’s defence sales would have any effect on overall defence sales to Saudi Arabia, or that it would give the UK additional leverage to effect positive improvements. The government must adhere strictly to its existing policy to ensure that defence equipment sold by UK firms are not used for human rights abuses or internal repression. In its response to this report the Government should provide further evidence that it is doing so in practice, including any evidence gathered by end-use monitoring. (Paragraph 78)

13. Saudi Arabia continues to be a vital but complicated counter-terrorism partner for the UK and wider international community. Counter-terrorism co-operation has proven to be of great and practical benefit to both sides and has been instrumental in protecting British lives and interests. However, Saudi Arabia is part of the problem as well as part of the solution. We recommend that the Government make it a priority to engage with its counter-terrorism partners in Saudi Arabia to improve the monitoring of the funding flowing from Saudi Arabia to organisations with an
extremist message so that it can be more effectively disrupted. The Government should also encourage Saudi Arabia to ensure that its legitimate promotion of religious values does not inadvertently contribute to the furtherance of extremism, especially with regard to states in North Africa that have been particularly vulnerable to the influence of extremist groups, as well as in states in other regions such as Pakistan, Bangladesh and Indonesia. (Paragraph 85)

14. Given that the Saudi government does not acknowledge that torture is ever used by its officials, we would welcome further information on the safeguards the UK government has put in place to ensure that intelligence shared by Saudi Arabia does not result from torture. Counter-terrorism is an area in which Saudi authorities appear to be willing to be innovative and to co-operate with international partners. The UK should build on this co-operation to support improvements in standards and best practice. The British Embassy in Riyadh should pursue the chance offered by Saudi authorities to attend a counter-terrorism trial and the Government should update the Committee in its response to this report. (Paragraph 87)

15. We were surprised and disappointed by Saudi Arabia’s decision to reject a non-permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council. We believe that Saudi Arabia’s concerns are best expressed from a position on the Council within the UN system. The Government should encourage its counterparts in Saudi Arabia to re-engage with the UN Security Council on these important regional issues. (Paragraph 92)

16. Saudi Arabia is an important regional partner, which is taking an increasingly active international role. It shares many of the UK’s goals in the region and it is important to work closely with Saudi Arabia on these shared outcomes. However, the government should be vigilant with regard to where Saudi Arabia’s promotion of religious values may have a destabilising effect in the long-term, and must take steps with its international partners to discourage this policy, or to mitigate its effects. (Paragraph 96)

17. Although there is a long way still to go in bringing stability to Yemen, this is a good example of UK-Saudi co-operation to try to bring stabilization and to promote development in a country that is key to Saudi Arabia’s interests. As such, it could act as a model of high-profile and substantial British support for locally-led solutions to regional problems. (Paragraph 100)

18. The UK and Saudi Arabia share immediate and critical concerns with regard to Iran’s nuclear programme and its interference in states in the region. It will be important for the Government to work closely with Saudi Arabia on engaging with Iran as a more constructive regional player. Saudi Arabia provides vital support for international action via sanctions. Saudi Arabia’s broader rivalry with Iran on ethnic and religious lines is a cause for concern, but the Saudi leadership has shown itself willing to act as a pragmatic and useful foreign policy partner in containing the Iranian threat to regional and international security. (Paragraph 104)

19. Saudi Arabia has been a strong voice in the Gulf and Arab world in support of international action on Syria. The UK and Saudi Arabia share a deep concern about
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Paragraph 108

20. We note the reported supply of arms by Saudi Arabia to groups in Syria; the Government should set out in its response to this report its assessment of the situation and the actions it is taking to monitor any groups that are receiving funding and arms from Saudi Arabia, and its efforts to engage with the Saudi authorities regarding any concerns about those groups. (Paragraph 109)

21. Given the UK's close relationship with both Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, the Government should engage with Saudi Arabia on the UK's efforts to promote the reform process in Bahrain and an inclusive and substantive National Dialogue. (Paragraph 115)

22. Despite some recent improvements, the human rights situation in Saudi Arabia remains very poor. The absence of civil and political rights and the use of extreme punishments with inadequate judicial safeguards remain of deep concern, as do the rights of women and minorities. We recognise and welcome the significant steps that have been taken toward improved rights and freedoms, particularly with regard to women's rights, but this has started from a very low base. (Paragraph 125)

23. Although we recognise and are concerned about the poor human rights record in Saudi Arabia, we are unconvinced that constant and severe public criticism by the UK Government would result in anything other than disengagement by the Saudi side. This would achieve none of the UK's goals and could result in a worsening situation in Saudi Arabia. However, it is important that the UK maintain credibility at home and abroad with regard to its human rights work. (Paragraph 133)

24. Democratic governments such as the UK face a challenge in trying to reconcile their liberal constituencies at home with the need to maintain relationships with undemocratic and conservative regimes that are important to our interests on a regional and global level. We understand that to encourage a Government such as that of Saudi Arabia toward reform, a combination of private and public pressure is required. By their very nature, private conversations are difficult to explain publicly. However, we are particularly concerned that some witnesses not only disagreed with UK policy but appeared to disbelieve the Government's account of its private conversations with Saudi Arabia on reform. The Government appears to have a credibility problem and must do more to explain its policies and consider where it can point to specific progress as a result of its human rights work. We recommend that the Government consider what confidence-building measures it could put in place, such as supporting access to Saudi Arabia for NGOs and journalists, and conduct a review of what information it is able to make available either to NGOs or in the public domain. (Paragraph 134)

25. The UK is well-placed to provide legal and judicial reform assistance and we recommend that the government make this constructive contribution a focus of its human rights work with Saudi Arabia. Despite the considerable challenges, promising steps appear to have been taken toward providing constructive assistance but these must be converted into solid and reportable programmes. The UK should also encourage the development of Saudi Arabia's consultative systems, and we
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26. The UN provides an important forum for constructive discussion of Saudi Arabia’s progress and continuing challenges. Saudi Arabia’s Universal Periodic Review is an opportunity for the UK to make clear its concerns about and support for progress on reform and human rights in Saudi Arabia. Following Saudi Arabia’s Universal Periodic Review in October, the government should encourage Saudi Arabia to engage constructively with the United Nations. (Paragraph 138)

Bilateral relations with Bahrain

27. The UK’s two recent ambassadors to Bahrain have taken different approaches to their work in response to the situation in Bahrain at the time of their tenure. We commend the energy that both former Ambassador Jamie Bowden and current Ambassador Iain Lindsay have brought to this role in a difficult situation. (Paragraph 157)

28. The aggressive manner in the way that the Bahraini security forces handled events in 2011 has deeply damaged Bahrain’s international reputation, and complicated its relationships with Western governments, including the UK. Bahrain’s failure quickly to implement the important and practical recommendations of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry has created further difficulties in its relationship with the UK, and has squandered the good faith and goodwill that the BICI could have helped to restore. (Paragraph 160)

29. In our view the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry made sensible recommendations and the Bahrain government’s failure to implement them fully is inexplicable. If it had done so, it would have been easier for the international community as a whole to engage with the Bahraini leadership. (Paragraph 161)

30. The Government was correct to take a firm line in 2011 urging an end to the unacceptable violence and expressing its deep concern to the Bahraini authorities. The Government’s efforts to re-establish close relations since 2011 appear to have been successful, and the UK is now well placed to help Bahrain as it shapes its future. The Government must, however, continue to monitor its policies in respect to Bahrain closely. (Paragraph 162)

31. While criticism of the UK in Bahrain is not new, it is a cause of concern. The UK’s high profile in Bahrain is an asset for the UK that can be used to influence and support Bahrain’s reform, but it also makes British actions and statements a target for scrutiny and criticism. Given the detailed attention that statements and actions by the British Embassy receive, the UK must be extremely careful about the message it sends to the broader public in Bahrain and internationally as it positions itself as a “critical friend” to Bahrain. We conclude that the UK Government is correct to try to use its high profile and influence to good effect to support evolutionary reform in Bahrain and to act as a critical friend. (Paragraph 167)

32. The British Council provides a valuable vehicle for the promotion of British values and the provision of useful skills in Bahrain. We particularly welcome its commitment to learning and debate, which is a critical service in a society that
The UK’s relations with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain appears to be becoming more divided. We recommend that in response to this report the Government provide details on what skills training the British Council is providing in Bahrain in order to enhance their students’ skills to participate more effectively in the political process of evolutionary reform and change. (Paragraph 170)

33. The UK is well placed to capitalise on its business reputation in Bahrain as it begins large-scale infrastructure spending. (Paragraph 175)

34. The Government should not grant any licence that could contribute to internal repression and should make decisions on other export licences on a case-by-case basis, ensuring the strict implementation of existing policies. The Government should provide in response to this report further evidence that it is adhering in practice to its own strict policies with regard to British defence equipment sold to Bahrain including any evidence gathered by end-use monitoring. (Paragraph 180)

35. Both the government and the opposition in Bahrain view UK defence sales as a signal of British support for the government. The UK Government should take this into account when considering high-profile sales, such as the Eurofighter Typhoon, to Bahrain. (Paragraph 181)

36. Bahrain provides the UK with an immensely valuable home in the Gulf and the defence co-operation is mutually beneficial. Ending defence co-operation and naval basing in Bahrain and seeking a substitute would be an extremely costly and difficult step. (Paragraph 192)

37. We recommend that UK-supplied training, delivered in the UK or Bahrain, should always include human rights elements, and that the Government should set out in response to this report the elements included in its each of the training programmes provided to Bahrain that cover rights, the rule of law and the correct use of force. (Paragraph 193)

38. We are disappointed that the Government has provided so little detail to Parliament and this Committee on its most recent defence accord with Bahrain. It was predictable that Bahrain would consider it a public signal of support and, if the Government did not mean it to send this message, it would have been more sensible to have immediately released information about the Accord and the UK’s reasons for agreeing it at this time. We understand that the Government does not publish Defence Accord Agreements but in its response to this report, the Government should consider what, if any, further information it could release about this Defence Accord and the UK’s reasons for signing it at this time. (Paragraph 194)

39. Bahrain’s implementation of the BICI recommendations has been disappointingly slow and has further damaged its international reputation. Swift implementation of the recommendations would have gone a long way toward preventing the breakdown in trust and fracturing of opposition in Bahrain. (Paragraph 200)

40. We are particularly concerned by recent reports that the Bahraini authorities have banned political groups from having unrestricted access to diplomats. In its response to this report the Government should provide its assessment of the situation including information on whether it has affected any of the Embassy’s meetings,
along with any representations it has made to the authorities to lift the ban. (Paragraph 201)

41. We conclude that the Government is right to pursue a strategy of engagement with Bahrain and to demonstrate the benefits of a reforming, moderate approach. However, British engagement and support should not be unconditional in the face of continued violations and slow implementation of reforms. There is a danger to the UK’s credibility if it allows itself to become associated with the problems in Bahrain rather than solutions. (Paragraph 210)

42. We recommend that the UK seek to meet members of the opposition groups whenever possible, and advocate on behalf of international and British NGOs for access to Bahrain. In its response to this report, the Government should set out the meetings held with Bahraini NGOs and opposition figures in the last 12 months, and the steps it has taken to improve NGO access to Bahrain. (Paragraph 211)

43. We recommend that the Government make securing an invitation to the UN Special Rapporteur on torture a priority in its next Joint Working Group with the Bahraini authorities. (Paragraph 213)

44. The UK is right to be understanding of Bahrain’s dilemmas. For its region, prior to the protests it was liberal and reforming, and there is not an easy answer to its internal political issues. However, many of Bahrain’s problems are of its Government’s own making. The UK must press with greater urgency and force for Bahrain to implement the BICI reforms, engage seriously in dialogue and welcome UN mechanisms in order to re-establish good faith in its intentions. If there is no significant progress by the start of 2014, the Government should designate Bahrain as a ‘country of concern’ in its Human Rights Report. (Paragraph 214)

45. We conclude that Bahrain is subject to intense pressure from other states in the Gulf, which have strong and opposing interests in what happens in Bahrain. The UK Government should work to improve the international context in which Bahrain seeks a national reconciliation. Regional players must be involved in the reform and reconciliation process if it is to have any chance to succeed. The sectarian element to Bahrain’s troubles are a complicating factor, but also make Bahrain’s reconciliation even more of a prize: if these communities can find a way to reconcile and work together then it will be an example in the region. (Paragraph 219)

**FCO resources in the Gulf**

46. We welcome the Government’s efforts to improve the FCO’s Arabic language skills in the Gulf, in particular by designating more posts as ‘speaker slots’. However, it appears that 25% of staff in those speaker slots have low levels of Arabic proficiency, and 40% have not reached the required standard for their grade, undermining the effect of this policy. For reasons of public diplomacy (to local television interviews, for example), as well as to demonstrate respect for the partner state, it is important that high-level FCO diplomats speak Arabic even in those states where they can manage in English or with a translator. In this context, we welcome the re-opening of the FCO’s language school, fulfilling a pledge made by the Foreign Secretary in 2011. (Paragraph 226)
47. We understand that it will take time to re-build Arabic language capacity, particularly at the senior levels of the FCO, but we believe that it is important that the Government demonstrate its commitment to the goal of improving language skills at all levels of the FCO and incentivise FCO staff to learn Arabic. We recommend that the FCO set a timeframe in which it expects to make a minimum level of Arabic language skills mandatory for those who wish to be appointed to senior diplomatic posts in the region. (Paragraph 227)

**Future of UK-Gulf relations**

48. The UK must make the most of what it can offer the Gulf: an established partner with understanding of the region, and a bridge to the larger powers of the United States and European Union. (Paragraph 231)

49. The UK will have to work harder in future to maintain its influence and secure its interests in the Gulf. The Government should ensure that it does not lose its current momentum and should be willing to dedicate further staff and other resources to this important region. (Paragraph 231)

50. The Government should set out in its response to this report how the FCO is contributing to the Prime Minister’s review of UK-Gulf relations, and what will be made public as a result of this review. (Paragraph 231)

51. The Government must make the UK’s public profile and reputation a more central part of its work in the Gulf, and ensure that constructive relationships are built with a wide cross-section of society, if it is to remain a principal partner in the future. (Paragraph 232)
1 Introduction

Our inquiry

1. The UK’s relationship with the six states that border the Gulf\(^1\) stretches back over two centuries of alliances in the fields of defence, trade, and regional security. The Government has announced that it is strongly committed to strengthening the UK’s bilateral relations with all its partners in the Gulf, and to expanding cooperation “across the board, in culture, education, defence and security, trade and investment, and foreign policy”.\(^2\) The Foreign Secretary has declared improving UK relations with the Gulf to be a personal goal,\(^3\) and the Government included ambitions to upgrade UK-Gulf relations in its 2011-15 Business Plan. In 2010, the Government therefore launched its ‘Gulf Initiative’, a cross-departmental effort to improve its relations with the Gulf States (Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)).

2. We considered this a significant foreign policy initiative in a region of vital importance to the UK. Although the FCO has emphasised that the Gulf Initiative aims to improve the UK’s relations with all Gulf States, we chose to focus our inquiry on two in particular, which was in line with previous FAC bilateral inquiries into important partners, such as Brazil and Turkey. First, we chose to look at the UK’s relations with Saudi Arabia, as the largest and most influential Gulf state, as well as one with which the UK shares some priorities in terms of defence and security, counter-terrorism, and trade. Second, we chose to examine the UK’s relationship with Saudi Arabia’s island neighbour Bahrain, which is connected to the Saudi mainland by a causeway. The UK-Bahrain relationship is one of the UK’s oldest and closest bilateral relationships in the Gulf. Bahrain has experienced significant turbulence and challenge since the events of 2011, so we wanted to examine how this might have affected the UK-Bahrain relationship, as well as how the UK has supported Bahrain during this difficult period.

3. The Foreign Affairs Committee last considered the UK’s relationship with a Gulf State in 2006, when our predecessor committee focused on the UK’s relationship with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates as part of its overarching inquiry into Foreign Policy Aspects of the War against Terrorism.

4. The Committee invited written submissions on the UK’s relations with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, in the broader context of the UK and the Gulf States, with a particular focus on the following points:

- the UK’s foreign policy priorities in its relations with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain and how effectively the Government balances the UK’s interests in defence, commerce, energy security, counter-terrorism, and human rights;

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1 Iran refers to the region as the Persian Gulf, while some Gulf States refer to it as the Arabian Gulf. The FCO calls it the Gulf, as will this report.


3 Ibid.
• the extent to which the FCO’s Gulf Initiative has met its objective of improving relations with the Gulf States more generally and establishing the UK as a “key strategic partner” in the region as a whole;

• Saudi Arabia and Bahrain as foreign policy partners for the UK, particularly with regard to Iran and Syria and as members of international and regional organisations;

• the implications of the Arab Spring for UK foreign policy in its relations with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain;

• how the UK can encourage democratic and liberalising reforms in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, including its power to effect improvements;

• the long-term trends and scenarios in the region for which the FCO should prepare, and the extent to which it is doing so;

• the extent to which the FCO has the resources, personnel and capacities required for effective policy in the region.

5. We received a total of 71 written submissions from individuals, former diplomats, nongovernmental organisations, academics, writers, and the Government. Some of these submissions contained allegations against individuals and organisations as well as personal information, such as individuals’ medical conditions and details of alleged maltreatment and torture. We needed to consider carefully the consequences of publishing such information, and we are grateful to those who exercised patience while we did so. We have now published 57 submissions as evidence: in some cases authors agreed to remove personal information; in others, the original submission has been redacted on agreement with the author in order to protect individuals’ safety and privacy. Those that were not published included duplicates, submissions that were later withdrawn, submissions that had already been published elsewhere and submissions which were not fully relevant to the inquiry but which we nonetheless treated as background papers.

6. We took oral evidence on six occasions, between January 2013 and July 2013. Witnesses included academics, researchers, former diplomats, business representatives, human rights and reform experts and Government Ministers and officials from the Ministry of Defence and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. A full list of witnesses can be found on page 112 of this report. In March 2013, we visited Riyadh in Saudi Arabia and Manama in Bahrain. We provide a list of our meetings during these visits as Annex A. We also held a number of private informal meetings in London relevant to our inquiry; a full list of these meetings can be found at Annex B. We would like to thank all those who provided written and oral evidence, spoke to us in connection with our inquiry or otherwise assisted us, and especially the UK’s Ambassadors to Saudi Arabia and Bahrain and their teams for facilitating our visits. We also record our thanks to Sir William Patey, former British Ambassador to Saudi Arabia (2007-2010) for his service as Special Adviser to the Committee for this inquiry.4

4 Sir William was appointed on 4 December 2012. He declared the following interests: Adviser to Control Risks, Non Executive Director HSBC Bank Middle East, and Chairman Swindon Town FC. On 8 January 2013 he made a further declaration of his membership of the Locarno Group, an advisory body to the FCO. These declarations appear in the formal minutes of Committee meetings, published at http://www.parliament.uk/documents/commons-committees/foreign-affairs/MOPs12-13final.pdf.
2 Broader context: UK ties with the Gulf

7. Saudi Arabia and Bahrain are members of a group of six oil-producing monarchies that border the Gulf, known as the Gulf States. In the context of the Arab Spring, which brought about a renewed focus on the UK’s approach to supporting human rights and democratic reform, our witnesses considered that the Gulf States were particularly challenging for FCO policy. Although their domestic situations vary, some Gulf States are among the least democratic in the world, and they generally have poor or very poor human rights records. However, most are also wealthy and influential, and vitally important to many of the UK’s interests in the region.

8. In many ways, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain are at opposite ends of the spectrum among the Gulf States: Saudi Arabia is the largest oil-producer in the Gulf and indeed the world, and accounts for over 20% of the region’s GDP, while Bahrain has comparatively few

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natural resources and is the Gulf’s smallest economy. In this chapter, we consider the UK’s broad approach to the Gulf region as a context for looking at its relationship with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain in detail.

**Historic ties with the Gulf States**

9. The UK has a unique history of close relationships with Gulf rulers and involvement in Gulf affairs including, in different ways, with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. The region became important to the UK in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as the UK established and protected its global trading network and, eventually, its empire. Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and the UAE6 all became British Protectorates during the nineteenth and early twentieth century, ceding to the UK control of their foreign affairs in return for guaranteeing their security. Connections were also established with Oman and Saudi Arabia, and by the early twentieth century the UK had become the pre-eminent Western power in the Gulf. The Second World War and end of the British Empire had inevitable consequences for the UK’s influence in the region, and the UK’s role as a principal power and guarantor of security in the area was eclipsed by the United States and the Gulf States’ own growing power. Britain withdrew from its remaining commitments in regions east of Suez in 1971, and the Gulf now comprises six independent and wealthy states with considerable regional power of their own.

10. The FCO told us that the Gulf had mattered to the UK for generations, and described the UK’s relationships in the Gulf as “among our most enduring in the world”.7 Britain’s long history of involvement in the region has advantages and disadvantages. Jane Kinninmont warned that some elements of ruling families who felt they were disadvantaged by British influence still harboured “resentments”,8 and several witnesses considered that in the wider society there existed an exaggerated sense of the UK’s ongoing influence and power, and a perception that “behind the scenes there may still be Brits pulling strings”.9 This latter point is particularly true in Bahrain, which remained a British Protectorate until 1971 and is where the UK (arguably) continues to exert the most influence in the Gulf. However, the fact that the Gulf wasn’t directly colonised is generally thought to have resulted in a more mutually respectful relationship between elites than has been the case elsewhere,10 and the UK now has a valuable legacy of close ties with a number of Gulf rulers.11 For the Gulf monarchies, the history of bilateral relations between our two states is also a personal, and recent, history of their families and states. Throughout the whole of Britain’s relations with Saudi Arabia since its formation in the 1930s, it has been ruled by the current King’s father and brothers. In Bahrain, one of our witnesses reminded us that the British adviser was effectively one of the most powerful men in the Kingdom until 1957, within the living memory of some of the members of the current royal family. Witnesses also noted a sense in the Gulf of the UK as an experienced and knowledgeable partner, particularly in comparison with other Western states (such as

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6 Before becoming the United Arab Emirates on its independence from the UK, the UAE was known as the Trucial States.
7 Ev 133
8 Q 4
9 Q 4
10 See, for instance, Q4 and Q 193
11 See, for instance, Q69 and Q 193
the US). Professor Rosemary Hollis indicated that there was an element of flattery to this, but Neil Partrick said “The cliché is, ‘You understand us. You have been around roughly for 150 years’.

**Ongoing interests**

11. The UK’s relationship with the Gulf is not merely historical but reflects ongoing and, in some cases, growing British interests in the region. As one of the most prosperous areas in the world, located in the heart of the Middle East, with over 160,000 British nationals living and working in the Gulf, the region is important for all three of the FCO’s key objectives: protecting the UK’s security, supporting British nationals overseas, and promoting the UK’s economy. The Gulf States are particularly important to the UK in the following fields:

- **Defence**: The UK has defence cooperation arrangements with all six Gulf States which between them provide bases for the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force, and there is typically at least one Royal Navy frigate or destroyer based in the Gulf, as well as Royal Navy mine hunters.

- **Counter-terrorism**: The Gulf States are important counter-terrorism partners, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE are founding members of the Global Counter-Terrorism Forum (GCTF), an informal, multi-lateral ‘platform’ for sharing counter-terrorism expertise and enhancing international cooperation; and the UK and UAE co-chair the GCTF’s Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) working group, which aims to strengthen measures and discuss best practice, and collaborate on a CVE Centre of Excellence.

- **Energy security**: as the home of 55% of the world’s proven oil reserves and 45% of its proven gas reserves, the Gulf is critical to global energy security and market stability.

- **Trade and investment**: Perhaps unsurprisingly, given its natural resources, the Gulf region has a combined GDP of £1.3 trillion and an average annual GDP growth of 5.4% over the last five years. It is now the UK’s seventh largest export market, which the Government pointed out, was "larger than India, Russia and Mexico combined". In addition, the region is home to 27% of the world’s sovereign wealth and has increased its investments in the UK over the last few years through high-profile ventures such as the London Bridge skyscraper The Shard, and the London Gateway Port Project.

12. Saudi Arabia and Bahrain fit into this mixture of interests in different ways: Saudi Arabia is very important to defence, counter-terrorism, energy security and trade, though it is far less well represented with respect to inward investment into the UK than some of its neighbours in the Gulf, such as Qatar and the UAE. In contrast, Bahrain is the smallest economy and partner for UK trade and investment in the Gulf, but by merit of its location in the Gulf and its willingness to host UK and US naval assets, it is vitally important to the UK’s interests in defence and energy security. The Gulf is a region that remains important to the UK’s defence interests and offers substantial commercial opportunities. The UK has benefited from its historical links with the Gulf States,
including with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. The UK’s long-standing relationships in the Gulf place it in a good position to extend and benefit from these ties in the coming years.

**UK Government policy: renewing ties**

13. On taking office in 2010, the Foreign Secretary announced his intention to reinvigorate bilateral ties with the Gulf States,\(^1\) which he considered to be “obvious examples” of states with which Britain has historic ties, and could “do more.”\(^2\) This commitment to the Gulf is part of the Government’s broader efforts to promote closer bilateral relationships between Britain and the major emerging global markets, and to place greater emphasis on the UK’s historic partnerships as part of a distinctive and long-term British foreign policy.\(^3\) The FCO’s subsequent May 2011 Business Plan contained plans to re-launch UK engagement with the Gulf States by establishing “strategic relationships” with all six states, strengthening regional security and improving commercial, economic, cultural and educational ties.\(^4\) It has succeeded in doing so with five of the six Gulf States; only Saudi Arabia has not signed a dialogue or joint working agreement (see chapter 3 for more details).

14. The Government also launched a cross-departmental ‘Gulf Initiative’ in 2010. The Gulf Initiative does not have dedicated staff or published strategy, but acts as a statement of intent and an overarching framework for the UK’s renewed effort toward the Gulf. It has a relatively small budget of approximately £98,000 to fund related projects, for instance to support ministerial bilateral meetings; to support a Commercial Diplomacy project to promote UK companies in major industrial centres in South and West Saudi Arabia; and the help fund the position of the “Defence Special Adviser to the Middle East” when his work is in support of FCO objectives in the Gulf.\(^5\) This is unlike the FCO’s Arab Partnership Initiative, (now called Arab Partnership), which has a dedicated staff and a multi-million pound fund for projects jointly administered with DfID, although there is some overlap between the two (see paragraph 20 for Arab Partnership funding for projects in the Gulf).

15. The Government has pursued improved diplomatic ties by increasing the number of high-level ministerial visits to and from the region, and by establishing working groups that offer guaranteed opportunities for ministerial-level dialogue. The Government has also said it intends to become the Gulf’s commercial ‘partner of choice’, and it has set ambitious trade targets, including the doubling of trade with Kuwait and Qatar by 2015. The UK Trade and Investment (UKTI), the Government’s trade promotion body, has a Middle East Taskforce focused on the high growth markets of the Gulf (UAE, Saudi Arabia and Qatar) and Egypt, and the Prime Minister has led two trade delegations to the region in the last three years. Cultural exchange projects have included the British Museum’s Hajj

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\(^1\) Speech by the Foreign Secretary William Hague, ‘Britain’s Foreign Policy in a Networked World’, 1 July 2010, London. Published on FCO website: www.gov.uk

\(^2\) Interview with the Foreign Secretary, 17 June 2010, Al Jazeera. Published on FCO website: www.gov.uk

\(^3\) “Foreign Secretary visits Bahrain”, FCO announcement, 10 February 2011


\(^5\) Information provided by the FCO, October 2013 [not published]
exhibition, as well as the Qatar-UK 2013 ‘Year of Culture’, which aims to forge new partnerships in the arts, education, sport and science.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Significant outward and inward visits 2010-2013</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Outward (to Gulf)</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Over 230 outward visits by ministers from all government departments since 2010, including:</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Four visits to the Gulf by the current UK Prime Minister since 2010</td>
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<tr>
<td>- State visit by Her Majesty the Queen in November 2010 to Oman and the UAE</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Visit by His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales and the Duchess of Cornwall in March 2013 to Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Qatar and Oman.</td>
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16. The Government told us that the Gulf Initiative was showing “clear results” in its effort to reverse neglect of the UK’s relationships in the Gulf in previous years, and that “increased UK engagement has been noticed and welcomed by our key contacts in the region at the highest levels.” The FCO told us that the UK’s bilateral trade with the Gulf had increased by 39% over the last two years, from £21.5 billion to £29.8 billion. The then Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Alistair Burt MP, the Minister with responsibility for the Middle East and North Africa, acknowledged that diplomats in the Gulf under previous governments were “giving absolutely 100% of their best” but said that the word neglect had “popped up” anecdotally on visits to the region, and the Government had felt that there was more that could be done through increased visits “and more we could do to give a sense that traditional partners were as important now and in the future as they had been in the past.”

The then Lord Mayor of London, Roger Gifford, provided support for the Government’s position, writing that until the last Government was elected in 2010, the Lord Mayor was the only person on Ministerial level who visited the Gulf on a regular basis. Since then the number of Ministerial visits has grown and, whilst this has challenged Posts, it has been appreciated greatly by the rulers and governments of the Gulf States.

17. All of our witnesses agreed that ministerial and royal visits were appreciated in the Gulf. Chris Doyle said that visits mattered, particularly at the current time: “They want to see top-level royals and top-level Ministers coming to see them, nurturing that relationship. It is a time when they feel they need reassurance.” However, witnesses cast doubt as to the claim that the UK had previously neglected the Gulf, and the perception that the relationship had significantly improved under the Gulf Initiative. Dr Neil Partrick

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19 The figures of 160 outward and 100 inward visits were provided in the FCO’s written submission in November 2012. It can be assumed that these numbers will have increased since then.

20 Second Report from the Foreign Affairs Committee, Session 2012-13, British Foreign Policy and the ‘Arab Spring’, HC80 Ev 81

21 Ev 134

22 Q 381

23 Ev 124

24 Q 69
said he had been “struck by the Conservative Opposition’s concern about giving more attention to a relationship that they felt was neglected. I don’t think that the leaders of the GCC actually did feel neglected […] I do not think that the UK Government has a lot of catching up to do.” Former ambassadors Sir Roger Tomkys and Robin Lamb also felt that there had been continued diplomatic effort throughout the period, and Jane Kinninmont saw “a fair amount of continuity. The Saudi King’s only state visit to the UK was under the previous government.”

18. The UK is correct to prioritise its Gulf relations, which remain key to the UK’s national interests. We are satisfied that the Gulf Initiative is being appreciated by the UK’s partners in the Gulf. It is largely a re-branding exercise, but that does not invalidate its worth as a signal of the UK’s commitment to the region. However, we find no conclusive proof of neglect by previous governments.

The UK’s support for reform and human rights in the Gulf

19. Upon taking office in 2010, the Government emphasised human rights as a central pillar of its foreign policy. During one of his key speeches in 2010 that set out the UK’s foreign policy direction, the Foreign Secretary said:

    Our foreign policy should always have consistent support for human rights and poverty reduction at its irreducible core and we should always strive to act with moral authority, recognising that once that is damaged it is hard to restore.

The Arab Spring revolutions that began the following year led to a renewed focus on the UK’s approach to supporting human rights and democratic reform, particularly in the Middle East and North Africa. The FCO told us that it had adopted a “values-based approach” to the Arab Spring, and highlighted a speech made by the Prime Minister to the Kuwait National Parliament in February 2011, at the height of the Arab uprisings. The Prime Minister spoke about previous UK foreign policy and the Government’s new approach:

    For decades, some have argued that stability required highly controlling regimes, and that reform and openness would put that stability at risk. So, the argument went, countries like Britain faced a choice between our interests and our values. And to be honest, we should acknowledge that sometimes we have made such calculations in the past. But I say that is a false choice.

    As recent events have confirmed, denying people their basic rights does not preserve stability, rather the reverse. Our interests lie in upholding our values—in insisting on the right to peaceful protest, in freedom of speech and the internet, in freedom of assembly and the rule of law. But these are not just our values, but the entitlement of people everywhere; of people in Tahrir Square as much as Trafalgar Square.

25 The Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC): a regional organisation comprising the six Gulf States.
26 Q 3
27 Q 3
28 Speech by the Foreign Secretary William Hague, ‘Britain’s Foreign Policy in a Networked World’, 1 July 2010, London. Published on FCO website: www.gov.uk
The Prime Minister went on to offer “a new chapter in Britain’s long partnership with our friends in this region”.

20. The FCO created the Arab Partnership in 2011, which it says constitutes the FCO’s “strategic response to the Arab Spring”. It is backed by the Arab Partnership Fund (APF) which will spend £110 million over 2011-15 on relevant projects in Arab states. Of this, £40m is administered by the FCO’s Arab Partnership Participation Fund (APPF), which funs projects in the Arab world, including the Gulf, that support political participation; freedom of expression and public voice; and good governance.29

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Arab Partnership Participation Fund funding to Gulf States 2011-2013</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Bahrain</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Good Governance: Run by Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP) &amp; OPCAT</td>
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<tr>
<td>Supporting the ratification and implementation of Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture (OPCAT) in Bahrain, by sharing best practice, raising awareness and facilitating development of independent monitoring of detention.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1yr</td>
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<td>£30,000</td>
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| **Kuwait** |
| Political Participation: Run by Ittejihat for Studies and Research (working with Gallup) |
| Developing national opinion polling and research by establishing a professional independent unit to provide decision-makers with accurate data. |
| 1yr |
| £40,000 |

| **Oman** |
| Public Voice: Run by Twofour54/ Thomson Reuters Foundation |
| Supporting Oman’s Shura Council by strengthening communication skills of MPs and Parliamentary staff, to improve communication between parliament and the media. |
| 1yr |
| £55,077 |

| Good governance: Run by: British Council and the Bar Council Human Rights Committee |
| Providing peer support and advice to lawyers, prosecutors, parliamentarians and law students/ academics to strengthen rule of law and principles of human rights |
| 2 yrs |
| £213,561 |

In addition, Bahrain is one of the states in receipt of funding for two multi-state programmes on Good Governance (by Transparency International) and Anti Corruption (by the John Smith Memorial Trust), worth a total of £2.5 million.30 There have been no Arab Partnership funding programmes in Saudi Arabia.

**A change of policy toward Gulf States?**

21. The Arab Spring caused Gulf rulers to be apprehensive about the revolutions’ potential for destabilising the region and empowering their domestic and external opponents, and increased their sensitivity to perceived criticism of how they deal with dissent. Our witnesses provided us with little to suggest that the Gulf as a whole was in the process of reform, and Jane Kinninmont told us that “if anything, political rights for nationals have been reduced in the last two years across the board in the Gulf, with more criminalisation of dissent.”31 Freedom House, an American NGO, provided support for this. Its 2013 *Freedom in the World* report observed that “The past several years, and the past year in

29 APPF spending in the Gulf States is capped at £250,000 per annum in line with the FCO’s Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) commitments. See FCO, Arab Partnership Programme Approach 2011-15

30 FCO, Arab Partnership Programme Fund: Project list FY 12/13. www.gov.uk

31 Q 16
particular, have featured a steady decline in democratic institutions and in some cases an increase in repressive policies among the Persian Gulf states. The following chart shows declines in freedom rankings in the last few years in four of the six Gulf States (higher numbers denote less free):

![Graph showing freedom rankings in the last few years in four of the six Gulf States](image)

[32 Freedom House has published this annual comparative assessment of political rights and civil liberties for the last 39 years. Each country is assigned two numerical ratings—one for political rights and one for civil liberties—based on a 1 to 7 scale. Underlying those ratings are more detailed assessments of country situations based on a 40-point scale for political rights and a 60-point scale for civil liberties. For comparison, the UK has been ranked as ‘1: Free’ on the Freedom House Rankings since 2003.]

22. Freedom House assigns its rankings on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 as the most free and 7 as the least. Every year, each country is assigned a numerical rating on this scale for its political rights and for its civil liberties. This chart shows that Saudi Arabia and Bahrain are now the two lowest-ranking states in the Gulf (Bahrain is matched by the UAE, both ranked at ‘6’ in 2012-3). While Saudi Arabia has been consistently below all the other Gulf states and has received the lowest possible ranking for its civil and political rights throughout the majority of the last thirteen years due to its long-term lack of democracy and human rights, Bahrain was for seven years second only to Kuwait in its freedoms, but has dropped significantly since 2009. The Freedom House reports for this period attribute Saudi Arabia’s low scores to restrictions on political representation and opposition; the media; freedom of religion, expression and assembly; and women’s rights. It further registers concerns about corruption, the lack of an independent judiciary, torture, and discrimination. In contrast, Bahrain was considered ‘Partly Free’ in 2003-9 (the only Gulf State aside from Kuwait to achieve this), reflecting several years of political reform in the early 2000s, which saw the Islamist opposition party Al Wefaq win elections to the Lower House of the National Assembly in 2005. From 2007-8, Freedom House began to register


33 Underlying the Freedom House ratings are more detailed assessments of country situations based on a 40-point scale for political rights and a 60-point scale for civil liberties. The Report explains: A ‘Free’ country is one where there is open political competition, a climate of respect for civil liberties, significant independent civic life, and independent media. A ‘Partly Free’ country is one in which there is limited respect for political rights and civil liberties. Partly Free states frequently suffer from an environment of corruption, weak rule of law, ethnic and religious strife, and a political landscape in which a single party enjoys dominance despite a certain degree of pluralism. A ‘Not Free’ country is one where basic political rights are absent, and basic civil liberties are widely and systematically denied.

concerns about a government crackdown on opposition figures and the use of force to disperse protests, as well as growing sectarian tension. In 2010 it downgraded Bahrain to ‘Not Free’, and in 2012 it further lowered its ratings in direct response to the violence and repression of the Bahraini authorities in responding to the protests.

23. Our witnesses told us that the Western response to the Arab Spring had also caused Gulf rulers concern and apprehension about the steadfastness of their allies. Neil Partrick said that former Egyptian President Mubarak had been a personal friend of King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, and his downfall had been seen by some as the result of machinations by Western governments which were perceived to have ‘abandoned’ former allies and embraced Islamist groups that were regarded as threatening by some states in the Gulf. He said that as a result, the UK in particular was no longer seen as “a kind of cavalry waiting to come over a hill”.

24. The Government considered the events of the Arab Spring to be “game-changing” and “the key strategic development since the launch of the [Gulf] Initiative.” It told us that it had “therefore adjusted the HMG approach to reflect lessons so far, with emphasis on supporting long-term political and economic reform across Gulf States”. Partly to alleviate concerns in the Gulf about the UK’s enthusiastic welcome for reform elsewhere in the region, the Government put emphasis on its commitment to long term reform and respect for different approaches. Mr Burt said: “The UK government is very clear in its condemnation of violence and its insistence on upholding the rule of law and individual rights, but it is also clear that there is no blueprint for legitimately governing a country and no one-size-fits-all model.” On a visit to the UAE in November 2012, the Prime Minister expanded on the UK’s attitude toward reform in the Gulf states:

My country very strongly believes that giving people both a job and a voice is vital for creating stable, prosperous societies, and we have a history of supporting human rights around the world. Now that does not mean that we preach or lecture; different countries take different pathways to becoming more open societies. We should be respectful of the different journey that countries are taking. We should be respectful of different traditions, different cultures.

But I do think that standing up for human rights and standing up for the right of people to have a job and a voice around the world is important, and I think this is a discussion that our countries can have.

The Prime Minister emphasised the importance of discussing difficult topics between close partners, but said it should not be “a relationship based on lecturing or hectoring.” Rather than advocating a direct move to an electoral democracy, the Prime Minister spoke about

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35 See, for instance, Q 177
36 Q 8
37 Second Report from the Foreign Affairs Committee, Session 2012-13, British Foreign Policy and the ‘Arab Spring’, HC80, Ev 81
38 Ibid.
39 Q 379
40 Q&A with Prime Minister David Cameron, 5 November 2012, Zayed University, Abu Dhabi. www.gov.uk/government/speeches
41 Ibid.
the need for the “building blocks of democracy and open societies”, including courts, the rule of law, and a “proper place” for the military. 42

25. The FCO drew our attention to the Prime Minister’s speech as an indication of its approach, and reiterated the UK’s commitment to long-term reform in the Gulf, emphasising legitimacy, participation and consent as vital elements of a governing model:

It is in our fundamental national interest to see stable and open societies emerge across the Middle East over time. The Arab Spring has confirmed that long-term stability requires legitimacy derived from citizen participation and consent. However it is for each country in the region to develop a model that reflects its own unique historical and social context and gives every citizen a stake in the political and economic life of their countries. It is not for us to dictate change in any country in the region.43

With regard to both Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, we identified four key underlying elements to the Government’s approach:

- An assessment that both states are heading in the right direction, in difficult circumstances. Alistair Burt, then Minister with responsibility for the Middle East and North Africa, told us that “In both Saudi Arabia and Bahrain we are dealing with countries that are edging, in different ways, towards reform.”44

- A conviction that it is not the UK’s place to dictate change to states with different histories and cultural traditions, even if it had the capacity to do so.

- A belief that the UK’s leverage to effect change in the Gulf is limited, and best achieved by working within the system of the other state.

- An understanding that with respect to both states, private pressure from the UK can sometimes be more effective than public pressure.

Within this broader context, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain have very different domestic situations with regard to human rights and reform. While Saudi Arabia was commonly seen as one of the least democratic states in the world, prior to 2011 Bahrain was seen as a reforming state and a progressive one, relative to its Gulf neighbours. On this basis, the UK has adopted a strategy of engagement with both states – offering a combination of support, training and private discussions on human rights issues; alongside some public criticism and pressure in certain circumstances. The balance between these approaches differs in accordance with the Government’s understanding of its influence and the most effective means to effect improvements. This will be examined in greater detail in the bilateral relations section of this report.

26. The Arab Spring in 2011 revealed some of the differences between the UK and the Gulf with regard to differing domestic governance systems and approach to the revolutions. The Government had to reassure its old allies in the Gulf of its reliability while simultaneously pressing them more urgently for change and reform. In this
context, the Government’s emphasis on gradual reform based on participation and consent is a realistic approach, though the Committee believes the FCO should continue to monitor the effectiveness of its policy closely.
3 Bilateral relations with Saudi Arabia

Historical ties

27. In its submission to this inquiry, the Government referred to the "long history of friendship and co-operation" between the UK and Saudi Arabia. The relationship stretches back just over a hundred years, to the period before the Kingdom was unified under the Al Saud monarchy. Between 1902, when Abdul Aziz al Saud returned from exile to capture Riyadh, and 1932 when the Kingdom was finally unified under the Al Saud monarchy, the UK had broadly positive relations with the Al Saud, signing its first agreement with Abdul Aziz Al Saud in 1911 and shifting its support conclusively behind him in the 1920s. Following a series of conquests that eventually united the tribes and territory under a single banner of the Al Saud and Wahhabi Islam, the UK signed the 1927 Treaty of Jeddah, recognising the territory (and protecting the boundaries of the UK’s interests elsewhere in the region).

28. On the discovery of oil in the 1930s and 40s, Saudi Arabia granted a US company the rights to exploration, while the UK had exclusive rights in its protectorate states on Saudi Arabia’s borders. The UK has on the whole maintained a broad alliance with Saudi Arabia ever since, based on shared strategic interests, especially in defence and trade, and a shared commitment to security and stability in the Middle East, although one witness noted that the relationship had nonetheless been subject to some disruptions:

There was an interval that many may not recall of 12 years of no diplomatic relations at all, between 1953 and 1965 over the Bahraini episode in the Empty Quarter, the boundary dispute and the initial search for oil and so on, where Britain undertook to support its protected regimes in the form of Abu Dhabi and Oman and aroused the intense irritation of the Al Saud.45

The relationship also suffered under a 1973 oil embargo imposed by Saudi Arabia and other OPEC members on the UK and Western States following their support for Israel in the October War 1973.46 The 1980s saw warmer relations, and a major defence agreement (more details in paragraph 64), Several witnesses to the inquiry emphasised the benefit of historical connections for the UK’s current diplomatic relationship. Sir Alan Munro told the Committee that as ambassador in the 1980s, he had had “extremely close and, indeed, rewarding contact” with King Fahd and other senior members of the government and of the royal family. He had:

a conviction that our relationship with Saudi Arabia remains and has long been of the first order. […] it remains for this country a relationship of the first order in diplomatic, political, economic and cultural terms, and at the public level.47

Saudi Arabia has since provided vital support in recent times of crisis, as an important ally in the first Gulf War against Iraq in 1990-1 and the subsequent no-fly zones, during which

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45 Q 87
46 Also known as the Yom Kippur War
47 Q 87
it hosted British Tornadoes, and by providing support and bases for allies in the second Gulf War.

**UK-Saudi diplomatic relationship today**

**Shared interests**

29. The current UK-Saudi relationship is based on these historical ties as well as a continued sense of common interests in defence, security, and trade. These shared interests continue to be important in the 21st century, with ongoing co-operation with Saudi Arabia on some of the UK’s greatest security concerns, including Al Qaeda, Iran and, most recently, Syria. The Government told us of Saudi Arabia’s importance across a wide range of areas, including as: a regional influence, a global religious influence, a key counter-terrorism partner, a key player in global energy markets, a major market for British goods and services and a country visited by tens of thousands of Britons every year.48 In 2011 the Foreign Secretary affirmed the Government’s commitment to building on the UK’s historical relationship and continuing to develop its relationship with Saudi Arabia:

> Britain’s links with the Kingdom are deep and long-standing and extend from inter-governmental relations to the rich network of links between our people. It is vital that we continue to develop our relations across the board.49

Sir Tom Phillips, UK Ambassador to Saudi Arabia between 2010 and 2012, endorsed this policy, describing how the UK had “extensive interests at stake” in Saudi Arabia, which is a “long standing ally and key partner in a complex and volatile region.”50

30. Saudi Arabia is nonetheless a far from straightforward ally. Its political development since 1930 has not kept pace with its startling economic development, and remains one of the least democratic states in the world with a notoriously poor human rights record. This presents problems for the UK Government in its desire to pursue closer ties with this important ally, as the UK has also made human rights and supporting reform in other states increasingly central to its foreign policy.51 As the largest Gulf State, with the biggest GDP and enormous social and economic influence on the region, Saudi Arabia presents perhaps the biggest challenge to the FCO’s efforts to both secure the UK’s interests and pursue its values.

**Pursuing a ’strategic partnership’ with Saudi Arabia**

31. The Government has committed itself to strengthening the UK-Saudi relationship, within the overarching framework of the Gulf Initiative. As part of this, in July 2011 the Government announced its intention to upgrade its annual Two Kingdoms Dialogue52 with Saudi Arabia to a “full Strategic Partnership” before the end of that year. The Foreign

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48 Ev 133-138
49 “Foreign Secretary visits Saudi Arabia”, FCO press release, 5 July 2011
50 Q 206
51 See, for example, speech by Foreign Secretary William Hague, ‘Britain’s values in a networked world’, 15 September 2010
52 An annual ministerial-level dialogue that ran between 2005 and 2011 (with some interruptions)
Secretary said that the establishment of a ‘Strategic Partnership’ between the UK and Saudi Arabia:

will enable greater engagement between our two Kingdoms and formally put our relationship on a par with that between Britain and other major global partners. At a moment of unprecedented change, this is more important than ever.\(^53\)

The Government does not publish a list of countries with which it has a ‘strategic partnership’ and there is no fixed template for the form a UK bilateral ‘strategic partnership’ might take. It is, therefore, arguably something of a re-branding exercise in the same vein as the Gulf Initiative referred to in paragraph 14. However, Sir Tom Phillips, Ambassador to Saudi Arabia in 2011, explained that the UK had proposed the new partnership because “we wanted to send a signal of the importance that we attached to that huge spread of UK interests that was at stake”.\(^54\) Under the Gulf Initiative, the Government has since 2010 established formal dialogues with other states in the Gulf, including the UAE, Oman, Kuwait and Bahrain.\(^55\)

32. Since 2011, and despite two visits to Saudi Arabia by the Prime Minister in 2012, the UK has neither signed an agreement for a new ‘Strategic Partnership’ with Saudi Arabia or held another meeting of the Two Kingdoms Dialogue. When he appeared before this inquiry, then Minister with responsibility for the Middle East and North Africa, Alistair Burt, confirmed that the Two Kingdoms dialogue had not been rekindled, for “all sorts of reasons”, noting that the first two years of UK-Saudi relations under the current government had been “slightly difficult because of illnesses and ill health in Saudi Arabia”. He told us that the proposal was still on the table and that the UK Government would like to pursue the idea of a structured dialogue to help to give “a bit of extra structure”, however, he emphasised that its lapse “has not got in the way of relationships or anything else up to now.”\(^56\)

33. Our witnesses endorsed the Government’s account. Sir Tom Phillips told us that the UK has “a very intensive dialogue with the Saudis already at ministerial and lower level. In some ways, [securing a structured dialogue] is recognising the reality of what goes on anyway.”\(^57\) Sir David Wootton, former Mayor of London, agreed that the lapse of the dialogue was for “reasons not applicable to the British side” and said:

Lots of business and visits have been going on meanwhile, but the time will, at some stage, be right for a revivification of the formal structure. It is work in progress, but meanwhile a lot of good things are going on.\(^58\)

34. The UK-Saudi relationship continues to be important for the UK. We have no reason to suspect that the failure so far to establish a formal ‘Strategic Partnership’ indicates that the friendship between the UK and Saudi Arabia has suffered. It appears

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\(^{53}\) “Foreign Secretary visits Saudi Arabia”, FCO press release, 5 July 2011

\(^{54}\) Q 209

\(^{55}\) UK-UAE Taskforce (est 2010); UK-Oman Joint Working Group (est. 2011); UK-Kuwait Joint Steering Group (est. 2012); and UK-Bahrain Joint Working Group (est. 2012)

\(^{56}\) Q 398

\(^{57}\) Q 209

\(^{58}\) Q 126
that practical reasons have prevented progress. However, we agree with the
Government’s original position that structured relations can provide a useful forum to
enhance co-operation on common interests and to raise issues of concern, and the lapse
of regular annual talks is therefore regrettable. The FCO should include the
reinstatement of talks via a strategic partnership, or the reinstatement of the Two
Kingdoms Dialogue, as a goal in its business plan and should continue to represent the
benefits of such structured talks to the authorities in Saudi Arabia.

People to people contacts and public opinion

35. While relations between the UK and Saudi Arabia have traditionally been conducted at
the level of ruling elites, including the Royal Families, links are increasingly being forged
between the broader societies as well. There are sizeable expatriate communities in each
country: 34,000 Saudis were resident in the UK and 20,000 British nationals were resident
in Saudi Arabia in 2012. Saudi Arabia is not a tourist destination for Britons, but over
70,000 British Muslims visit on pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina each year, and British
Muslims make up the largest contingent from a Western state to the annual Hajj. The UK,
particularly London, is considered a tourist destination, and over 100,000 visits were made
from Saudi Arabia last year, making the UK the European country most visited by Saudis
in most years.59

36. Overall, our witnesses were of the opinion that the UK was generally viewed quite
positively by the Saudi leadership, and Sir Alan Munro described “a mixture of [...] ignorance and attraction”60 among the wider Saudi population. However, research
conducted by the British Council presents a more negative picture of popular opinion
about the UK. A 2012 poll done by the British Council and Ipsos Mori surveyed 520 online
Saudi respondents aged 16 – 34 that had completed at least secondary education, and asked
them to self-assess their level of trust in people from the UK. It found that the net level of
trust61 was -10%. The same poll later distinguishes between trust in people from the UK (-
10%) and trust in the British Government (-34%).62 This is a small poll but its conclusions
seemed to be somewhat supported by the limited public polling available from commercial
sources, such as the Arab Youth Survey 2013, run by ASDA’A Burson-Marsteller, a public
relations consultancy. This poll surveyed young people from 16 Arab countries, including
Saudi Arabia, and found a favourable rating for the UK of only 32%, lower than that of
France (44%) and Germany (39%), and just above the US (30%).63 The Arab Youth survey
cautiously attributes this to a decline in favourability toward ‘traditional regional powers’
such as the UK and US.64

37. British public opinion of Saudi Arabia appears to be similarly poor: when a 2012
Chatham House survey asked 2,000 members of the general public in the UK to pick

59 “UK and Saudi Arabia drive forward bilateral trade”, FCO press release, 24 June 2010
60 Q 88
61 Net level of trust calculated as : (strongly trust + tend to trust) - (strongly distrust + tend to distrust)
62 British Council, ‘Trust Pays: How international cultural relationships build trust in the UK and underpin the success
of the UK economy’, 2012
63 ‘Arab Youth Survey 2012’, ASDA’A Burson-Marsteller, p.23. Percentages are based on the number of respondents
who describe themselves as “very favourable” toward those states. www.arabyouthsurvey.com
countries about which they felt especially favourable from a list of 19, just 2% picked Saudi Arabia. When the same group was asked to identify states toward which they felt especially unfavourable, 16% picked Saudi Arabia. Further polling by US-based Pew Research as part of its ‘Global Attitudes Project’ revealed similarly negative views of Saudi Arabia in Britain with regard to their perception of the Saudi government’s respect for human rights. When British participants were asked if they thought that the government of Saudi Arabia respects the personal freedoms of its people, 69% said no, and only 12% said yes.

38. The Middle East Association told us that Saudi Arabia’s reputation in the UK was one of its biggest obstacles to increasing trade. Negative opinions about Saudi Arabia might in part may be due to a lack of information about Saudi Arabia provided to the general public in the UK. A 2012 BBC World Trust review of reportage of the ‘Arab Spring’ by the BBC national TV and radio, online content, and BBC World News found that there had been inconsistencies in the BBC’s coverage across different states in the Middle East and North Africa, and singled out the BBC’s “thin” coverage of Saudi Arabia for criticism:

Given the strategic importance of Saudi Arabia, its role as the key ally of the West in the region and its active role in both the Yemeni and Bahraini uprisings, it is notable that so little attention was paid to it [during 2011].

The report notes that the problems in reporting on Saudi Arabia were not new, and stemmed from the Saudi government’s reluctance to allow journalists access to the country:

[...] the Saudi regime itself shares Western interest in its own stability, but it does not see that objective as being served by detailed Western knowledge of its own society and internal workings, and especially not knowledge by the Western media and public.

39. Evidence of negative perceptions of the UK among young Saudis is deeply concerning, particularly in a state in which over 60% of the population is under 30 years old. It is difficult with so little evidence to draw conclusions as to the reason for the low level of trust in the UK, but we recommend that the Government set out in response to this report any research it has conducted on the public perception of the UK in Saudi Arabia, and its views on the reasons for the poor public perception of the UK.

Engaging with the Saudi public

40. The Government did not make reference to public diplomacy work in Saudi Arabia in its submission to this inquiry. However, some effort has been made to reach out to the Saudi public through old and new media. In recent years, the British Ambassador has written a column in a major Saudi newspaper every two weeks. Sir Tom Phillips told us

66 “Saudi Arabia’s Image Falters among Middle East Neighbors”, Pew Research Center: Global Attitudes Project, 17 October 2013
67 Ev 106
68 BBC Trust, A BBC Trust report on the impartiality and accuracy of the BBC’s coverage of the events known as the “Arab Spring”, June 2012, p.57-58
69 Ibid.
that this column enabled ambassadors to provide a sense of British views and values to the readership. In addition, in line with FCO guidance, the Embassy in Saudi Arabia also has a webpage, Facebook page and Twitter feed in English and Arabic. In an example of its outreach work, the Embassy has launched a photo competition open to the general public “to search for the best image which demonstrates the friendship between UK and Saudi Arabia”.

**The World Service and BBC Arabic language service**

41. The BBC Arabic language service is part of the BBC World Service and delivers a news service in Arabic for and about the Middle East. Our Committee has commented previously on the importance of BBC Arabic, particularly following the events of 2011 in the Middle East. At the end of 2011, the BBC World Service reported record high viewing figures for its Arabic Service across the Middle East. In Saudi Arabia, BBC Arabic TV saw its weekly audience more than double from 12.2% to 24.6% in 2011. In its 2012/13 Annual Review, the BBC World Service reported that it had surpassed its targets by achieving an overall BBC multimedia reach in Arabic of 32.5 million. However, when it surveyed Saudis regarding the BBC World Service’s performance in comparison to its competitors, it found that “Al Arabiya and Al Jazeera outperform on many measures but the BBC is still seen as the most trustworthy.”

**The British Council**

42. The British Council also contributes to people-to-people trust and understanding, promoting Britain through education, art, and social initiatives. With offices and teaching centres in Riyadh, Jeddah and Al-Khobar, it boasts a strong presence in Saudi Arabia and told us that it was “recognised as a trusted partner by both governments and by civil society”. It provides English language teaching and training to 15,000 students, as well as working with the Saudi Ministry of Education, universities and private schools. The British Council claimed to be dominant in this area, telling us that “the scale of our work in English is unrivalled by US and other European cultural relations analogues in Saudi.” The British Council also emphasised the arts as a means of connecting the Saudi and British societies, highlighting the success of their *Out of Britain* touring exhibition of contemporary British art and the British Museum’s Hajj exhibition.

43. A 2012 British Council poll provides support for the British Council’s claims to improve trust in people from the UK. The below chart illustrates that Saudi nationals who have been involved in “cultural relations activities” with the British Council have positive

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70 Q 236
71 “British Embassy Riyadh’s Photo Competition”, FCO Press Release, 22 August 2013
72 See, for example Sixth Report from the Foreign Affairs Committee, Session 2010-11, *The Implications of Cuts to the BBC World Service*, HC 849, Vol I
73 BBC Media centre, ‘Record audiences for BBC’s Arabic Services’, 5 December 2011
74 BBC World Service, *Annual Review 2012/13*, p.54
75 Ev w121
76 Ev w122
77 Ev w123
levels of ‘net trust’ in people from the UK, unlike those who have had no contact with the UK, who have overall negative net levels of trust.\textsuperscript{78}

44. We recommend that the Government make public engagement with the wider Saudi population a priority for its digital diplomacy team in the Gulf and Embassy in Saudi Arabia. The Government should also set out in response to this report its public engagement strategy, including the steps it is taking to engage with Saudi youth on social media, how it is representing the UK to the younger generation in Saudi Arabia, and what staff and resources it is dedicating to this task.

45. The work of the British Council is particularly useful in Saudi Arabia as it is one of the only channels of direct contact between the UK and Saudi public. As a provider of valued language training services, it is able to co-operate with and support the Saudi authorities at the same time as engaging directly with the Saudi public and promoting a positive image of the UK.

\textsuperscript{78} British Council, \textit{Trust Pays: How international cultural relationships build trust in the UK and underpin the success of the UK economy}, 2012
46. Saudi Arabia has the world’s 20th largest economy and the largest in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Its strength is based almost entirely upon its petroleum exports, which are the biggest in the world and stand at around nine million barrels per day. It also has almost one-fifth of the world’s proven oil reserves and fifth largest natural gas reserves, though natural gas production remains limited. Dr Neil Partrick noted the importance to the UK of Saudi Arabia’s role as a reliable oil producer, and particularly its ability to stabilise global oil markets through its spare capacity of around two million barrels of oil per day. This means that Saudi Arabia is able quickly to respond to any shocks in the global market, such as the halting of Libyan oil fields during the intervention in 2011. The wealth Saudi Arabia gains from petroleum exports has provided it with substantial sovereign wealth fund and foreign exchange reserves, as well as the ability to fund large-scale domestic programmes and to provide what Sir Alan Munro called a “mega welfare state”. It has also proven relatively reliable over the last decade, with a high oil price of over $100 per barrel and GDP growth in Saudi averaging over 5% over the last five years, which is comparable to growth of one of the BRICS countries.

47. Saudi Arabia’s rulers nevertheless face considerable economic challenges in the coming years. These include a demographic phenomenon which has seen the Kingdom’s population double since the 1980s, resulting in an annual 4.5% increase in the labour force; high unemployment; and pressure on housing, public services and utilities. In addition Dr Neil Partrick questioned the sustainability of Saudi spending in the longer-term, which he considered had always been high but was raised further in response to the Arab Spring (Saudi Arabia’s 2013 budget is 58% higher than its pre-Arab Spring 2010 budget). He cited one report by a Saudi investment bank that considered that a “phenomenally high” oil price of $350 per barrel would be necessary by 2030 if current levels of spending were maintained. Saudi Arabia’s growing population and generous domestic energy subsidies have also resulted in an exponential growth in its own energy consumption. The Economist warned in July 2013 that “even rich Arab countries cannot squander their resources
indefinitely”, adding, “local consumption already eats up a quarter of Saudi oil output, and on current trends could devour all of it within 25 years.”

48. The Saudi government has recognised the challenge and begun to take steps to diversify its economy, encourage the development of the private sector, and attract foreign direct investment. It has also launched an ambitious spending programme for infrastructure development and modernisation, as well as far-reaching health, social and educational programmes. As part of this, the state has guaranteed a stimulus package of $400 billion for capital projects, such as the development of seven new cities, a £120 billion programme of investment in schools and hospitals and a £30 billion Railways Development Programme.

Unsurprisingly, our trade witnesses were enthusiastic about the prospects for bilateral trade and investment and Saudi Arabia was described as a source of immense opportunity. Sir David Wootton told us that “the sheer scale of economic activity, particularly in Saudi Arabia, is huge, and there is much more we could do.” David Lloyd, Senior Consultant at the Middle East Association, agreed, and said:

It has by far the largest population of all the GCC states. That population has to be served with roads, schools, universities, power – you name it. As such, it is by far the most important and largest economy in the Middle East.

The oil and gas sector, infrastructure, mining and housing development, were all raised as holding opportunities for UK businesses.

**UK-Saudi trade and commercial relations**

49. Saudi Arabia’s current economic advantages are one of the Government’s major reasons for its push to improve bilateral relations. Saudi Arabia is already the UK’s largest
The UK’s relations with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain

market in the Middle East, comprising 20% of our exports in goods and services to the region in 2011, and it is our 18th largest market globally, with £7.5 billion in exports of goods and services in 2012, and overall bilateral trade worth an estimated £15 billion per year. The Government estimates that over 6,000 British companies are actively exporting to Saudi Arabia. The UK is also the second largest cumulative investor in Saudi Arabia after the US, according to UKTI, and there are approximately 200 UK/Saudi joint ventures with total investment of more than £11 billion. Thousands of British expatriates work in Saudi Arabia and British companies involved in the country include Shell, GlaxoSmithKline, BAE Systems, Rolls Royce and Marks & Spencer. With enormous oil wealth, Saudi Arabia is also a source of investment into the UK. It has an estimated £62 billion invested in the UK economy.

Trade promotion by the Government

50. The Government has identified Saudi Arabia as a ‘High Growth Market’ in the Gulf and is committed to working with the Saudi government and British and Saudi businesses to build a greater understanding of the Saudi market and its opportunities. The FCO highlighted opportunities for UK-Saudi partnerships in the health and education sectors, both of which will be the focus of significant Saudi spending over the coming few years. The UK and Saudi governments signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the UK’s Department of Health and its Saudi counterpart in 2011, whereby the UK will support the Saudis’ ambitious $100 billion investment into health programmes, drawing on NHS and private sector expertise. See Appendix 1 for a full list of extant Memorandums and treaties signed between the UK and Saudi Arabia.

51. The Government has made trade delegations a priority: the Prime Minister led trade delegations to Saudi Arabia in 2011 and 2012, securing defence sales contracts (see below). The Lord Mayor of London takes a trade delegation from the City of London every year, while the Mayor of London, Boris Johnson, led a trade delegation in April 2013. Sir David Wootton told us that the UK’s trade delegations received a “very warm” reception in Saudi Arabia and that the Gulf States value a visit by the Prime Minister very highly. He added that it was important to maintain a regularity of visits and contact at all levels – building personal relationships at the “technical level” as well as at the “decision-making level” in order to ensure success.

52. However, unlike for other states in the Gulf, the FCO did not set a specific target for increasing the UK’s trade with Saudi Arabia in its 2011-15 Business Plan. The FCO’s Jon Davies explained that this was because the Saudi market was

more mature and [...] already extremely healthy for the UK. Looking to guarantee a doubling of that market over the period would therefore have been more
challenging. If we can, we will, but that is why we are not committing ourselves as formally as that.\textsuperscript{96}

However, the Middle East Association (MEA) has pointed out that the UK’s export market share is well below that of the US, Japan, Korea and our leading EU competitors.\textsuperscript{97} Sir David Wootton attributed this in part to the failure of UK business to respond:

The UK government effort is very good. I think the people in post are working very hard and are very well connected, and, as I say, are throwing up more opportunities than we are taking up at the moment.\textsuperscript{98}

53. The scale of the investment projects proposed by Saudi Arabia does not always count in the UK’s favour when it tries to secure contracts. While in Saudi Arabia, we were told that UK businesses held their own in securing second and third tier contracts as subcontractors for the main organization running a project, but they rarely secured the overall contractor positions because the UK lacks “big hitters” at the top of the infrastructure sector and is not good at forming consortiums. This is not a new problem: Baroness Symons of Vernham Dean, a former envoy to the Gulf and current Chairman of the Arab British Chamber of Commerce told an ‘Opportunity Arabia’ business conference in 2011 that “we Brits really do have to do better in putting together consortia to meet Saudi needs. We have to put together business packages and proposals, which must crucially involve the transfer of knowledge and skills to Saudi business partners.”\textsuperscript{99} Other states do not seem to suffer from this problem: consortiums of construction groups from the US, Spain and Italy were each awarded multi-billion dollar contracts in July 2013 to build a metro system in Riyadh.\textsuperscript{100}

54. The Government has taken some steps to support UK involvement in large-scale projects: in June 2013, the UK’s export credit agency, UK Export Finance (UKEF), announced that it will guarantee $700 million (£450 million) of finance to British companies bidding for contracts on a new $19 billion (£12 billion) petrochemical facility in Saudi Arabia. This is backed by the UK Government, and is the biggest project financing facility in the UKEF’s history. Three British companies working in engineering, procurement and construction - Jacobs, Fluor and Foster Wheeler - have already secured contracts which will benefit from financing under the facility.\textsuperscript{101}

55. However, significant barriers to trade on the Saudi side risk impeding further growth in British exports to the state. This is true, for example, in agriculture exports. The UK is in theory allowed to export lamb and mutton to Saudi Arabia but requirements currently imposed by the Saudi authorities are seen as onerous and not conducive to the establishment of an export market.

\textsuperscript{96} Q 400
\textsuperscript{97} Middle East Association, “Opportunity Arabia 10” conference information for event on 4 October 2013. Accessed online November 2013, www.the-mea.co.uk
\textsuperscript{98} Q 120
\textsuperscript{99} The Rt Hon Baroness Symons of Vernham Dean was also previously FCO Minister of State for the Middle East (2003-05) and Minister for Trade and Investment and Deputy Leader of the House of Lords (2001-03). Quotation from keynote speech by Baroness Symons of Vernham Dean, ‘Opportunity Arabia 8 Conference’, London, 22 September 2011
\textsuperscript{100} ‘Saudi Arabia awards $22.5bn metro contracts’, Financial Times, 29 July 2013
\textsuperscript{101} “Massive boost to British industry in biggest ever petrochemical project”, UKTI press release, 24 Jun 2013. www.ukti.gov.uk
56. The growing Saudi market and the Saudi government’s spending plans offer huge opportunities for British businesses across a wide range of sectors. Given the large-scale opportunities available, we see no reason why the UK should not set ambitious targets for growth in UK-Saudi trade and investment.

57. We recommend that the Government facilitate a leading role for British businesses in international consortiums to bid for projects in Saudi Arabia. In its response to this report, the Government should set out what resources it is dedicating to this task.

The work of UKTI

58. UKTI has created a ‘high value opportunities team’, specifically to identify projects in Saudi Arabia. The UK has a British Trade Office in Al Khobar, in the oil rich Eastern Province, in addition to the consulate in Jeddah and Embassy in Riyadh. David Lloyd told us that, across the Gulf, UKTI services were variable, but he praised highly the work of the Al Khobar Trade Office post in eastern Saudi Arabia that he considered “outstanding”, and which had organized a Saudi-British energy week in 2012 which provided “first class” organization and connections.  

However, he was critical of the charges the UKTI levied on business people, including the fees that the Overseas Market Introduction Service (OMIS) asked in order to host an official embassy reception, which were over £2,000 and for receptions of variable quality. He told us that in consequence:

We are now starting to have to bypass UKTI services at the embassy, because missioners cannot afford to pay that price. That seems to me to be a major deterrent. Why are we charging our exporters? 

59. We recommend that the Government assess whether it would be beneficial to lower the costs of its introduction services to British businesses for a temporary period in order to boost the UK’s participation in the Saudi market, particularly for small and medium sized enterprises.

Barriers to trade: visas

60. The requirements for visas cause resentment on both sides of the UK-Saudi bilateral relationship. On our visit to the Gulf, we heard repeated complaints about the problems in obtaining a British visa. Mr Burt acknowledged that visas were “one of the hottest topics” on his visits to the region and told us that the Government was still considering the UK’s border security assessment, including visa arrangements across the Gulf:

We believe that the visa service we operate right across the Gulf is very good. In each of the states, regular visitors to the United Kingdom know exactly what it is that they need to do. They are able to get multiple or long-term visas and they know what they need to get them. […] My honest assessment is that even though this is raised a lot by

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102 Q 134. Mr Lloyd specifically did not mention the post in Al Khobar by name.
103 Q 145
104 Q 401
all the states in the Gulf, it does not desperately get in the way of people’s visits here, and we are extremely conscious of any risk that that should be the case.\textsuperscript{105}

Despite the complaints, it appears that the UK is more generous to Saudi nationals than Saudi Arabia is toward UK nationals. David Lloyd, representing the Middle East Association, pointed out that while the UK offers 5 year multiple-entry visas to Saudi nationals and a 24 hour turnaround process; this is not reciprocated for British travellers going to Saudi Arabia.\textsuperscript{106} Mr Lloyd complained about the difficulties that British business people have in obtaining a Saudi entry visa, describing the visa process as arbitrary, unpredictable and very off-putting for businesses who are seeking to establish a firm foothold in the Saudi market, and “the biggest deterrent to doing business in the Kingdom”.\textsuperscript{107}

61. The UK gains considerable benefits from its visa provision for Saudi nationals. For example, there are now 20,000 Saudi students attending British universities and institutions, which the British Council estimates is worth around £700 million per annum to the UK.\textsuperscript{108} Mr Lloyd said that the UK Government had made several representations for reciprocal visa arrangements and the Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs had taken steps to address this problem, but its recommendations had not been implemented at the Saudi embassy level. He contrasted the UK’s experience with that of the US, which had imposed security checks on Saudi travelers after 9/11. These inconvenienced Saudi travellers, leading Saudi Arabia to push for a reciprocal visa agreement, and a ‘trusted traveler programme’ was consequently signed between the US and Saudi Arabia in January 2013. Aside from the US, however, he believed that visas were a common problem for western business travelers to the Kingdom.\textsuperscript{109}

62. The current visa regime is a significant source of difficulty and inconvenience for both Saudi and British businessmen and undermines the UK Government’s stated priority of increasing trade with Saudi Arabia. The improvement of the visa terms would be of benefit to both states and we are disappointed that the UK has not managed to secure reciprocal terms for its business visas. We recommend that the Government make improving the visa regime a priority in its discussions with the Saudi government when seeking to establish a strategic partnership.

\textbf{Defence sales to Saudi Arabia}

63. Sales of defence and security equipment by UK companies remain a significant, and controversial, portion of the UK’s overall trade with Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia is one of the British defence industry’s largest markets. It is hard to obtain exact figures as to the volume of defence trade as the Government restricts the supply of some information; however, the UK has granted export licences for almost £4 billion worth of defence equipment over the last five years.\textsuperscript{110} Reports on the UK’s strategic export controls

\textsuperscript{105} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{106} Ev 106
\textsuperscript{107} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{108} Ev w121
\textsuperscript{109} Q 154 and Q 155
\textsuperscript{110} “Government continues to promote arms to Saudi Arabia as human rights deteriorate”, Campaign Against Arms Trade press release, 21 May 2013
produced by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills show that the UK issued Standard Individual Export Licences (SIELs) for over £117 million worth of military and other defence exports in 2012. This was in addition to defence exports that were classified under Open Individual Export Licences (OIELs), for which the Government does not provide figures of the value of exports as these are open-ended. The defence items licenced under these provisions reflect a broad range of equipment, for example: body armour; communication equipment; crowd control ammunition; hand grenades; cryptographic software; machine guns; and military combat vehicles.\(^{111}\) The UK is one of the three largest suppliers to Saudi Arabia, alongside the US and France.

64. The British Government supports major defence sales to Saudi Arabia directly through providing government-to-government contracts, in which the Ministry of Defence signs agreements with the Saudi Arabian Government, then places contracts with UK prime contractors (such as BAE Systems) to fulfil the UK’s obligations. The Ministry of Defence oversees several of the main contracts through two main bodies: the Ministry of Defence Saudi Armed Forces Project (MODSAP) and Saudi Arabia National Guard Communications Project (SANGCOM). These monitor the progress and performance of the contracts and provide training and assistance. The project’s operating expenditure is covered by a management fee received from the Saudi Arabian Government, but details of the fee are confidential. Several of our witnesses endorsed the Government’s efforts to support the industry: Howard Wheeldon, for instance, said that the defence deals and follow-up had been “very well handled and very well supported.”

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<tr>
<th>MAJOR UK-SAUDI DEFENCE SALES AGREEMENTS SINCE 1985</th>
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<td><strong>Al Yamamah agreements (I and II)</strong> initiated in 1985 between the UK and Saudi governments for the supply of a complete package of military equipment, especially Tornado and Hawk jets, by BAE Systems, it was worth over £43 billion by 2004. Following allegations of corruption and a Serious Fraud Office investigation, Al Yamamah was officially closed in 2006.</td>
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<td><strong>The Saudi-British Defence Cooperation Programme (SBDCP)</strong> is a new and separate defence cooperation agreement between the UK and Saudi governments to provide support for the equipment already in service with the Saudi armed forces, including upgrading and servicing some Tornado aircraft. The programme is funded by the Saudi Defence Budget and began operation in 2007. It is overseen by MODSAP.</td>
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<td><strong>The Salem (‘Peace’) Project</strong> initiated in 2007. A deal between the UK and Saudi governments for 72 Eurofighter Typhoons to be provided by BAE, which involves RAF and Royal Saudi Air Force aircrews and ground technicians training alongside each other in the UK. It is also overseen by MODSAP. 24 planes were delivered in 2009, but there have been continued delays and price ‘issues’ relating to the remaining Typhoons. Though the initial contract was for £4.4 billion, it is estimated to ultimately be worth c. £20 billion.</td>
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<td>In May 2012 BAE won a contract with Saudi Arabia to provide <strong>22 new Hawk advanced jet trainer aircraft</strong>, 55 Pilatus PC-21 aircraft and other aircrew training equipment. The deal is worth £2.5 billion and reportedly will preserve 250 jobs at the BAE Systems factory in Brough in Yorkshire, with the planes being built in Samlesbury and Warton.</td>
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65. In addition to the government-to-government contracts, the UK dedicates significant resources across the Government departments to promoting the defence trade in the Gulf, as a key part of the Governments broader support for exports and “prosperity agenda”. The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) has designated Saudi Arabia as a priority market for UK arms exports, and UKTI has a Defence & Security Organisation (UKTI DSO) which aims to help UK defence and security companies to build and maintain relationships with overseas customers and to export their products. The UK also holds promotional events and hosted a defence and security international exhibition in September 2013 that is thought to have been the largest of its type in Europe this year. The Prime Minister has personally championed the UK’s defence sales in Saudi Arabia. His November 2012 visit to the Gulf was seen as being aimed principally at promoting the sale

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112 HC Deb, 27 June 2007, col 796W
113 Q 180
114 “Revival of UK Saudi Defense Pact boosts sales”, Aviation International News (AIN) online, 25 May 2012
115 HC Deb, 13 December 2012, col 154WH and also oral evidence taken before the Select Committee on Soft Power and the UK’s Influence on 8 July 2013, HL (2013) Q43 [Lt General Simon Mayall CB]
116 HC Deb, 2 September 2013, col 15
of Eurofighter Typhoon jets to the UAE and Saudi militaries. These sales would reportedly be worth up to £6 billion, with further purchases expected to be made by Oman.\(^{117}\) As such, the Government emphasised to us that these defence sales “represent a significant success story for UK industry, sustaining many thousands of jobs and billions of pounds of export orders.”\(^{118}\)

66. Our witnesses agreed that Saudi Arabia was an extremely important market for the UK, the loss of which would be very difficult for the defence industry. Howard Wheeldon suggested that a cancelled order for the Typhoon would be “devastating” for the UK’s industrial regions, while Dr Eyal told us that without Saudi buyers for Typhoons, the unit price would be affected and it would “change the entire dynamic of the project.”\(^{119}\) However, witnesses mostly believed that the UK defence industry could survive without Saudi Arabia, if necessary.\(^{120}\)

**Criticism of defence sales**

67. British defence sales to Saudi Arabia are controversial, and we received several submissions that disagreed with the UK government’s approach to supporting the British defence industry’s sales to Saudi Arabia. Criticism of the sales centred around three main areas: human rights, corruption and the misuse of leverage.

68. **Human rights**: Several submissions to this inquiry highlighted a perceived contradiction between the Government designating Saudi Arabia as a ‘Country of concern’ in its annual Human Rights and Democracy report, while simultaneously marking it as a priority market for arms exports. The Campaign Against Arms Trade argued that:

> Selling arms to Saudi Arabia and other authoritarian regimes has undermined the credibility of the UK’s advocacy of democracy and work to end corruption. It has compromised the UK’s justice system, and left UK taxpayers vulnerable to loss if there were a default.\(^{121}\)

Witnesses highlighted fears about the equipment being used both in internal repression (for instance, in Saudi Arabia’s Eastern Province), and in external action, such as the GCC intervention in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia’s alleged bombing of Yemen in 2009.\(^{122}\)

69. The Government has strongly refuted these concerns, arguing that there is no evidence that equipment supplied by the United Kingdom to Saudi Arabia has been used in breach of the EU’s arms controls criteria.\(^{123}\) On a recent visit to the region, the Prime Minister told the BBC he would make “absolutely no apologies” for talking to the UAE and Saudi Arabia

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117 ‘David Cameron defends ‘legitimate’ arms deals during Gulf states tour’, *The Telegraph*, 5 November 2012
118 Ev 135
119 Q 179
120 See, for example, Q 175 and Q 214
121 Ev 61
122 Q 258 and Ev 115
123 See, for example, Ev 135 and HC Deb, 13 December 2012, col 157WH
about "defence partnerships", adding that: "Their security is important for our security and this is vital for British jobs". He further stated:

We have one of the strictest regimes anywhere in the world for sales of defence equipment but we do believe that countries have a right to self-defence and we do believe that Britain has important defence industries that employ over 300,000 people so that sort of business is completely legitimate and right.

70. The Committees on Arms Export Controls recorded 417 extant export licences for Saudi Arabia in May 2013. The UK Government stated that it had re-examined all of its licences to Saudi Arabia at the time of the Arab Spring and was satisfied that all licences granted to Saudi Arabia remained consistent with the Consolidated EU and National Arms Export Licensing Criteria. On being questioned by the Committees on Arms Export Controls about the possibility of arms being used for internal repression in Saudi Arabia or other states, the Government repeated that:

export licences for Saudi Arabia are kept under constant review and every licence is scrutinised in light of changing facts on the ground.

The Government is satisfied that none of the extant licences for Saudi Arabia contravene its stated policy. Several of our witnesses endorsed the Government’s position. Sir Tom Phillips said Saudi Arabia was "a long standing friend and ally in a volatile region with legitimate defence requirements." Howard Wheeldon agreed, and further considered Saudi Arabia to be a responsible buyer of defence equipment:

We have been selling defence equipment to Saudi Arabia for a long and enduring period. They have behaved, in my view, extremely responsibly through that time and through the whole relationship in how they have used the power that we have provided them with.

71. Corruption: In 2006 a major Serious Fraud Office (SFO) investigation into alleged bribes paid as part of the Al Yamamah deal was controversially halted after it was advised that Saudi Arabia might withdraw intelligence cooperation. In 2012 the Serious Fraud Office launched an investigation into GPT, the subsidiary of EADS, the pan-European defence contractor that supplied the Saudi Arabian National Guard Communication project (SANGCOM) equipment, in the light of further bribery allegations. The Government has thus far declined to give further information about the case.

124 ‘Joint defence partnership between UK and the UAE announced’, BBC News online, 6 November 2012
125 ‘David Cameron arrives in Gulf on arms trade trip’, Guardian, 5 November 2012
128 Ibid.
129 Q 215
130 Q 173
131 HC Deb, 15 May 2013, col 204W
72. The closure of the SFO’s Al Yamamah inquiry led to increased international and domestic pressure to update the UK’s bribery laws, contributing to the Bribery Act 2010, which clarified what could and could not be done by British companies when conducting business both at home and abroad. This legislation put the UK on a par with the strongest anti-corruption measures in the world, including those of the US. Howard Wheeldon and Dr Eyal both considered that the UK’s regulations were as tough, if not more tough, than our competitors’, though Howard Wheeldon noted that “It is a pity, of course, that the rest of the world does not necessarily play with us on a level playing field.”132 As the UK has imposed new limitations, Saudi Arabia is also beginning to improve: Jane Kinninmont, Senior Research Fellow at Chatham House, told us that the Saudis had begun to address corruption from their side, stating that: “King Abdullah has taken steps to make the procurement more transparent from his end, because he has clearly been very aware that corruption eats away at legitimacy.”133 This trend toward greater transparency has seen institutional changes, as financial accounting responsibility for the defence contracts have moved from Saudi Arabia’s Ministry of Defence to its Ministry of Finance, and the ‘oil for arms’ arrangements no longer exist. According to Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index for 2012, Saudi Arabia is a middle-ranking country in terms of public sector corruption.134 Scoring 4.4 on a scale of 1 to 10, where 10 is the least corrupt, Saudi Arabia is seen as less corrupt than Italy and than many of its neighbours in North Africa and the Middle East (although its neighbouring Gulf States are all rated higher, with the UAE and Qatar doing significantly better). The UK scores 7.4.135

73. That the sales are used as leverage: Dr Rosemary Hollis suggested that the Gulf rulers, including the Al Saouds, have “worked out that Britain needs them as much as they need us, if not more so.”136 She suggested that when Gulf rulers are upset about something (such as the above-mentioned SFO investigation) “The message comes out, ‘We don’t actually have to buy your Typhoons. We can always buy from somebody else.”137 However, Dr Eyal of RUSI was not convinced by suggestions of ‘arm twisting’ by Saudi Arabia when it came to the most recent contract, stating:

It is very easy to jump to the conclusion that what we are being subjected to is sort of—how should we put this politely?—a political blowback or that there is a suggestion that somehow if we do not behave in a particular manner, Riyadh would draw the consequences. I am sorry to disappoint some people, but I have not seen evidence of that. I have not seen direct evidence of that. I think they cherish the relationship and want it to continue.138

74. Nevertheless, Dr Eyal did admit that the UK defence industry was under pressure in the Gulf, but he believed that this pressure was coming from competitors. Dr Eyal pointed out that competition was coming from traditional rivals such as the US and France: the latter

132 Q 183
133 Q 11
134 Transparency International, Corruption perceptions index 2012, transparency.org
135 Ibid.
136 Q 68
137 Ibid.
138 Q 177
had made four visits at presidential level with defence “at the top of the agenda” in 2012, and also from newer, “second-tier” competitors such as Serbia and South Korea: 139

we are under pressure in this industry, which is still important for the UK. It is one of the main contributors to engineering skills in the UK, and we are under pressure. Please look at the figures in terms of world league tables for exports. Some people may find it refreshing that we are under pressure on this score, but we are. 140

Dr Eyal also warned that with other players in the market, the UK should not overestimate its own influence and leverage: “There are many other players in the region that do not necessarily displace us but certainly put us in a diminished position as far as our leverage in defence relationships is concerned.” 141 He considered such pressure to be problematic, as Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states turned to these alternative providers “in part due to apprehension […] about how steadfast are its western allies.” 142

Defence and security cooperation

75. Defence cooperation is central to the Government’s view of the UK-Saudi relationship, with defence activities seen to “underpin” the entire bilateral relationship. The Government told us that decades of partnership between UK armed forces, British companies, and Saudi Arabia had “strengthened and deepened” the UK-Saudi bilateral relationship. 143 The UK maintains the following teams in Saudi Arabia:

- A small British Military Mission (BMM) of seconded British Army personnel that trains and advises the Special Security Brigade of the Saudi Arabian National Guard providing advice on such issues as officer training and developing basic military skills, and in more specialised areas such as anti-terrorism.

- A separate, specialised team assisting in the procurement and commissioning of a new communications system for the National Guard (SANGCOM). This team is made up of one MoD civilian based in the UK and around 20 UK military personnel and 50 MoD civil servants in Saudi Arabia. 144

- A larger team of UK civil servants and MoD personnel working for the Ministry of Defence Saudi Armed Forces Project (MODSAP). This team of around 80 staff based in Saudi Arabia (along with a further 112 staff in the UK) oversees the major defence cooperation agreements (see above). 145

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139 Q 177 and Q182
140 Q 179
141 Q 171
142 Q 171 and Q 177
143 Ev 135
144 Figures are as at April 2012, HC Deb 19 Dec 2012, Col 837W
145 According to government figures. The Campaign Against Arms Trade has published a more detailed recent breakdown obtained by email from MODSAP on 10 July 2013: According to this, as at 1 April 2013, there were 69 civilians and 44 military personnel based in the UK, and 31 civilians and 46 military personnel based in Saudi Arabia. caat.org.uk
A small Royal Navy liaison team (5 Royal Navy personnel) provides support to the King Fahd Naval Academy at Jubail.146

The UK has approximately 20 naval personnel, 40 army personnel and 70 air force personnel stationed in Saudi Arabia overall. For comparison, the UK has similar (slightly more) numbers of each service stationed in the Netherlands working as NATO staff, personnel exchange and on bilateral engagement (30, 40 and 90, respectively). The UK has the same numbers of naval and army personnel and just less than half the number of air force personnel as Saudi Arabia stationed in Oman.147 There is limited information available about the number of MoD civil servants in each country, which makes it more difficult to compare these figures.148 MODSAP’s operating expenditure, including staff salaries, is covered in full by a management fee received from the Saudi Arabian Government, but details of the fee are confidential.149 Other Gulf States also cover the operating expenditure of resident British missions.150 Dr Andrew Murrison told us that staff salaries are paid by the UK, and that the costs are reimbursed at a government-to-government level.151 In addition, Saudi Arabia sends some of its army and naval officers to train in the military academies and colleges in the UK, and UK ships make regular Saudi visits and occasionally participate in joint exercises. In his evidence to us, Sir Tom Phillips, former British Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, told us that the training provided by the UK, for instance, to the National Guard was “based on the rule of law and the rules of international conflict, etc.—[which] again, allows us to put across a values element in that sort of thing.”152

**Controversy over the intervention in Bahrain**

76. In May 2011, it emerged that Saudi Arabian troops who were sent into Bahrain in March 2011 to assist its government in ending a popular protest might have benefited from British military training, and it was alleged that the troops had used British-made armoured vehicles.153 The Gulf Cooperation Council’s ‘Peninsula Shield’ force was used to secure key installations in Bahrain and did not take any frontline roles. However, in the crackdown that followed the GCC intervention, over 35 people were killed and many more were injured, prompting international condemnation of the Bahraini authorities and an independent commission of inquiry (BICI).

77. Dr Murrison, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Ministry of Defence, confirmed that the Saudi forces that took part in the intervention did include members who had been in receipt of British training, but he reassured us that “none of that was used in a repressive way.” Dr Murrison added that the BICI had exonerated the GCC force from

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146 “Royal Navy Sailors share 500 years of seafaring knowledge with Saudi partners”, Ministry of Defence press release, 28 February 2013 www.royalnavy.mod.uk
147 The UK has 20 naval, 40 army and 30 air force personnel stationed in Oman. See HC Deb, 19 Dec 2012, Col 834W
148 HC Deb, 19 Dec 2012, Col 834W
149 HC Deb, 27 June 2007, Col 796W
150 HC Deb, 25 October 2012, col 983W
151 Q 361
152 Q 206
153 Ev w61
any involvement in the mistreatment that occurred. Mr Burt agreed that the Saudi forces were not at fault, telling us:

There is no logical connection between what the Saudi authorities were asked to do by the Government of Bahrain and the GCC, namely to come in and provide protection and do what they did—there is no connection between any of those vehicles and any human rights abuses. It would have been entirely open to the Bahraini security forces to do their job properly.

Mr Burt thought it was “unfair” to search for a British connection to the abuses.

78. Saudi Arabia is an important buyer for the UK defence industry, and defence sales are important to the overall UK-Saudi relationship. The UK provides valued training alongside its defence sales that is beneficial to both UK and Saudi forces. With other competitors in the market, there is little to suggest that ending the UK’s defence sales would have any effect on overall defence sales to Saudi Arabia, or that it would give the UK additional leverage to effect positive improvements. The government must adhere strictly to its existing policy to ensure that defence equipment sold by UK firms are not used for human rights abuses or internal repression. In its response to this report the Government should provide further evidence that it is doing so in practice, including any evidence gathered by end-use monitoring.

Counter-Terrorism

79. Counter-terrorism, and particularly the threat from Islamist terrorism, is a key part of the UK’s relationship with Saudi Arabia, and a long-standing and primary security concern for the UK. In a speech at RUSI in February 2013, the Foreign Secretary confirmed its continuing importance, stating that “Twelve years after 9/11 the greatest source of the terrorist threat to the United Kingdom remains Al Qaeda and its ideology.” However, the role played by Saudi Arabia as a counter-terrorism partner is a mixed and contradictory one. The Saudi authorities have proven to be engaged and innovative in their co-operation with the UK and others on counter-terrorism issues. However, there are fears that the Saudi authorities do not pay enough attention to the dangerous effects of the funding and religious teaching that are exported by Saudi citizens to extremist groups across the region and the wider world.

80. One the one hand, the FCO considers Saudi Arabia to be the UK’s “key operational partner” on counter-terrorism in the region, as well as a “strategic partner in our global efforts”. The FCO also noted that Saudi Arabia had faced its own very serious terrorist threat, and it stated that the “strong cooperation on counter-terrorism [...] is essential to the interests of both countries.” Saudi Arabia is especially important to efforts to counter the threat from Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), which is based in Yemen and is widely thought to be the most dangerous of the Al Qaeda ‘franchises’. AQAP has proved

154 Q 363
155 Q 451
156 Q 452
158 Ev 134
capable of mounting significant terrorist attacks in the region and has tried several times in the past three years to carry out bomb attacks in the West using complex explosives that are difficult for airline scanners to detect.\textsuperscript{159} Saudi authorities have demonstrated their value as counter-terrorism partners by co-operating with the UK and the United States in trying to control and counter AQAP, for example: by allowing the US to locate a secret drone base on Saudi territory, whence the US could pursue senior AQAP figures in Yemen;\textsuperscript{160} and sharing critical intelligence on threats to Western targets. The FCO highlighted an example of important Saudi-British counter-terrorism cooperation and intelligence-sharing:

British-Saudi collaboration has resulted in the foiling of AQAP terrorist attacks, which would have caused substantial destruction and loss of life, including the provision of information to protect British interests. An example of this cooperation was the discovery at East Midlands airport of a ‘printer bomb’ onboard a US bound flight in October 2010. The initial alert came from the Saudi authorities, who have been quick to provide information to protect British interests on many other occasions.\textsuperscript{161}

81. Our witnesses agreed on the important role played by Saudi Arabia, with a number of witnesses pointing to the UK’s halting in 2006 of the Serious Fraud Office’s investigation into Al Yamamah as a sign of the importance of co-operation, although one witness expressed doubt as to how much credence the UK should give threats that cooperation would be halted:

There might be room for a bit of scepticism about whether counter-terrorism co-operation would really have suffered so badly, given that that seems to be something that is clearly in the national interest of both sides, and not a favour that the Gulf does to us.\textsuperscript{162}

RUSI Director Dr Jonathan Eyal agreed that co-operation was of mutual benefit and was unlikely to be fully withdrawn, however he suggested that problems in the relationship could mean that “there would be damage to the quality and the timeliness of information provided to us.”\textsuperscript{163} Dr Eyal was supportive of counter-terrorism co-operation between the UK and Saudi Arabia, describing the counter-terrorism work by Saudi Arabia’s Ministry of Interior as “innovative” and the UK’s engagement with Saudi Arabia on counter-terrorism as important and productive.\textsuperscript{164} Rosemary Hollis pointed out that the cooperation was three-way with the United States, and that the UK would “not want to be excluded from something that the Saudis would remain in with the Americans.”\textsuperscript{165} This accords with our visit to Saudi Arabia, where we met Ministry of Interior officials and received the

\textsuperscript{159} See, for example, the Statement by the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency David H. Petraeus to Congress on ‘The Terrorist Threat Ten Years After 9/11’, 13 September 2011
\textsuperscript{160} ‘Brennan nomination exposes criticism on targeted killings and secret Saudi base’, Washington Post, 5 February 2013
\textsuperscript{161} Ev 135
\textsuperscript{162} Q 10, and see also Ev w88-91 [C.R.G. Murray]
\textsuperscript{163} Q 184
\textsuperscript{164} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{165} Q 73
impression that counter terrorism was an important and highly valued part of the UK-Saudi bilateral relationship.

82. However, alongside this central role as a counter-terrorism partner, Saudi Arabia also appears to be responsible for some elements that directly contribute to the growth of extremism and terrorism worldwide. As part of our ongoing inquiry into The UK’s response to extremism and instability in North and West Africa, we have heard from some sources about concerns regarding the Saudi funding and encouragement of conservative Islamic Wahhabi madrassas, mosques, and social and political organisations across North Africa which encourage radical and extreme forms of Islam. Some of the people we have met during that inquiry have considered such madrassas and groups as directly contributing to troubling extremist trends in the region. As one argued: people travel from madrassa to mosque to extremist groups. The funding from Saudi Arabia is attributed to private Saudi individuals (rather than the government) who donate to charitable causes but may not always be aware of the details of what they are funding.166

83. The dangers associated with this phenomenon appear to be a major concern of the US government. Our witnesses pointed to a 2008 memorandum published by Wikileaks in 2010, in which US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said that Saudi private and charitable donors still “constitute the most significant source of funding to Sunni terrorist groups worldwide” and that it remained “a critical financial support base for Al Qaida, the Taliban, LeT and other terrorist groups”. The cable adds that the Saudi authorities had promised to set up a charities committee to address the issue but had not yet delivered, and adds that “While the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) takes seriously the threat of terrorism within Saudi Arabia, it has been an ongoing challenge to persuade Saudi officials to treat terrorist financing emanating from Saudi Arabia as a strategic priority.”167 Dr Eyal agreed that this was a problem, and told us that there was “absolutely no doubt that a lot of the funding that came for various terrorist or organisations came from various Saudi sources.” However, he did not believe that this was government-sanctioned money, and said that the Saudis had realised that it was “a cancer to themselves”. In this respect, he considered that Saudi Arabia was both “part of the problem and part of the solution”, but he emphasised the importance of assuring the Saudi leadership that the UK supports the authorities and wanted to engage as a friend.168

84. When asked about the consequences of Saudi support for radical religious groups, Mr Burt told the House in September 2013 that while he had discussed counter-terrorism efforts with his Saudi counterparts, he had not recently discussed the specific issue of Saudi Arabia’s policies to discourage the growth of Jihadi Wahhabism, saying:

There are many reasons why individuals develop extremist views, and our understanding is continuing to evolve. Many countries have problems with domestic extremism and terrorism, and with their citizens travelling overseas to join jihadist groups.

166 Q 186. See also the Statement by Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence Stuart Levey, Testimony Before the Senate Committee on Finance, 1 April 2008
167 Saudi Arabia is ‘biggest funder of terrorists’, The Independent, 6 December 2010. See also ‘US embassy cables: Hillary Clinton says Saudi Arabia ‘a critical source of terrorist funding’’, The Guardian, 5 December 2010
168 Q 184-186
Saudi Arabia has developed sophisticated and integrated prevention, rehabilitation and after-care counter-terrorism programmes. Saudi security forces continue to take action against terrorist groups and disrupt their plans and infrastructure, including through the prevention of travel overseas by extremists.\textsuperscript{169}

85. Saudi Arabia continues to be a vital but complicated counter-terrorism partner for the UK and wider international community. Counter-terrorism co-operation has proven to be of great and practical benefit to both sides and has been instrumental in protecting British lives and interests. However, Saudi Arabia is part of the problem as well as part of the solution. We recommend that the Government make it a priority to engage with its counter-terrorism partners in Saudi Arabia to improve the monitoring of the funding flowing from Saudi Arabia to organisations with an extremist message so that it can be more effectively disrupted. The Government should also encourage Saudi Arabia to ensure that its legitimate promotion of religious values does not inadvertently contribute to the furtherance of extremism, especially with regard to states in North Africa that have been particularly vulnerable to the influence of extremist groups, as well as in states in other regions such as Pakistan, Bangladesh and Indonesia.

86. The UK is also criticised by human rights organisations and campaigners for its intelligence and counter-terrorism co-operation with Saudi Arabia, as Saudi authorities are alleged to detain thousands of suspects without charge, hold detainees for prolonged periods of solitary confinement, and have unfair trial procedures.\textsuperscript{170} In addition, NGOs have expressed concerns that government critics are labelled as ‘terrorists’ and prosecuted under this law. Amnesty International told us “torture and other ill-treatment remain rife, and are used extensively to extract forced “confessions”, which are all too readily accepted by the courts.”\textsuperscript{171} The FCO’s own report on Human Rights and Democracy 2012 noted that “Allegations of torture continue to be heard, in particular from political activists accused of terrorism offences”.\textsuperscript{172} In the light of these allegations, when asked about intelligence sharing, the Government affirmed that it was “very clear about what information cannot be accepted. The Prime Minister has been absolutely clear that the United Kingdom cannot use any information that may have been produced by torture or anything like that.”\textsuperscript{173} The FCO has acknowledged concerns about Saudi Arabia’s counter-terrorism programme, and told us that the FCO staff in Riyadh have “registered our concerns about arbitrary detentions… and have been permitted to attend a counter-terrorism trial in the future.”\textsuperscript{174} In July 2013, the Government confirmed that Embassy staff had not yet attended such a trial, in part because permission to attend trials is in the hands of each trial judge.\textsuperscript{175} However, the Government argued that its counter-terrorism co-operation could serve to improve the human rights situation:

169 HC Deb, 3 September 2013, col 322W
170 Ev w82 – 88 [Redress], Ev 114-119 [Amnesty International], Ev 111-14 [Human Rights Watch]
171 Ev 116
173 Q 403
174 Ev 135
175 Ev 141
Our counter-terrorism partnership in recent years has also allowed us to promote our values and help improve human rights in Saudi Arabia. For example, giving the Saudi authorities greater forensic expertise will give them greater capability for evidence-based prosecutions, which will be admissible in court. [...] we continue to believe that the UK’s ability to influence reform and best practice will be most effective if we are cooperating on counter-terrorism.176

87. Given that the Saudi government does not acknowledge that torture is ever used by its officials, we would welcome further information on the safeguards the UK government has put in place to ensure that intelligence shared by Saudi Arabia does not result from torture. Counter-terrorism is an area in which Saudi authorities appear to be willing to be innovative and to co-operate with international partners. The UK should build on this co-operation to support improvements in standards and best practice. The British Embassy in Riyadh should pursue the chance offered by Saudi authorities to attend a counter-terrorism trial and the Government should update the Committee in its response to this report.

**Saudi Arabia as a foreign policy partner**

88. Saudi Arabia has a huge presence in a region that is very important to the UK’s foreign policy interests. It is one of largest and wealthiest state in the region, with significant defence capability as well as religious leadership as the home of Islam’s Two Holy Mosques. As such, it has enormous potential as a foreign policy partner to the UK. For its part, the Government considers Saudi Arabia to be a “key strategic partner” in the Middle East and the Arab world and common foreign policy interests were repeatedly raised by the Government as something on which Saudi Arabia and the UK work together, such as the containment of Iran; resolution of the Syrian crisis; stabilizing Yemen; supporting Arab states in transition (Egypt, Libya and Tunisia); counter-proliferation; and the Middle East Peace Process.177

**Diplomatic capacity**

89. However, some of our witnesses cautioned that Saudi Arabia has not always lived up to its potential as a positive influence in the region. Dr Neil Partrick was sceptical about Saudi Arabia’s foreign policy capability, calling it a “greatly overstated player” whose diplomats did not engage in “actively politicking”. He argued that Saudi Arabia had not been able to deliver on the Middle East Process, and would not “substantively engage” with Iraq either. He concluded:

> Part of this is about judgment but it is also about capacity. They do not have a significant policy-making capacity, so even under a younger leadership there are still problems about willingness to advance policy and follow it up. [...] We share a lot of broad aspirations – they are more conservative, certainly, on the Iran side – but it is very hard to look to Saudi Arabia as an active partner in dealing with some of those questions.178

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176 Ev 135-136
177 Q 369 and Ev 133
178 Q 30
Other witnesses disagreed with this analysis. Sir Tom Phillips told us that Saudi Arabia had some very capable people, including an extremely experienced Foreign Minister (Prince Saud bin Faisal has been in office since 1975). He acknowledged that it was harder to engage at the lower levels as the “real competence was at the top” and senior Saudi figures conducted work via mobile phones rather than through institutions. However, he told us that Saudi Arabia has pursued a noticeably more active foreign policy in recent years, pointing to its active role with regard to Syria, Bahrain and Yemen as indicating an increasingly prominent role in regional foreign policy. In a recent speech to British Parliamentarians, Prince Turki al Faisal, a former head of Saudi Arabia’s intelligence agency and former Ambassador to the UK and US, highlighted strengthening allies, maintaining stability, and conflict resolution as three overall goals of Saudi foreign policy over the next decade.179

90. In this context, we note Saudi Arabia’s rejection on 18 October 2013 of a non-permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). This marked the first time that Saudi Arabia had applied to be elected as a member, and it was due to take up a seat in January 2014 for a two year term. The announcement by Saudi Arabia that it was to renounce the UNSC seat was swift and apparently unexpected; The Economist said that the decision followed months of diligent preparation for taking up the place, including the training of several Saudi diplomats in order to be ready to support Saudi Arabia’s membership.180 Saudi Arabia’s Foreign Ministry provided a statement that criticised the Security Council for failing to bring peace to the Middle East, particularly with regard to Palestine and Syria:

Saudi Arabia [...] is refraining from taking membership of the U.N. Security Council until it has reformed so it can effectively and practically perform its duties and discharge its responsibilities in maintaining international security and peace.181

91. Analysts have speculated on the reasons for this decision and suggestions include that it might be down to a sense of frustration with the United States at its perceived failure to act in Syria and fear about a potential rapprochement with Iran; a concern that taking the seat would mean publicly adopting positions on major international issues, which Saudi Arabia has traditionally avoided; a desire to take a more assertive position on Syria and Iran than would be compatible with membership; or internal power struggles in the Kingdom.182 Sir Tom Philips, former Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, wrote that the decision sent the West a “strong, and public, message about their feeling of betrayal.”183

92. We were surprised and disappointed by Saudi Arabia’s decision to reject a non-permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council. We believe that Saudi Arabia’s concerns are best expressed from a position on the Council within the UN system. The Government should encourage its counterparts in Saudi Arabia to re-engage with the UN Security Council on these important regional issues.

180 ‘Pique your partners’, The Economist, 26 October 2013
182 See, for example, ‘Saudi Arabia and the UN: Why the snub?’, The Economist, 21 October 2013
183 ‘What’s got into the Saudis?’, Tom Phillips for CNN, 19 October 2013
Regional influence: a force for moderation?

93. Saudi Arabia is a member of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the Arab League,184 and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC),185 as well as OPEC.186 The Government drew our attention to Saudi Arabia’s action in these regional organisations; Alistair Burt said that there was “plenty of evidence” of Saudi Arabia exerting its influence in the region, telling us: “Saudi is looked to by its neighbours; there is no doubt about that. In both the GCC and, particularly, in the Arab League, it is a key player.” He said Saudi Arabia had been “fully engaged” in securing Arab League support for the international military campaign in Libya in 2011, and highlighted its leadership with regard to Syria:

King Abdullah saw to it that the OIC convened an extraordinary summit in August 2012 in Mecca, which saw the OIC decide to suspend Syria’s membership of the OIC due to the actions of the Assad regime.187

Our witnesses agreed with the Government that Saudi Arabia played a valuable role in regional organisations, and several noted in particular its role in securing regional support for the 2011 Libyan intervention.188 The OIC is hosted by Saudi Arabia, and Sir Alan told that that Saudi Arabia had “on various occasions called it together in order to mediate and moderate Islamic fervour in international affairs”, citing Bosnia, Afghanistan and the Rushdie affair as examples of its use.189 Neil Partrick also noted that Saudi Arabia played an important role as “a reasonable, pragmatic player within OPEC” and ensures that the oil market remains stable.190

94. Saudi Arabia’s role in the region was also notable with regard to the recent developments in Egypt. Saudi Arabia had publicly expressed concerns about the Muslim Brotherhood and disquiet about the departure of former President Mubarak. Following the departure of former President Morsi, Saudi Arabia reportedly extended an aid package of over £5 billion and made public statements in support of the army’s actions.191

95. More broadly, Sir Alan Munro described Saudi Arabia’s value as a foreign policy partner as one of broadly encouraging moderation in the region, supplemented by “specific instances” where the UK and Saudi Arabia have shared interests.192 However, the contradictory approach highlighted in the above section on counter-terrorism is also reflected across Saudi Arabia’s foreign policy. Saudi Arabia has enormous religious influence and authority across the Muslim world. This was mentioned by the FCO and by

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184 The Arab League, or League of Arab States, is an association of 22 Arabic-speaking countries (including Palestine, which it considers independent). Foreign Ministers usually meet twice a year to strengthen ties and coordinate policies.
185 Formally the Organisation of the Islamic Conference, the OIC was established to strengthen the solidarity and cooperation among its 57 Member States. Its secretariat is based in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.
186 The Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) is an intergovernmental organisation of 12 states. Its objective is to co-ordinate and unify petroleum policies among Member Countries, in order to secure fair and stable prices.
187 Q 426
188 Q 248 and Q 426
189 Q 102
190 Q 2
191 ‘Why Saudi Arabia is taking a risk by backing the Egyptian coup’, The Guardian, 20 August 2013
192 Q 102
most of our witnesses only in a positive sense but, as noted in the above section, we have also heard significant concern that while Saudi Arabia is inherently conservative and in favour of the status quo, its export of radical Wahhabi teaching may be in the long term destabilising to states in the broader region.

96. **Saudi Arabia is an important regional partner, which is taking an increasingly active international role.** It shares many of the UK’s goals in the region and it is important to work closely with Saudi Arabia on these shared outcomes. However, the government should be vigilant with regard to where Saudi Arabia’s promotion of religious values may have a destabilising effect in the long-term, and must take steps with its international partners to discourage this policy, or to mitigate its effects.

**Shared interests**

**Middle East Peace Process and the Arab Peace Initiative**

97. The Government has made the Middle East Peace Process a focus of its work this year. In January 2013, the Foreign Secretary expressed UK support for what he hoped would become “a major effort by the United States on the Middle East peace process—the greatest effort since the Oslo peace accords”. At his joint press conference with the new Secretary of State John Kerry on 25 February 2013, the Foreign Secretary stated that “There is no more urgent foreign policy priority in 2013 than restarting negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians […] my promise to Secretary Kerry today was that the United Kingdom will make every effort to mobilise the European Union and Arab states behind decisive moves for peace.”

98. With its combination of regional leadership, religious authority and significant wealth, Saudi Arabia has been considered an important partner in the Middle East Peace Process. Saudi Arabia’s role was enhanced by the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative, proposed by then-Crown Prince, King Abdullah to the Arab League, which set out bold proposals to normalise relations between Israel and the Arab region, in exchange for a withdrawal from the Occupied Territories (including East Jerusalem), recognition of an independent Palestinian state, and a “just settlement” for the refugees. The Arab League unanimously endorsed the proposal, and re-adopted it in 2007 at its Riyadh summit. Although Israel rejected the proposal, it received significant international praise and support, including by many heads of state, the Quartet on the Middle East (UN, US, EU, and Russia) in 2003, and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). The API continues to be the subject of discussion and a basis for this year’s initiative by the US.

**Saudi Arabia and Yemen**

99. The Government highlighted the cooperation between Saudi Arabia and the UK over Yemen as an example of working together on shared interests. The Government has made Yemen a priority in UK foreign policy for counter-terrorism and humanitarian reasons,

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193 HC Deb, 22 January 2013, col 156
195 The OIC endorsed the Arab Peace Initiative at its summit in Beirut, Lebanon in March 2002
196 ‘Netanyahu signals readiness to consider 2002 Arab peace plan’ Reuters, 5 June 2013
while Yemen’s location on Saudi Arabia’s southern border makes it a major foreign policy concern for the Saudi government. After the Yemeni government lost control of large parts of the country in 2011 amid fears of imminent state collapse, Saudi Arabia played a primary role in arranging the GCC-brokered initiative and UN agreement under which the long-time President Ali Abdullah Saleh eventually agreed to step down and allow for a transition. The UK, Saudi Arabia and Yemen now co-chair the Friends of Yemen initiative, which aims to keep Yemen on the international agenda and coordinate fundraising and stabilization efforts. Saudi Arabia hosted a Donor Conference in September 2012 at which representatives from GCC countries, the World Bank and others made pledges totalling $6.4 billion towards an agreed list of priorities and funding mechanisms.\textsuperscript{197} The Government of Yemen stated in March 2013 that of the total $7.9 billion pledged in 2012, $2.7 billion had been approved and $1.8 billion disbursed.\textsuperscript{198}

100. **Although there is a long way still to go in bringing stability to Yemen, this is a good example of UK-Saudi co-operation to try to bring stabilization and to promote development in a country that is key to Saudi Arabia’s interests. As such, it could act as a model of high-profile and substantial British support for locally-led solutions to regional problems.**

**Saudi Arabia and Iran**

101. As with Yemen, the UK and Saudi Arabia share concerns about Iran, considering it to be a security threat to other states in the region, to energy security, and to nuclear non-proliferation in the Middle East. For Saudi Arabia, Iran is a long-standing rival for regional influence and power, and a source of genuine concern. Sir Tom Phillips warned:

> Iran is Saudi Arabia’s No.1 foreign policy strategic threat, and they do feel threatened, and encircled indeed, by what they think Iran is trying to do.\textsuperscript{199}

102. Alistair Burt told us that the UK’s interests were aligned with regard to Iran:

> Saudi Arabia is acutely aware of the presence of Iran […] and of the risks that both it and we believe Iran poses to the region through its nuclear file and other ways in which it has sought to interfere with its neighbours. […] It is clearly in our strategic interest that Iran does not become nuclear –capable, thus leading to the risk of proliferation in the region. In all such areas our interests are aligned.\textsuperscript{200}

However, witnesses suggested that the UK and Saudi Arabia’s motivations for concern, and perception about the seriousness of the threat and required response, may not always be in alignment. While our witnesses agreed that UK and Saudi security interests were aligned with respect to containing Iran’s nuclear ambitions and countering its sponsorship of “proxy militias throughout the region”,\textsuperscript{201} they pointed out that the UK did not share in other causes of Saudi Arabia’s long-standing rivalry with Iran. Jane Kinninmont highlighted that “there are ethnic and sectarian components of the Saudi policy that are not

\textsuperscript{197} ‘Donors pledge $6.4bn in aid to Yemen’, Financial Times, 4 September 2012

\textsuperscript{198} HC Deb, 20 May 2013, col 518W

\textsuperscript{199} Q 253

\textsuperscript{200} Q 427

\textsuperscript{201} Q 187
shared by Britain.” Dr Eyal saw a difference “on the degrees” to which Iran was considered a problem:

For instance, we would not see Shia as being necessarily impossible to accommodate in the structure of the Middle East as it is now. We accept that Iran is a big country in the region and deserves and has to have its secure place. Indeed, all the discussion with Iran is predicated on that. I do not think that we see eye to eye with Saudi Arabia on that; I think that their belief is that the weaker Iran is, the better.203

103. Witnesses told us that Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf States, are worried about the UK’s commitment to preventing Iran from becoming a possible nuclear weapons state.” However, it is not clear how far Saudi Arabia and the GCC wish Western states to act. Witnesses referred us to the remarks attributed to Saudi King Abdullah in US documents published by Wikileaks, calling for US airstrikes against Iran, and urging the US to ‘cut the head off the snake’.205 Dr Eyal agreed that for Saudi Arabia a nuclear Iran would be “an absolute red line”, however, he added that the Saudis “do not want a convulsion, if they could avoid it.”206 In the light of this, we note that Saudi Arabia has been willing to make some conciliatory gestures; in 2012, the then-President of Iran Mahmood Ahmedinejad visited Mecca at the invitation of Saudi Arabia for an OIC meeting and was asked to sit beside King Abdullah in what was interpreted as a gesture of reconciliation.207 Following the 2013 election of Dr Rouhani as President of Iran, there have been hopes of progress in UK-Iran relations and a meeting has been scheduled at the UN General Assembly in New York in September 2013.

104. The UK and Saudi Arabia share immediate and critical concerns with regard to Iran’s nuclear programme and its interference in states in the region. It will be important for the Government to work closely with Saudi Arabia on engaging with Iran as a more constructive regional player. Saudi Arabia provides vital support for international action via sanctions. Saudi Arabia’s broader rivalry with Iran on ethnic and religious lines is a cause for concern, but the Saudi leadership has shown itself willing to act as a pragmatic and useful foreign policy partner in containing the Iranian threat to regional and international security.

**Saudi Arabia and Syria**

105. Saudi Arabia has taken an unusually strong line in response to the Syrian civil war. King Abdullah publicly condemned the Assad regime after sustained military action began in 2011, and Saudi Arabia has called repeatedly for a greater international response to the crisis. Sir Tom Phillips described Saudi Arabia’s leaders as “genuinely morally affronted by what Assad was doing”.

202 Q 30
203 Q 187
204 Q 30
205 Q 253
206 Q 189
207 ‘Saudi king sits next to Iran’s Ahmadinejad in goodwill gesture’, Reuters, 14 August 2012
106. The Government considered Syria a shared interest and concern of Saudi Arabia and the UK, and the shared desire for a united response, telling us:

The [Saudi] Foreign Minister has expressed a wish for the violence to come to an end, and for the peaceful political solution being proposed through the Geneva process to be followed as a matter of great importance.  

The Government also welcomed Saudi Arabia’s continuing support for international efforts to respond to the Syria crisis, including its support for a united response by the UN Security Council and its role in both the “core group” and wider membership of the Friends of Syria. Since the Minister gave evidence, Saudi Arabia is also reported to have been the driving force behind renewed efforts in September 2013 to secure an Arab League endorsement of international action on Syria.

107. Saudi Arabia’s foreign minister has been stridently critical of the international community’s failure to take more action, and Saudi Arabia is widely believed to have begun arming opposition groups itself. Saudi Arabia has not confirmed this, but Prince Saud bin Faisal, the Saudi Foreign Minister, said that

Saudi Arabia will do everything within its capacity, and we do believe that what is happening in Syria is a slaughter, a slaughter of innocents [...] We can’t bring ourselves to remain quiet. Morally we have a duty.

The prospect of arming rebel groups has contributed to fears that Syria will become a proxy conflict between armed groups funded by external Sunni and Shia regional powers. Alistair Burt emphasised that Saudi Arabia had not officially confirmed that it was arming opposition groups, though “they have certainly provided support to those seeking reform, who are under pressure, as the United Kingdom has”. Mr Burt rejected suggestions that sectarian and strategic rivalry with Iran was motivating Saudi Arabia in Syria:

Saudi Arabia is working for a peaceful solution, and I do not believe that its concerns about Iran, which many share, in any way get in the way of trying to find the right and peaceful answer to what is happening in Syria.

Sir Tom Phillips told us that Saudi Arabia’s leaders had learned lessons about the dangers of arming groups in Afghanistan, and that if they were arming opposition groups they had taken time to reach a decision on arming rebels so that they could find “people whom they could work with and who are not people who will turn into the Al Qaeda threat down the pike.” Most observers agree with this assessment, though they note that while Saudi Arabia is not arming Al Qaeda, it may be arming hardline Salafist groups.

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208 Q 433
209 See, for example, ‘Arab League Endorses International Action’, The New York Times, 1 September 2013
210 See, for example, ‘Saudi Arabia in secret deals to arm Syrian opposition’, The Times, 27 February 2012; and “Saudi weapons’ seen at Syria rebel base’, BBC News online, 8 October 2012
212 Q 433
213 Q 252
214 See, for example, ‘Syria’s Secular and Islamist Rebels: Who Are the Saudis and the Qataris Arming?’, Time Magazine, 18 September 2012; and ‘Insight: Saudi Arabia boosts Salafist rivals to al Qaeda in Syria’, Reuters, 1 October 2013
108. Saudi Arabia has been a strong voice in the Gulf and Arab world in support of international action on Syria. The UK and Saudi Arabia share a deep concern about the conflict, a desire for a political solution, and the requirement for an international multilateral response.

109. We note the reported supply of arms by Saudi Arabia to groups in Syria; the Government should set out in its response to this report its assessment of the situation and the actions it is taking to monitor any groups that are receiving funding and arms from Saudi Arabia, and its efforts to engage with the Saudi authorities regarding any concerns about those groups.

**Saudi Arabia and Bahrain**

110. As Bahrain’s nearest and largest neighbour and main source of financial support, Saudi Arabia has enormous influence in Bahrain and a close relationship with its Sunni royal family. Dr Eyal described how the stability of Bahrain’s government is also important to Saudi Arabia’s stability and security, principally because if Bahrain’s government were to collapse: it would be the first monarchy to do so; it would be seen as a victory for Iran; and it would result in a Shia-dominated government “smack-bang on the eastern province of Saudi Arabia, which has its own problem with Shias”, all of which would be “really thoroughly bad news for the Saudis.”

111. As such, Saudi Arabia provided increased support to Bahrain’s rulers during its crisis in 2011. Most controversially, at the height of the protests Saudi Arabia took part in the GCC-mandated intervention, deploying around 1,000 troops with armoured support to secure institutions. Since then, it has provided considerable financial support to the ruling family in Bahrain, pledging to contribute $10 billion to Bahrain’s stabilization and economic development over the next ten years.

112. Saudi Arabia is widely thought to have provided backing and support to ‘hardliners’ in the Bahraini royal family in 2011, and Sir Roger Tomkys said “I believe that the Saudis have made it quite clear that they do not intend to let radical change take place.” Robin Lamb agreed that Saudi Arabia would be willing to make its displeasure known, citing an example from 2004 when Saudi Arabia had cut off some oil income to Bahrain as a penalty for signing a Free Trade Agreement with the US. Nevertheless, Sir Tom Phillips suggested that it was open to the political process:

> What I experienced from my own direct dialogue with the Saudis on Bahrain was that they acknowledged from the start that there had to be a political process there. It was not something that you could control from a purely security perspective. So they were encouraging that political dialogue. I think the problem they have got is that they don’t quite see what the end result is of the dialogue. What is the confessional balance you get to that does not mean it is, in some sense, a Shia-dominated risk?

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215 Q 191


217 Q 46, see also Jane Kinninmont: *Bahrain: Beyond the Impasse*, Chatham House, June 2012

218 Q 46
There is a bottom line there; that Bahrain does not become what they would see as an Iranian client state.\textsuperscript{219}

Prince Turki Al Faisal confirmed this in his speech to a meeting in the House of Commons, in which he said:

King Hamad has continued to call for negotiations. We in Saudi Arabia continue to support that call. But let us be clear. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia will never accept that Iran take power in Bahrain. This is a fantasy, if anyone, including the West, believes that such an eventuality can happen on Saudi Arabia’s watch.\textsuperscript{220}

113. The Government did not mention Bahrain as a shared interest for the UK and Saudi Arabia, though when asked, Mr Burt acknowledged the “special relationship” between the close neighbours and argued that the UK and Saudi Arabia shared a desire for the national dialogue in Bahrain to succeed,\textsuperscript{221} “thereby ending the violence and ensuring greater inclusion and delivery of the BICI recommendations.”\textsuperscript{222} However, he acknowledged that this was subject to certain limits on the Saudi side, which the UK accepted:

Saudi Arabia does not want to see a change in the monarchy in Bahrain and has made that plain. It believes that the governance of Bahrain is more secure under that umbrella. Anything else is for Bahrainis to decide. That is the United Kingdom’s position. However, we do not see a reason to challenge the assumption made by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.\textsuperscript{223}

114. Robert Lacey was more provocative in his assessment of our shared interests, arguing that that the worldwide condemnation of Saudi Arabia’s intervention in Bahrain was “understandable, but hypocrical”, adding:

The majority of the inhabitants of Bahrain are Shia Muslims whose loyalties – social, religious and political – look beyond Bahrain to Iran and Iraq. Iran’s massive new US- and UK- liberated Shia ally. There is not a single western country, including Britain, which would welcome a pro-Iranian Shia government dominating Bahrain and its crucial US naval base. So, inasmuch as Saudi Arabia is helping to suppress the undoubted political rights of the undoubted Shia majority of Bahrainis, it is doing our dirty work.\textsuperscript{224}

115. Given the UK’s close relationship with both Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, the Government should engage with Saudi Arabia on the UK’s efforts to promote the reform process in Bahrain and an inclusive and substantive National Dialogue.

\textsuperscript{219} Q 242
\textsuperscript{220} Speech by HRH Prince Turki al Faisal for the Henry Jackson Society at the House of Commons, “A Saudi Perspective on a Changing Middle East”, 12 September 2013
\textsuperscript{221} A new round of national dialogue talks began in Bahrain in February 2013 between representatives from ‘loyalist’ national societies, members of the parliament, opposition political societies, and three government ministers.
\textsuperscript{222} Q 427. “BICI” refers to the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry.
\textsuperscript{223} Q 427
\textsuperscript{224} Ev 120
Reform and human rights in Saudi Arabia: current situation

**Political reform**

116. Saudi Arabia is an absolute monarchy ruled by the Al Saud family, with no legislature or political parties. Robert Lacey described it as “a family creation, a family fiefdom and a family business”. At 161 out of 167 on the Economist Intelligence Unit’s Democracy Index 2011, Saudi Arabia was ranked equal to Burma and even lower than Iran. Constitutionally, the King rules in accordance with the *Shari'a*, the sacred law of Islam. He appoints and leads a Council of Ministers, which serves as the instrument of royal authority in both legislative and executive matters. A wider Consultative Council (Majlis al-Shura) was established in 1993 and acts somewhat like a parliament, reviewing laws and forming committees. However, the Council is entirely consultative, with members appointed by the King, and has no legislative or scrutiny power. Unlike Bahrain, for example, Saudi Arabia does not have any established political opposition because political parties are banned and anyone expressing public dissent risks punishment. Aside from occasional protests in the Eastern region, there appears to be no organised widespread political movement against the Saudi leadership.

117. The FCO said that political participation in Saudi Arabia is limited, but noted that the King had appointed women to the Shura Council for the first time in 2013, and issued a decree allowing women to vote in the next municipal elections in 2015, which it considered a “significant development.” These municipal-level elections in Saudi towns and cities result in boards with little real power, but as the only official positions that are elected they have symbolic significance.

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225 Ev 115
226 See Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index 2011. The EIU’s Democracy Index 2012 placed Saudi Arabia at 163 of 167 (which was ranked 158th)
Human rights

### Saudi Arabia

#### Adherence to selected human rights conventions and relevant international instruments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conventions and Instruments Signed/ratified/acceded</th>
<th>Not signed/ratified/acceded</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reservations: general (“providing these do not conflict with the precepts of the Islamic Shariah”) and art. 22 (referral to International Court of Justice)</td>
<td>International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reservations: general (“In case of contradiction between any term of the Convention and the norms of Islamic law, the Kingdom is not under obligation to observe the contradictory terms of the Convention”) and art. 9.2 (nationality of children) and 29.1 (referral to International Court of Justice)</td>
<td>Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture (OPCAT)</td>
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<td>Convention Against Torture (CAT)(1997)</td>
<td>International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reservations: art. 20 (jurisdiction of the Committee for inquiries and visits) and 30.1 (referral to International Court of Justice)</td>
<td>Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (CPED)</td>
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<tr>
<td>General Reservation: (“Reservations with respect to all such articles as are in conflict with the provisions of Islamic law”)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Declarations: general and art. 3.2 (age of recruitment: 17 years)</td>
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118. Saudi Arabia has a very poor human rights record. Our witnesses and submissions drew our attention to many and serious human rights concerns, including the use of corporal punishment; capital punishment; torture; the absence of the rule of law; severe restrictions on women’s rights, freedom of expression and assembly; and restrictions on the rights of minorities and migrant workers; as well as abuses related to Saudi Arabia’s work in counter-terrorism and security operations in its Eastern Province. In addition, they noted that it is virtually impossible to register a human rights organization, and that activists have been prosecuted and imprisoned.228 The FCO said many of its human rights concerns centred on punishments prescribed by Islamic Shariah law, and identified a number of main concerns regarding human rights in Saudi Arabia. These include the death penalty, women’s rights and torture, as well as freedom of expression and assembly, religious freedom and the judicial system.229

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228 Ev 111-114 [Human Rights Watch], Ev 114-119 [Amnesty International], Ev 130-133 [Caroline Montagu], Ev w82-88 [Redress], Ev w6-7, Ev w75-77 [Index on Censorship]

Is Saudi Arabia reforming?

119. Our witnesses were in agreement that the human rights situation in Saudi Arabia remained problematic. However, there was far less consensus as to their assessments of the progress so far, and whether Saudi Arabia was going in the right direction. Several of our witnesses gave a quite positive assessment of the situation, arguing that Saudi authorities are cautiously proceeding with reforms while dealing with a deeply religious and conservative society.230 The FCO’s submission states that “There are indications that the Saudi Government is slowly encouraging Saudi society to open up.”231 Witnesses, particularly the former diplomats, endorsed this position, and some went much further in their praise for the reforms so far: Sir Tom Phillips considered that King Abdullah “will go down in Saudi history as one of the great reforming kings.”232 Sir Alan Munro told us that “we are now seeing the regime, frankly, pushing at the doors of change with a force that I have not seen before.”233

120. Women’s rights in particular were highlighted as an area in which the King was pressing for reform in the face of a more conservative society. Saudi Arabia was ranked at 127 out of 136 countries in the World Economic Forum’s Gender Gap Index in 2013 (a small rise from 131 out of 135 in 2012), and women’s rights in Saudi Arabia are a focus of particular international concern, particularly with regard to the ‘Guardianship’ system, which treats women as minors and girls and women of all ages are forbidden from travelling, studying, or working without permission from their male guardians. Nevertheless, we were told by witnesses that the King had put women’s rights at the top of the agenda,235 and positive steps included the appointment in February 2013 of 30 women to the Shura Council, Saudi Arabia’s consultative assembly; the announcement that women will be able to take part as voters and candidates in 2015’s municipal election; the provision of ID cards, enabling women to hold bank accounts and open businesses; and the widening of the scope of jobs deemed suitable for women. Women now make up 60% of university graduates in Saudi Arabia, and women have taken high-profile roles in Saudi society, including as a higher education minister, and roles on the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce and Jeddah Economic Forum.236

121. During our visit in March 2013 we observed a marked difference in women’s rights in comparison to previous experiences in the Kingdom. Reporting on its visit to Saudi Arabia in 2006, our predecessor committee wrote:

We were particularly struck by the complete segregation of society, with Saudi women excluded from meetings. This was particularly evident at one meeting, then
our female interlocutors observed us via a video link and were unable to participate themselves.\footnote{237}

By contrast, women took part in the majority of the meetings we held in Saudi Arabia. We observed female members of the Shura Council taking an active part in a debate in the Council chambers, and women members of the Foreign Affairs and Human Rights Committees took an active part in our meetings with those committees. Of course, even with such changes the position of women in Saudi society is subject to enormous constraint and it was hard for us to judge how far the changes at the top of society have ‘trickled down’ to women at other levels of Saudi society. However, it appeared undeniable that there was much more acceptance of women taking a public role and space for women’s rights to gradually improve in Saudi Arabia than there had been only seven years earlier. We were struck by the extent to which the women we spoke to felt that progress was being made. Since our visit, there have been further positive developments, including the Saudi cabinet passing a ban on domestic violence and other forms of abuse against women, making domestic violence a punishable crime for the first time.\footnote{238}

122. Several of these witnesses considered that the extent to which Saudi Arabia has enacted reforms is not well-understood in the West, which tends to focus on the continuing problems and does not fully consider the “deeply conservative” context in which the Government is working. Sir Alan Munro described Saudi Arabia as a “diarchy” in which the monarchy must work with a powerful religious establishment, and told the Committee that over the last 20 years

Political reform, as being orchestrated under an ailing—long may he reign, as I see it—King Abdullah, has moved to a pitch that has never been seen before. But at every stage, given this deeply entrenched religious conservatism in that society, they have got to move at the pace that will carry the clerical establishment and the conservative constituency with it. That is a constant preoccupation. [...] Within those constraints, [...]That is a welcome thing, but there are constraints.\footnote{239}

Robert Lacey told us that “The House of Saud has a generally retrograde image in Western media. Seen from the inside of a deeply conservative society, however, they often seem the very opposite - pioneering such innovations as women’s education, the telephone, radio and television, the internet and social media in the face of fierce and sometimes violent fundamentalist opposition.”

123. In addition to praise for attempts to enact top-down reforms, witnesses also drew attention to longer-term trends in Saudi Arabia that they considered had set the conditions for future reform. These included the speedy rise in internet use and social media, which BBC journalist Frank Gardner has described as providing “a healthy explosion of free discussion, criticism and satire on the internet”. Saudi Arabia is the fastest-growing Twitter market in the world,\footnote{240} and Saudi Twitter users recorded 3,000% growth from 2011 to

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\item 237 Foreign Affairs Committee, Fourth Report of Session 2005-06, Foreign Policy Aspects of the War Against Terrorism, HC 573, para 132
\item 238 ‘Saudi Arabia cabinet passes ban on domestic violence’, The Independent, 29 August 2013
\item 239 Q 99
\item 240 ‘Twitter usage is booming in Saudi Arabia’, Global Web Index blog, globalwebindex.net
\end{thebibliography}
2012, which is much higher than the global average.\textsuperscript{241} Other witnesses pointed to the huge increase in educated youth: Saudi Arabia has spent enormous resources on education in the last two decades and 160,000 Saudis study abroad on King Abdullah scholarships each year, which has been regarded as a sign of inevitable change to come.\textsuperscript{242}

124. In contrast, NGOs and others were much more critical, describing a decidedly more “mixed picture” with regard to improvements in human rights and reform, drawing attention to Saudi Arabia’s “unflinching repression”\textsuperscript{243} in its Eastern Province where 14 people died in protests in 2011-12. David Mepham, UK Director of Human Rights Watch cautioned that while there had been “modest improvements” to women’s rights, they should be recognised as starting from a very low base and the guardianship system remains in place “in all its essentials”.\textsuperscript{244} Philip Luther, Middle East and North Africa Director at Amnesty International, highlighted instances which revealed more negative trends, such as an increased crackdown on activists and human rights defenders in recent months.\textsuperscript{245}

125. Despite some recent improvements, the human rights situation in Saudi Arabia remains very poor. The absence of civil and political rights and the use of extreme punishments with inadequate judicial safeguards remain of deep concern, as do the rights of women and minorities. We recognise and welcome the significant steps that have been taken toward improved rights and freedoms, particularly with regard to women’s rights, but this has started from a very low base.

\textbf{How effectively is the UK supporting reform and human rights in Saudi Arabia?}

\textit{Strategy of engagement}

126. The then Minister with responsibility for the Middle East and North Africa, Alistair Burt, told us that the UK has “a frank and robust relationship with Saudi Arabia in terms of human rights”.\textsuperscript{246} The FCO’s Human Rights and Democracy Report for 2011 explains the UK’s strategy of engagement:

Our strategy remains to work with Saudi society, advocating reform within the existing constitutional framework, to build support for full application of human rights standards. In 2011, this involved organising visits and meetings with key Saudi Arabian interlocutors to deepen mutual understanding on human rights issues. The Foreign Secretary, Minister for the Middle East Alistair Burt, and our Ambassador engaged in dialogue with Saudi Arabian ministers, officials and human rights

\begin{footnotes}
\item[241] ‘Through the Eyes of Twentysomethings-Murphy’, book review, \textit{Saudi-US Relations Information Service (SUSRIS)}. susris.com
\item[242] Ev w121-124, Q 206 and Q 219
\item[244] Q 256
\item[245] Ibid.
\item[246] Q 410
\end{footnotes}
organisations to raise our concerns and understand Saudi perceptions of the issues and the pace of change.\textsuperscript{247}

127. The Government states that it raises human rights issues in public and in private with Saudi leaders and officials.\textsuperscript{248} In public, Saudi Arabia has been a long-standing feature of the list of “countries of concern” in the FCO’s human rights reports, and the FCO issues quarterly updates that monitor the human rights situation.\textsuperscript{249} In addition, the UK makes public statements on human rights issues, and FCO ministers have issued five press releases concerning human rights abuses in Saudi Arabia in 2013.\textsuperscript{250} The Government also claims that it holds conversations about human rights when it meets officials and ministers in private. For example, the Deputy Head of Mission at the UK’s Embassy in Riyadh discussed with the Deputy Chairman of the Saudi Human Rights Commission the section on Saudi Arabia in the FCO’s Annual Human Rights Report 2012, and the head of the FCO’s Human Rights and Democracy Department, Louise de Sousa, visited Saudi Arabia for discussions in May 2013.\textsuperscript{251} Alistair Burt said that he and the Foreign Secretary had both discussed human rights and reform in their meetings with Saudi counterparts.\textsuperscript{252}

128. In its 2012 Human Rights Report, the FCO highlighted its efforts to cooperate on judicial reform and in April 2013 the Government said its officials were negotiating a Memorandum of Understanding in the Justice Sector, and that the UK was pressing to include a provision on the implementation of international obligations, particularly the human rights conventions. This would require pressing Saudi Arabia to ratify the CAT Optional Protocol, thus establishing a national preventive mechanism.\textsuperscript{253} As of November 2013, the UK and Saudi Arabia are yet to sign this Memorandum of Understanding.\textsuperscript{254}

129. Our witnesses had mixed views of the Government’s strategy. NGOs and human rights activists generally believed that the Government under-reported the level of human rights abuse in Saudi Arabia, and did not do enough to put pressure on its leadership for reform.\textsuperscript{255}

130. The Government’s application of public and private pressure garnered considerable comment. While all witnesses broadly agreed that a combination of public and private pressure was required, there were a variety of different responses to the Government’s assertion that it used both. At the most negative end of the scale, a number of witnesses were sceptical about how far the UK really does raise human rights and reform issues in private. Chris Doyle said:

I have spoken to diplomats and former diplomats, and I do not think that they would necessarily share the belief that, when it really comes down to, say, a British Prime

\textsuperscript{248} See, for example, Q 409 and HC Deb, 22 March 2013, col 874W
\textsuperscript{249} Latest update available September 2013, fco.gov.uk
\textsuperscript{250} Deduced from FCO website archive
\textsuperscript{251} HC Deb, 27 June 2013, col 380W
\textsuperscript{252} Q410 and HC Deb, 15 May 2013, c244W
\textsuperscript{253} HC Deb, 22 April 2013, Col 641W
\textsuperscript{254} See Appendix 1 for a list of extant MOUs and treaties, provided by the FCO.
\textsuperscript{255} Q 257, Q 278, Ev w82, Ev w77
Minister meeting with one of these major rulers, there are no no-go areas; I simply do not believe that that is true.²⁵⁶

Human Rights Watch said the Government “appears very reluctant to press the Saudi authorities on human rights issues and it rarely makes public statements of concern”.²⁵⁷ David Mepham argued that it seemed “a little too convenient that, where it might be embarrassing for them to press issues more publicly, they always prioritise and give more emphasis to the private route. Both are required to effect change.”²⁵⁸ He also argued that public criticism had the added benefit of “talking to the people of that country, so that when there are movements for change or people pressing for reform, you are saying, ‘We show support and sympathy for your position.’”²⁵⁹ Caroline Montagu agreed that public pressure could be useful, even going so far as to suggest that it would help the Saudi King: “The reform is top down, so he needs support.[…] I think that would definitely be welcomed by people such as King Abdullah, his daughter Princess Adilah and the many reforming members of the Al Saud family”.²⁶⁰

131. However, several witnesses, particularly former diplomats, supported the Government’s argument that private pressure could be more productive. Robin Lamb told us that public criticism “goes down like a lead balloon”,²⁶¹ and Sir Alan Munro argued that it could be counter-productive, warning of a “backlash factor” whereby British support for human rights issues makes the role of Saudi reformers more difficult.²⁶² Sir Tom Phillips agreed, arguing that:

> the Saudi Government are making important steps forward. Yes, of course, from the point of view of our society we would like it to be more, faster and so on, but I believe it is a system that is trying to move in the right direction and that we get more traction by working with it and encouraging it, rather than banging from the outside.”²⁶³

He told us that as an ambassador he had seen British ministers raise human rights issues with Saudi ministers, and he had done the same.²⁶⁴ His preference was “absolutely” in favour of private pressure, stating “That is part of this engagement strategy. We are working with a friend and an ally.”²⁶⁵

132. Witnesses suggested several more measures that the UK should use to apply further pressure and support reforms. These included attending and monitoring trials and raising named individual cases in conversations with Saudi Ministers,²⁶⁶ co-operation on

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²⁵⁶ Q 76. See also Ev w7
²⁵⁷ Ev 111
²⁵⁸ Q 266
²⁵⁹ Ibid.
²⁶⁰ Q 334
²⁶¹ Q 38
²⁶² Q 100
²⁶³ Q 219
²⁶⁴ Q 224
²⁶⁵ Q 229. See also Ev w22-23 [Sir Harold Walker]
²⁶⁶ Q 262
institutional reform, including reform of the judicial process as well as offering British expertise on Shari’a law developed by the Muslim Arbitration Tribunal in the UK, and encouraging the potential for Saudi Arabia’s Shura Council to become a more empowered, perhaps even partly elected body.

133. Although we recognise and are concerned about the poor human rights record in Saudi Arabia, we are unconvinced that constant and severe public criticism by the UK Government would result in anything other than disengagement by the Saudi side. This would achieve none of the UK’s goals and could result in a worsening situation in Saudi Arabia. However, it is important that the UK maintains credibility at home and abroad with regard to its human rights work.

134. Democratic governments such as the UK face a challenge in trying to reconcile their liberal constituencies at home with the need to maintain relationships with undemocratic and conservative regimes that are important to our interests on a regional and global level. We understand that to encourage a Government such as that of Saudi Arabia toward reform, a combination of private and public pressure is required. By their very nature, private conversations are difficult to explain publicly. However, we are particularly concerned that some witnesses not only disagreed with UK policy but appeared to disbelieve the Government’s account of its private conversations with Saudi Arabia on reform. The Government appears to have a credibility problem and must do more to explain its policies and consider where it can point to specific progress as a result of its human rights work. We recommend that the Government consider what confidence-building measures it could put in place, such as supporting access to Saudi Arabia for NGOs and journalists, and conduct a review of what information it is able to make available either to NGOs or in the public domain.

135. The UK is well-placed to provide legal and judicial reform assistance and we recommend that the government make this constructive contribution a focus of its human rights work with Saudi Arabia. Despite the considerable challenges, promising steps appear to have been taken toward providing constructive assistance but these must be converted into solid and reportable programmes. The UK should also encourage the development of Saudi Arabia’s consultative systems, and we particularly welcome initiatives such as parliamentary exchanges in this regard.

136. At the multilateral level, the UK participates in the United Nations Human Rights Council, which conducts a peer-review examination of each country on a rolling four-yearly basis, the Universal Periodic Review (UPR). Saudi Arabia’s UPR debate took place on 21 October 2013. In Saudi Arabia’s last UPR in 2009, the UK recommended that Saudi Arabia guarantee the right to form civil-society organizations; abolish the guardianship system; and amend the Code of Criminal Practice to stipulate that only individuals aged over 18 will be tried as adults. In its 2012 Human Rights report, the FCO states that it is “committed to the success of the Universal Periodic Review process”, but in June 2013 the Government told us that it had not yet determined its priorities for its recommendations in 2013. This was surprising, as we understand that the FCO usually prepares for UPRs some

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267 Q 337
268 Q 329
269 Q 16
months in advance. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch both made submissions to the UPR that were highly critical of Saudi Arabia’s record, expressing disappointment that Saudi Arabia appears to have implemented none of the central recommendations made to it in its previous UPR in 2009.270

137. At the UPR in October 2013, the UK Government raised written questions relating to freedom of expression; the establishment and operation of genuinely independent human rights organisations; measures to prevent individuals under the age of 18 years from facing the death penalty and those under 16 years from marrying; torture allegations and ratifying the Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture (OPCAT); and freedom to choose a religion.271 In a statement, the Government said that it supports efforts made by the Saudi government to improve its human rights record, but is disappointed that Saudi Arabia has not fulfilled all the recommendations accepted under the last Universal Periodic Review. The UK made the following two recommendations:

1) First, that the Saudi government allows women to participate fully and equally in society by abolishing the guardianship system, appointing more women to positions of authority, and increasing freedom of movement;

2) Second, that the Saudi government codifies its criminal law to bring it into line with international law and standards, and ensures it is applied effectively by an independent and impartial judiciary. Saudi Arabia’s justice system remains a concern; for example, prolonged pre-trial detention periods and the improper treatment of detainees. On women’s rights, the UK remains concerned at the severe restrictions.272

138. The UN provides an important forum for constructive discussion of Saudi Arabia’s progress and continuing challenges. Saudi Arabia’s Universal Periodic Review is an opportunity for the UK to make clear its concerns about and support for progress on reform and human rights in Saudi Arabia. Following Saudi Arabia’s Universal Periodic Review in October, the government should encourage Saudi Arabia to engage constructively with the United Nations.


271 For a full list of the eight questions raised in advance by the UK, see United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, ‘Universal Periodic Review - Saudi Arabia’ web page, “Additional advance questions to Saudi Arabia”, ohchr.org. The UK was one of nine states to raise written questions in advance.

4 Bilateral relations with Bahrain

Why is Bahrain important?

139. Bahrain is the smallest, least populous and least oil-rich state in the region. It accounts for only one sixtieth of the Gulf’s GDP, and the FCO compared its population size of just 1.3 million people to that of Merseyside. Yet Bahrain’s location in the Gulf between Saudi Arabia and Iran means that it is of great strategic significance in terms of energy security, as it is critical to the protection of Gulf shipping lanes (through which 17 million barrels of oil are shipped per day) and global energy supplies. In addition, its religious mix, as well as its West-friendly stance, has given it a strategic importance to its region, and to the UK, that belies its small size.

140. Recent events in Bahrain have served to both highlight and heighten Bahrain’s importance to the region. Bahrain was the only Gulf state to experience significant protests during the Arab Spring in February and March 2011. The protestors had pro-democracy messages similar to those of successful uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt and elsewhere. However, the protests also ultimately reflected and magnified existing sectarian tensions in Bahrain between the Sunni ruling Al Khalifa family and the majority Shia population. After an attempt by the Government to negotiate with the opposition broke down, and amid increasing disorder, Bahraini security forces ended the protests in a violent crackdown that was responsible for at least 35 deaths and many allegations of mistreatment and torture. Despite an independent investigation of the allegations and more than one attempt to bring about reconciliation through a National Dialogue, a political resolution has remained elusive, and Bahrain has now suffered more than two years of continued sporadic confrontations between security forces and street protests, as well as political stalemate. The troubles have resulted in an increased polarization of society, growing sectarian grievances, and fears of radicalized extremist groups, with bombing attempts in 2012 and 2013.

141. The violent events of 2011 drew the world’s attention to this small Gulf monarchy. It has remained the focus of substantial international scrutiny ever since. Of the submissions we received for this inquiry, it was telling that over 60% were focused entirely on Bahrain, and 74% included Bahrain.

A divided society

142. The submissions we received described very different experiences of Bahrain. Some spoke of Bahrain’s open and tolerant society relative to its neighbours in the Gulf, pointing to the high level of women’s rights and freedom of religion, the way mixed communities of Sunni and Shia Muslims lived together, and its established political opposition and elected Lower House. Some among these submissions tended to blame Iran and fundamentalist

274 Ev 138
275 For a detailed narrative of events see: Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, 23 November 2011
276 See, for example, ‘Five bomb blasts hit Bahrain capital, two killed’ Reuters, 5 November 2012; and ‘Bahrain violence on rise after car bomb’, Financial Times, 19 July 2013
277 Ev w1, Ev 10-11, Ev w43-45, Ev w57-61
Shia religious groups for the problems since 2011, and expressed fear that the goal of the protests in 2011 and the continued unrest is to create an Iranian-style theocracy in Bahrain.278 Others among our submissions drew our attention to a background of decades of political and economic discrimination by the Bahrain Sunni authorities against the majority Shia community, and evidence of very serious human rights abuses by the security services during the events of 2011 and in the two years since.279 These submissions tended to emphasise the democratic goals of the protestors, and argued that the Bahraini authorities were deliberately stoking sectarian tensions in order to delegitimise the protestors.280 These submissions gave an impression of a deeply divided community, poleaxed by a profound lack of trust between the ruling elite and the various opposition groups.

143. As a Committee, it is not our role to attempt to resolve what Bahrain is going through, or to pronounce upon the various claims of those that have submitted evidence to us, but rather to comment on the UK’s policy toward Bahrain to promote its reconciliation and protect British interests.

Close historical ties

144. The UK’s relationship with Bahrain is one of its oldest and closest in the Gulf. Bahrain became a British protectorate in 1820 and in the 1930s the UK moved its Gulf naval base to Bahrain, making it the centre of the UK’s activity in the region. Unlike some of its neighbours, Bahrain remained a British protectorate until it became fully independent in 1971, following the wider British withdrawal from East of Suez. A UK- Bahrain1971 Friendship Treaty ensured that strong ties continued, particularly with regard to defence co-operation, and trade and investment between the two states.281 The UK government describes Bahrain as a close friend and ally that shares “deep historical ties” with the UK. The British and Bahraini Royal families have close relations, and the current Bahraini King, Sheikh Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, was educated in England at a public school in Cambridge, and went on to study at Mons Officer Cadet School in Aldershot.282

145. Witnesses generally endorsed the Government’s description of its warm relationship with Bahrain: Sir Roger Tomkys described how, in the 1980s, “the British Ambassador was quite uniquely privileged in access and was confided in to a remarkable degree”,283 and considered that though relations had become less exclusive, they continued to be “exceptionally close and positive, with benefits to both parties”.284 However, some submissions painted a more negative picture of the UK’s history in Bahrain. Kristian Coates Ulrichson told us that UK support for Bahrain’s rulers had “time and again” enabled Bahrain’s leaders to withstand domestic protests, and that the consequences of this
prior support was that Bahrain’s rulers now feel betrayed and angry when the UK criticises them, while its opposition is mistrustful of British intentions.285

**Brief summary of recent political history**

146. The Al Khalifa royal family has ruled Bahrain as a monarchy for more than two centuries. Upon Bahrain’s independence in 1971, a constitution was agreed that provided for a legislative assembly, but this proved to be short-lived and was dissolved by the monarch in 1975. The last two decades have witnessed sporadic turbulence and protest: the 1990s saw a spate of anti-government disturbances, including violent demonstrations and a bombing, which were attributed to the disaffection of some in the Shia majority toward their Sunni ruling elite. The government conducted a strong security response and over 1,000 people were detained.286 However, the accession of Sheikh Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa in 1999 signalled a change in direction: the new King enacted a number of significant reforms, including the release of political prisoners and return of exiles, the end of emergency laws and the introduction of a National Charter.287

147. The 2002 constitution affirmed Bahrain as a constitutional monarchy and established a National Assembly consisting of an appointed Upper House and an elected Lower House, but gave the king power over the executive, legislative, and judicial authorities. Between 2002 and 2006, a limited process of liberalization took place, the National Assembly sat and, in 2005, the main political opposition group, Al Wefaq, took part in elections and won the largest grouping of MPs. Between 2007 and 2010, however, reforms were thought to have stalled, protests began once more and a violent security response saw Bahrain’s standing in civil and political rights dropping once more (see table below; higher numbers denote less free):

![Freedom in the World rankings: Bahrain 2001-2013](image)

Source: Freedom House. Rankings based on monitoring of changes to civil and political rights (see p.17 for details)

285 Ev w112. Kristian Coates Ulrichsen is Co-Director of the Kuwait Research Programme on Development, Governance and Globalisation in the Gulf States, based at the London School of Economics. He also is an Associate Fellow with the Middle East and North Africa Programme at Chatham House.


The UK's relations with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain

The Arab Spring in Bahrain

148. The Arab Spring triggered protests in Bahrain in February and March 2011, which culminated in the occupation of 'Pearl roundabout' in Manama. The protestors had pro-democracy messages similar to those of protestors in Egypt and elsewhere. However, the protests also ultimately reflected and magnified existing sectarian tensions in Bahrain between the Sunni ruling Al Khalifa family and the majority Shia population. The protests were ended by Bahraini security forces after Saudi-led Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) troops entered Bahrain in March 2011. There was outrage within and outside Bahrain at allegations of widespread human rights abuses that took place during the crackdown perpetrated by Bahraini security officials.288

The aftermath: an independent commission of inquiry

149. In an unprecedented move, King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa appointed a panel of human rights experts to a Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) to examine the allegations of a brutal crackdown on protestors by Bahraini security forces. Chaired by Cherif Bassiouni, an Egyptian former war crimes lawyer for the UN, the Commission published a very critical report in November 2011, which described how prisoners had been hooded, whipped, beaten and subjected to electric-shock treatment, and stated that at least five prisoners had died under torture.289 The Economist reported at the time that the report was "both a humiliation and a triumph", in that it provided a "devastating and embarrassing indictment" of Bahrain’s security forces behaviour, but it was also a "vindication" of the King’s claim that it would be an independent and genuine attempt to get at the truth, thereby undermining those who claimed that it would be a whitewash.290 The King accepted the findings of the report and responded by promising reforms to protect freedom of speech and other basic rights, and to sack those officials who had abused their power. He said the report opened a “new page” in Bahrain’s history.291

150. In the two years since the BICI report was published, the political and human rights situation in Bahrain has remained near the top of the international agenda, and the domestic political situation remains unresolved. Although it has accepted many of the criticisms about its response to the protests in 2011, Bahrain has complained that the international community has misunderstood the situation in Bahrain. It argues that the opposition is not pro-democracy but is motivated by a sectarian agenda, and that the illegal demonstrations are inhibiting – and sometimes endangering - the lives of the ordinary public.292 Some opposition protests have turned violent and there have even been bombings in Manama, for which the government has blamed Hezbollah.293

290 ‘Bahrain’s human-rights report: The king’s risky move’, The Economist, 26 November 2011
291 Speech by His Majesty King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, 23 November 2011, Manama. Transcript at bna.bh
292 The Bahraini government’s criticism is particularly aimed at the February 14 movement, which is a more radical youth resistance movement, but extends to members of the more “moderate” opposition. It has detained and charged two senior members of Al Wefaq, one under charges of terrorism.See also, ‘Interview with Bahrain’s Prime Minister: The Opposition ‘Are Terrorizing the Rest of This Country’, Spiegel Online, 27 April 2012
293 See, for example, ‘Bahrain - Four Arrested in Bombings - Officials Hint at Hezbollah Role’, The New York Times, 6 November 2012
groups claim that they are a democratic movement and street protests are responding to ongoing state-sponsored police violence and repression. As the situation has developed, more nuanced differences between groups have emerged, including Islamist and secular groups, violent and non violent, domestic or connected to expatriates or other groups abroad. The longer the conflict continues, the greater the likelihood that groups move to polarised extremes.

**National dialogue**

151. In the first significant step forward since the talks between the Crown Prince and the opposition broke down in early 2011, in January 2013 the King invited opposition groups to a renewed national dialogue. Despite some scepticism among the opposition about the King's commitment to reform, talks began on 10 February with discussions between the representatives of parliament and 'loyalist' political groups, and a coalition of six opposition groups. The majority of the opposition (including the largest opposition group, Al Wefaq) wants a more representative constitutional monarchy, although some more radical elements of the opposition are calling for the downfall of the royal family. The dialogue has gone through multiple rounds of negotiation over the agenda and participants, and is widely seen as stalled. Al Wefaq has temporarily boycotted the Dialogue since September 2013 to protest at the arrest of one of its senior members.294 Human Rights Watch has been very critical of the Dialogue, arguing that it must be premised on the release of some human rights activists.295

**UK response to events in Bahrain: testing times for UK-Bahrain relations?**

152. The violent events in Bahrain presented a particular dilemma for the UK. Bahrain is considered a friendly state and long-standing ally, and the Foreign Secretary had visited Bahrain and held talks with the King just days before the protests began in February 2011.296 However, at the height of the Arab Spring in early 2011, there was immense pressure on Western governments to support democratic movements and the UK had voiced significant support for protestors elsewhere in the region.

153. The Government responded publicly to the situation in Bahrain with a mixture of concern about the action of the security services and support for the Bahraini authorities by distinguishing Bahrain as a reforming state. Following the Bahraini security services’ first violent clashes with protestors in February 2011, the Prime Minister spoke by phone to King Hamad on 20 February and his office put out the following statement:

   The Prime Minister stressed the importance of responding to peaceful protest through reform, not repression. The violence of previous days had been deeply

294 Bahraini authorities detained Khalil Marzook, assistant secretary general of Al Wefaq, on terrorism charges in mid-September 2013. The five opposition groups of the National Democratic Opposition Parties announced that they would suspend their participation in the National Dialogue as a result. Since then, the Secretary General of Al Wefaq, Sheikh Ali Salman, has also been charged with insulting authorities following an exhibition that showed alleged abuses against anti-government protesters. Both have been released but charges remain outstanding.

295 “Bahrain: No Progress on Reform”, Human Rights Watch press release, 28 February 2013

296 “Foreign Secretary visits Bahrain”, FCO press release, 10 February 2011
concerning. As a friend of Bahrain, the Prime Minister said that we supported the process of national dialogue which the Bahraini Government had initiated.297

At the same time, the Foreign Secretary told the House that whilst it was important to express the UK’s “gravest concerns”, “it is also important to recognise that important reforms have taken place in Bahrain and that the King of Bahrain pledged himself in the last week to further such reforms.”298 After negotiations between the Government and opposition broke down in March 2011 and the Bahraini authorities began to enact a further security crackdown, the UK expressed itself in stronger terms: the Prime Minister spoke by phone to King Hamad on 16 March 2011 and “expressed his serious concern at the deteriorating situation on the ground and called for restraint on all sides”,299 and the Foreign Secretary spoke to his Bahraini counterpart, Sheikh Khalid Bin Ahmed Bin Mohamed Al Khalifa.300

154. Our witnesses told us that the UK’s criticism was poorly received in Bahrain, and we heard anecdotally that this displeasure had prejudiced the access that the then-British Ambassador, Jamie Bowden, had to the Bahraini leadership. Dr Eyal described a feeling of disappointment among the Bahraini ruling family:

every time in Bahrain I got—and I think our Embassy got as well—a sort of feeling of sorrow from the local leaders. It was as though they were saying, “We did not expect it from you. We expected you—the Brits—to support us to the hilt,” precisely because of the historic relationship.301

However, following the end of the main protests in March 2011, and the launch of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) and a National Dialogue, relations between the UK and Bahrain appeared gradually to return to their former level of cooperation and engagement.302 The Foreign Secretary met the Crown Prince of Bahrain in May 2011, and expressed support for the dialogue process.303 Mr Burt returned to visit Bahrain in December 2011.304 Throughout 2012, the UK hosted high-level delegations including the King, the Crown Prince, and the Ministers for Justice, Human Rights, and the Interior.

155. In November 2012, during a visit to London by the Bahrain Minister for Foreign Affairs, Sheikh Khalid bin Ahmed Al Khalifa, the UK and Bahrain agreed to establish a new ministerial-level dialogue. This Joint Working Group was created to provide a forum to discuss “key regional issues such as Syria, Iran, and the impact of the Arab Spring,” as well as providing a forum for the UK to raise concerns and discuss means of support.305 Mr Burt told us that this was part of the wider Gulf Initiative to establish bilateral ties with each

297 “Prime Minister speaks to King of Bahrain”, FCO press release, 20 February 2011
298 HC Deb, 17 February 2011, col 1135
299 “Cameron calls for restraint on all sides in Bahrain”, Prime Minister’s Office press release, 16 March 2011
300 “Foreign Secretary expresses concern over ongoing unrest in Bahrain”, FCO press release, 16 March 2011
301 Q 193
302 See, for example, Q 1
303 “Foreign Secretary meets HRH The Crown Prince of Bahrain”, FCO press release, 26 May 2011
304 “Minister for the Middle East visits Bahrain”, FCO press release, 13 December 2011
305 “Foreign Secretary holds talks with Bahraini Foreign Minister”, FCO press release, 20 November 2012.
Gulf State, which has seen it launch similar cooperation initiatives with the UAE, Oman and Kuwait (see paragraph 13). Its inaugural meeting took place in Bahrain on 11 March 2013 and was attended by Mr Burt and hosted by Bahrain’s Minister for Foreign Affairs. The joint statement released after the working group underlined the “close and open relationship between Bahrain and the UK” and said that the two sides had discussed co-operation on key trade and investment opportunities, co-operation and assistance on security and counter-terrorism, and Bahrain’s reform programme, including UK support on the implementation of the BICI and UPR recommendations.\(^{306}\)

Commenting on the Agreement, Mr Burt said

> It represents a very supportive relationship between the United Kingdom and Bahrain, which we make no secret of. [...] Bahrain was looking to formalise the bilateral discussions that we have right across the board. We have chosen to do it through the working group and the defence accord.\(^{307}\)

156. The resumption of contact and support appears to have been welcomed by Bahrain’s rulers. The Foreign Secretary visited Bahrain for the first time since the protests in December 2012 for the resumption of the annual IISS Manama Dialogue (which had been suspended in 2011), a forum for governments and non-government experts to discuss regional security issues in the Middle East. The UK received conspicuous praise at the same conference in a speech by Bahrain’s Crown Prince Salman:

> I would in particular like to thank the diplomats, the leadership and the government of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth of the UK. You have stood head and shoulders above others. You have engaged all stakeholders. You have kept the door open to all sides in what was a very difficult and sometimes unclear situation. Your engagement and your help in police reform and judicial reform, and your direct engagement with the leadership of the Kingdom of Bahrain and with members of the opposition, has saved lives, and for that I will be personally eternally grateful. Thank you.\(^{308}\)

157. On our visit to Manama we observed that the British Ambassador, Iain Lindsay, and the British embassy had comfortable access to Bahrain’s leadership at its highest levels. The UK’s two recent ambassadors to Bahrain have taken different approaches to their work in response to the situation in Bahrain at the time of their tenure. We commend the energy that both former Ambassador Jamie Bowden and current Ambassador Iain Lindsay have brought to this role in a difficult situation.

**Criticism of the relationship**

158. We heard significant criticism of the UK’s response to the violent events in 2011 and its ongoing relationship with Bahrain, though some of it was contradictory. Several submissions to our inquiry criticised the UK for not supporting the Bahraini government enough during this difficult time. One cited the UK’s provision of two chartered flights out of Bahrain for British citizens wishing to escape the violence as a sign of the UK’s over-


\(^{307}\) Q 435

\(^{308}\) Speech by HRH Crown Prince Salman, 7 December 2012, at the Manama Dialogue 2012, Bahrain. iiss.org
reaction and misunderstanding of the nature of the protests in Bahrain (they returned almost empty).\textsuperscript{309} However, others among our witnesses have considered the UK to be too supportive, and have unfavourably compared the UK’s carefully calibrated response in Bahrain with the strong position it has held in relation to Arab Spring protests elsewhere in the region, particularly in Libya.\textsuperscript{310} Jane Kinninmont was critical of the fact that the UK was close to Bahrain, commenting that there had been some “self-congratulation about the fact that the Crown Prince selected the UK for particular praise in his speech” and adding:

it seems interesting that now Britain is probably Bahrain’s closest non-Arab ally. […] It is also puzzling to see how the relationship has re-emerged so strongly when the relations were tested by the uprising and by the crack-down.\textsuperscript{311}

159. Not all witnesses were critical, however. Some pointed out that a stable Bahrain was an important British goal and in line with our national interests. Sir Roger Tomkys said:

our greatest interest there is the continuing stability and prosperity of Bahrain because, if it fails, there would be a knock-on effect with the intervention of Saudi Arabia, and consequences that would be hard to predict, but very unattractive.\textsuperscript{312}

The FCO has responded to criticism of its close relationship with Bahrain by arguing that Bahrain is a close friend and ally, and that the UK’s close relationship had allowed it to support human rights and reform in Bahrain. The Government’s webpage on Bahrain emphasises the breadth of the UK’s relationship, stating that the UK aims to:

help Bahrain to return to a stable and reformist state with a good human rights record, while protecting our significant defence and security interests and enhancing our bilateral relationship.\textsuperscript{313}

160. The aggressive manner in the way that the Bahraini security forces handled events in 2011 has deeply damaged Bahrain’s international reputation, and complicated its relationships with Western governments, including the UK. Bahrain’s failure quickly to implement the important and practical recommendations of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry has created further difficulties in its relationship with the UK, and has squandered the good faith and goodwill that the BICI could have helped to restore.

161. The BICI report made 26 recommendations relating to independent institutions to address past problems and accountability, and to improve court procedures, as well as relating to the use of force, arrest, treatment of persons in custody, detention and prosecution in connection with the freedom of expression, assembly and association; the reinstatement of students and fired employees for taking part in protests; media issues. In our view the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry made sensible recommendations and the Bahrain government’s failure to implement them fully is

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{309} See Ev w9
\item \textsuperscript{310} Ev w55
\item \textsuperscript{311} Q 1
\item \textsuperscript{312} Q 39
\item \textsuperscript{313} Bahrain page, FCO website, gov.uk/government/world/, accessed November 2013
\end{itemize}
inexplicable. If it had done so, it would have been easier for the international community as a whole to engage with the Bahraini leadership.

162. The Government was correct to take a firm line in 2011 urging an end to the unacceptable violence and expressing its deep concern to the Bahraini authorities. The Government’s efforts to re-establish close relations since 2011 appear to have been successful, and the UK is now well placed to help Bahrain as it shapes its future. The Government must, however, continue to monitor its policies in respect to Bahrain closely.

People to people contact and public opinion

163. The historical connection between the UK and Bahrain has resulted in substantial contact between nationals and a sense of strong links and deep cultural ties between the two states. This warm feeling appears to be most immediately evident in Bahrain, which the UK’s ambassador to Bahrain Iain Lindsay describes as “incredibly anglophile”. However, some elements of Britain’s history in Bahrain have left a more negative view of the UK. Several submissions from NGOs and individuals in the UK and Bahrain mentioned the British former security officer Ian Henderson, who took over the running of the Bahraini security services in 1981. Rosemary Hollis told us that Mr Henderson “has a reputation for being particularly nasty in the handling of detainees. Political dissent was not something that he encouraged the Bahrainis to tolerate.” The UK is also still seen by many as exerting considerable influence in Bahrain ‘behind the scenes’, which is resented by some. However, the presence of both long-term and more recent opposition figures in London suggests that the UK is not generally disliked or feared by the Bahraini opposition, or the broader society in Bahrain.

164. Contact from the British side has been in part maintained by a substantial British expatriate community in Bahrain. The UK constitutes the largest western expatriate community (8,000 nationals in 2012) and a vocal and prominent presence in society. British nationals appear to have found Bahrain a pleasant home: we received several submissions from current and former British expatriates in Bahrain who spoke positively of their warm reception in Bahrain, and of the open and tolerant society they found there, particularly in comparison to other Gulf States.

165. In the aftermath of 2011, public opinion on both sides appears to have become more negative. In the UK, Bahrain has received heavy criticism in Parliament, the media, and by British NGOs for its crackdown on protestors and ongoing failure to implement reforms. In Bahrain, the UK has been criticised by both sides of the divide, as either being too critical or not critical enough: Dr Eyal told us that “the media in Bahrain is almost constantly hostile to us, […] We are not seen as their stalwart supporters.” However, we
The UK’s relations with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain

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note that criticism of the UK is not new in Bahrain: Robin Lamb told us that while he was ambassador he experienced public criticism and was even censured by the National Assembly. Nor is the UK alone in this regard: the US ambassador to Bahrain was publicly criticised by Bahraini Parliamentarians in March 2013 for ‘interference’ in Bahrain’s internal affairs.

Engaging with the public

166. The British Embassy has a high profile in Bahrain. On our visit we saw that the ambassador was featured prominently in the English-language media, and that his public comments on the political situation in Bahrain were known and used as a subject of discussion by the people we met at all levels of the government. As in Saudi Arabia, the British Embassy in Bahrain also has a website, Facebook page and Twitter feed. The UK’s high profile can mean that the embassy in Bahrain can be subject to intense scrutiny and criticism. When it published two articles on its website written by pro-government supporters that boasted about Bahrain’s human rights record for World Press Freedom Day in May 2013, it attracted international comment and criticism. The FCO later clarified that the views expressed in the blogs were “definitely not those of the UK Government.”

167. While criticism of the UK in Bahrain is not new, it is a cause of concern. The UK’s high profile in Bahrain is an asset for the UK that can be used to influence and support Bahrain’s reform, but it also makes British actions and statements a target for scrutiny and criticism. Given the detailed attention that statements and actions by the British Embassy receive, the UK must be extremely careful about the message it sends to the broader public in Bahrain and internationally as it positions itself as a “critical friend” to Bahrain. We conclude that the UK Government is correct to try to use its high profile and influence to good effect to support evolutionary reform in Bahrain and to act as a critical friend.

British Council

168. The British Council told us that it had a strong presence and established networks in Bahrain, where it has been operating since 1959. Proficiency in English “is seen as crucial to employability”. Its teaching centre in Manama has almost 2,000 students per term and it holds community events to encourage reading. The British Council also supports the education and Further and Higher Education sectors in Bahrain by supporting links between schools, colleges and universities in the UK and Bahrain. In addition to its language programme, the Council supports art programmes, including street art and pioneering art therapy for the disabled “in order to harness the many creative energies released by recent events in the country.”

321 Q 58
322 ‘Bahraini lawmakers call on U.S. envoy to end “interference”’, Reuters, 6 May 2013
323 See, for example, ‘Britain, undermining press freedom in Bahrain’, The Telegraph, 3 May 2013
324 Tweet on UK Embassy in Bahrain Twitter feed, 3 May 2013
325 Ev w123
169. The British Council emphasised that it “includes every shade of political and religious affiliation” and that its history and network gives it a special position in Bahrain in a society that is “increasingly divided along sectarian lines”:

Our position in Bahrain as an honest broker allows us to provide a safe, neutral place for people from differing political and religious traditions to meet, learn and debate together. Even when tensions were at the highest our classrooms remained full and calm and our Kids Read events open and inclusive to all sides.326

We visited the British Council in Manama, where it was located in a predominantly Shia neighbourhood. The Council was keenly aware of the ethnic and religious make-up of its student body, and is now taking steps to open a second, centre in an area where it could reach a more mixed population.

170. The British Council provides a valuable vehicle for the promotion of British values and the provision of useful skills in Bahrain. We particularly welcome its commitment to learning and debate, which is a critical service in a society that appears to be becoming more divided. We recommend that in response to this report the Government provide details on what skills training the British Council is providing in Bahrain in order to enhance their students’ skills to participate more effectively in the political process of evolutionary reform and change.

Trade and commercial relations

Bahrain’s economy

171. As Bahrain has relatively few oil and gas reserves, it has developed the most diversified economy of all the Gulf States, with lower taxes and a more robust regulatory structure than many of its neighbours, making it an investment destination and a major trading hub and financial centre in the Middle East. It is connected by a 25 km causeway to Saudi Arabia’s oil-rich Eastern Province, and Bahrain particularly markets itself as a ‘Gateway’ into the Saudi and other Gulf markets. Bahrain has an established financial services sector with particular expertise in Islamic finance, and overall financial services account for 25% of GDP. Oil production now comprises only 13% of Bahrain’s GDP, although hydrocarbons still provide the largest share of government revenue.327

172. Bahrain faces some of the same challenges as other Gulf States, including a very young population (65% of the population is under 25 years old), and a reliance on migrant labour: expatriates make up almost half of its population. It is also a very unequal society with much of its wealth heavily concentrated at the top.328 Bahrain’s economy was also affected by the unrest in 2011, with tourism receipts falling, and a number of businesses closing and/ or relocating to other parts of the Gulf.329 Formula 1 returned in 2012 but it is only recently that tourism has shown a modest increase, with most visitors coming from Saudi Arabia to take advantage of Bahrain’s more liberal laws with regard to entertainment.

326 Ibid.
327 ‘Doing Business in Bahrain’ UKTI website, 5 September 2012. ukti.gov.uk
328 Q 46. See also Jane Kinninmont: Bahrain: Beyond the Impasse, Chatham House, June 2012
Nevertheless, Bahrain saw GDP growth of 3.4% in 2012, and growth is forecast to continue to grow over the next five years. In addition, it is expected to benefit from a $10 billion economic package pledged by the GCC over the next ten years, which should maintain economic growth and allow for increased infrastructure spending by the government.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>International Monetary Fund</th>
<th>Bahrain: Selected Economic Indicators, 2008-12</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Percent change, unless otherwise indicated)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Production and prices</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Real GDP</td>
<td>6.3 3.2 4.7 2.1 4.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Real oil GDP(^1)</td>
<td>0.4 -0.8 1.8 3.4 -8.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Real non-oil GDP</td>
<td>7.2 3.8 5.2 1.9 6.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nominal GDP (billions of US$)</td>
<td>22.2 19.3 21.5 25.9 27.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Consumer price index (period average)</td>
<td>3.5 2.8 2.0 -0.4 2.8</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(Percent of GDP, unless otherwise indicated)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Financial variables</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Total revenue</td>
<td>32.4 23.8 27.2 29.2 29.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Of which: oil revenue</td>
<td>27.7 19.8 23.2 25.7 26.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total Expenditure</td>
<td>24.7 28.7 32.6 29.3 31.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Overall fiscal balance</td>
<td>4.9 -6.6 -7.0 -1.7 -2.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Change in broad money (percent)</td>
<td>18.4 5.8 10.5 3.4 9.0</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Billions of US$, unless otherwise indicated)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>External sector</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Exports</td>
<td>17.3 11.9 13.6 19.6 19.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Of which: Oil and refined products</td>
<td>13.8 8.9 10.2 15.5 15.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Imports</td>
<td>-14.2 -9.6 -11.2 -12.1 -13.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Current account balance</td>
<td>2.3 0.6 0.8 3.2 2.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Percent of GDP</td>
<td>10.2 2.9 3.6 12.6 8.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gross official reserves (end of period)</td>
<td>3.8 3.5 4.8 4.2 4.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Months of imports(^2)</td>
<td>4.1 3.3 4.2 3.4 4.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Months of imports (excluding crude oil imports)(^3)</td>
<td>5.4 6.3 7.8 8.1 9.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Real effective exchange rate</td>
<td>15.4 4.5 -2.4 -5.7 1.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Bahraini authorities; and IMF staff estimates.

1 Includes crude oil and gas.
2 Imports of goods and non-factor services for the following year.
3 All imported crude oil is exported after refining.

**UK-Bahrain trade**

173. Bahrain is one of the UK’s smallest but fastest-growing export markets in the Gulf, with a 39% increase in trade between 2009 and 2012, bringing the current total bilateral trade of goods and services to £884 million. The FCO told us that after a “flat” 2011, UK imports from Bahrain had increased in 2012 to $195 million, and that the Government

330 ‘Bahrain economic growth accelerates strongly in first quarter’ Reuters, 30 June 2013
331 Q 436
continued to look for opportunities to increase trade. The UKTI has identified Bahrain as holding opportunities in financial and professional services; education and training; infrastructure; healthcare; business services; downstream manufacturing; and logistics. In addition, the FCO said that the GCC’s $10 billion development fund is expected to result in further opportunities for the UK to support Bahrain’s re-development plans and benefit from its spending on infrastructure. Iain Lindsay, British Ambassador to Bahrain, told a recent business conference that on the UK’s historical share of major contracts, the Government estimates that the five biggest projects alone could be worth around £1 billion to UK business.

174. Nevertheless, our trade witnesses described a hesitancy on the part of UK businesses to pursue trade opportunities with Bahrain due to concerns about stability since 2011. David Lloyd told us that the Middle East Association had cancelled a planned trade delegation to Bahrain in December 2012 due to lack of participants. However, Iain Lindsay was more positive about the outlook, noting in a 2013 UKTI Doing Business in Bahrain brochure that Bahrain has witnessed a steady increase in commercial and investor confidence across key sectors, including tourism and retail “both of which reflect a return in consumer confidence.” He added that:

The Bahraini authorities want to see more British business in Bahrain. There are good opportunities for British companies here, with British products and expertise held in high esteem.

175. The UK is well placed to capitalise on its business reputation in Bahrain as it begins large-scale infrastructure spending.

Defence sales and export licences

176. As a small state with a limited defence budget, Bahrain is at present not a major market for the British defence industry. Nevertheless, the UK previously designated Bahrain as a key market for arms exports and, prior to 2011, the Government had granted export licences for equipment including tear gas and crowd control ammunition, equipment for aircraft cannons, assault rifles, shotguns, sniper rifles and sub-machine guns.

177. After the outbreak of violence in Bahrain, the Government reviewed its export licences for military and dual-use equipment and revoked 23 individual export licences and removed Bahrain from 18 open licences, explaining:

The licences revoked covered equipment which could be used for riot control destined for end users including the Police, Ministry of Interior, the Bahrain...
National Guard and the Bahrain Defence Force (BDF). Licences which were not revoked included goods such as aircraft components for the BDF. 339

The Committees on Arms Export Controls (CAEC) recorded 105 extant export licences for Bahrain as of May 2013. Limitations on export licences continue to be in force, and the Foreign Secretary told the CAEC in December 2012 that “there have been export licence applications in relation to Bahrain that we have recently refused, or are in the process of refusing.” 340 Nonetheless, the Campaign Against Arms Trade has estimated that the UK granted almost £8 million of export licences for Bahrain in 2012. 341 In August 2013 during a visit to the UK of Bahrain’s King Hamad, BAE announced that Bahrain had expressed an interest in the Eurofighter Typhoon aircraft and said that the British Government was leading “very early discussions”. 342

178. Several of our witnesses considered the revocation of export licences to be of little significance. Dr Eyal took the view that the UK’s portion of the Bahrain defence market was so small that it was “not a big issue”, 343 while Rosemary Hollis suggested that the withdrawal was somewhat for the sake of appearances, telling us that “the Bahrainis could not survive without the Saudis, so it makes absolutely no difference whether the British withdraw these licences or not.” 344 However, for some of our witnesses the continued sales sent a symbolic message of support to the Bahraini government with which they disagreed. In November 2011, Maryam Alkhawaja, Interim President of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights, particularly criticised the sales:

If you’re really serious about pushing through these values, of human rights and democracy and respecting citizens, you shouldn’t be selling arms to a country that uses them against civilians. And I think that’s a message that needs to be sent very clearly to the UK government along with the others: stop the arms sales, now. 345

The UK Government denies that there has been any evidence of equipment sold by the UK being used in the security crackdown in Bahrain. However, in her evidence to us, Maryam Alkhawaja argued that defence sales were nonetheless encouraging the Bahraini Government to “continue with their crackdown, because they see this as being business as usual.” 346

**Cyber technology exports**

179. An issue that received particular attention and criticism in submissions to this inquiry was allegations regarding the export by British companies of surveillance technology to Bahrain. Bahrain Watch submitted detailed evidence claiming to demonstrate that UK-
based Gamma International had sold surveillance technology to Bahraini authorities, who had used it to monitor Bahraini activists, including one activist based in the UK (Dr Ala’a Shehabi). The UK Government has confirmed that such technology would require an export licence, and that none had been requested or granted. However, the Government has since declined to make any more information public about any investigation it has conducted into the allegations, for which a group of NGOs, including Privacy International, has secured a Judicial Review. The hearing is set for early next year.

180. The Government should not grant any licence that could contribute to internal repression and should make decisions on other export licences on a case-by-case basis, ensuring the strict implementation of existing policies. The Government should provide in response to this report further evidence that it is adhering in practice to its own strict policies with regard to British defence equipment sold to Bahrain including any evidence gathered by end-use monitoring.

181. Both the government and the opposition in Bahrain view UK defence sales as a signal of British support for the government. The UK Government should take this into account when considering high-profile sales, such as the Eurofighter Typhoon, to Bahrain.

Defence and security relationship

182. Bahrain plays a key role in regional security, largely by merit of its location in the Arabian Gulf and its openness to international partners and coalition operations. Bahrain’s position between Saudi Arabia and Iran means that it is of great strategic significance in terms of energy security, as it is critical to the protection of Gulf shipping lanes (through which 17 million barrels of oil are shipped per day) and global energy supplies. Bahrain also hosts the U.S. Navy’s Fifth Fleet, as well as the Combined Maritime Forces’ base in the Gulf, a multi-national naval partnership focused on defeating terrorism, preventing piracy, encouraging regional cooperation, and promoting a safe maritime environment. In 2002, President George W. Bush designated Bahrain as a major non-NATO ally of the United States, and the US has provided significant defence support and funding to Bahrain.

183. Bahrain is a regular participant in multilateral action, contributing to Operation Desert Storm against Iraq in 1991 and various multi-lateral naval operations, as well as providing approximately 100 personnel in support of NATO forces in International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan. It also regularly conducts joint exercises with a number of western powers, including the US and UK. Bahrain was the first Arab state to lead a Coalition Task Force patrolling the Gulf and has supported the coalition counter-piracy mission with a deployment of its flagship.

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347 Ev w125-129
348 ‘UK firm faces questions over how spyware ended up in Bahrain’, The Guardian, 2 February 2013
350 “Privacy International files for judicial review of HMRC refusal to reveal the state of any investigation into Gamma International”, Privacy International press release, 16 April 2013
UK-Bahrain military cooperation

184. The UK’s defence relationship with Bahrain stretches back over almost 200 years to when Bahrain first became a British protectorate and the UK took on responsibility for its defence and security. When the UK withdrew from Bahrain in 1971, the defence relationship continued under the new ‘Friendship Treaty’, and the Government told us that Bahrain is an important partner for the UK in the region, where it “plays a key part in our strategic defence, has given the UK support with basing rights and helped us in relation to Afghanistan.” As of December 2012, the UK had 20 military personnel (naval) stationed in Bahrain, working on “Bi-lateral engagement; wider regional engagement; attaché and defence section Support; defence sales; Training Naval Support; support to Operations; counter terrorism”.

185. As well as hosting the US base, Bahrain is also home to the UK Maritime Component Command (UKMCC). The Government told us that this gives the Royal Navy the ability to operate not only in the Gulf but well beyond to the Red Sea, Gulf of Aden and North West Indian Ocean. Bahrain also provides vital basing for four UK mine-hunters in Al-Mina port, stationed in the Gulf to keep the Strait of Hormuz clear.

According to RUSI, the UK–Bahrain defence relationship is “crucial to the UK’s pursuit of its national strategic aims.” It is also favourable to the UK, as the UK is afforded special treatment in Bahrain beyond what it receives from others in the region:

Bahrain welcomes British naval vessels into its waters and port facilities, allows the RAF to use its airfields, and routinely waives the sorts of protocols Britain would have to follow before entering the national territory of certain of its neighbours. Bahrain also supplies the UK with intelligence, in particular though not exclusively in connection with counter-terrorism. In a sense, the kingdom is a substitute for an aircraft carrier permanently stationed in the Gulf.

186. Successive generations of Bahraini officers have been trained by the British armed forces. The UK routinely hosts Bahraini-funded students at Sandhurst, Cranwell and Dartmouth and, according to the FCO, provides in-country UK Officer Training Programmes “to the same high standards received by UK armed forces, which helps ensure professionally-trained armed forces and raises awareness of human rights.”

Co-operation withdrawn?

187. One of our witnesses suggested that this solid defence relationship was nevertheless susceptible to pressure: Jane Kinninmont told us that Bahrain had threatened to withdraw this defence co-operation with the UK in 2011 as a way to “push back” strongly against the
UK’s criticism of its handling of protests. Dr Murrison, Parliamentary Under Secretary at the Ministry of Defence, declined to confirm or deny whether Bahraini authorities had made this threat, however, he commented that:

We would manage; we always do. However, Bahrain is very important to us. It is a longstanding friend and ally, and it has been extremely helpful in providing basing and overflight facilities. Our defence engagement with Bahrain is very strong. [...] Bahrain is extremely important to us, but in the event that it was not there, we would clearly have to seek other alliances and partnerships. However, Bahrain is one of our closest relationships in that region, and we are very grateful to the Bahrainis for their hospitality and accommodation.

188. All our witnesses agreed that Bahrain provided a valuable partnership in terms of defence, but most also said that this cooperation was not irreplaceable. RUSI told us that without Bahrain’s cooperation, “the UK’s strategic flexibility would be curtailed”. It argued however that, although this gave Bahrain a degree of leverage, “one must not jump to the conclusion that British access concerns dominate policy-making. The relationship is much more robust than that.” Dr Eyal set out the consequences if defence cooperation were to be withdrawn by either side:

There are other countries in the region that can fulfil the same job, assuming that the Government wants to have a British military presence in the region, which the current Government has indicated it does. However, it would be costly. It would have to be negotiated, and it would have to be negotiated for the time when none of the countries of the region want to negotiate basing agreements if they can avoid it, for political reasons. It is important in that respect.

Dr Eyal also pointed out that the defence relationship with the UK was important for the Bahrainis, in particular as a counterbalance to “the overwhelming influence of Saudi Arabia.”

**UK-Bahrain Defence Cooperation Accord**

189. In a further development of the UK-Bahrain defence relationship, in October 2012, the Government agreed a UK-Bahrain Defence Cooperation Accord (DCA), which was signed in London during the visit of Bahraini Foreign Minister HE Sheikh Khalid bin Ahmed Al Khalifa. The Foreign Secretary told the Committees on Arms Export Controls (CAEC) that the Accord “complements existing agreements”:

It provides a framework for current and future defence activity with Bahrain, including training and capacity-building, partly in order to enhance the stability of the whole region. [...] we have defence assets of our own stationed in Bahrain, our

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357 Q 1
358 Q 364
359 Ev 108
360 Q 192
361 ibid.
362 Letter to Rt Hon Sir John Stanley MP, Chairman of the Committees on Arms Export Controls (CAEC), 6 February 2013
minesweepers in particular, which are responsible in any crisis for maintaining freedom of navigation in the Gulf, are physically based in Bahrain. We need regularly to update and amend our defence cooperation arrangements. 363

He added that the Accord “does not change our approach to export licensing in any way.” 364

190. While the UK Government appeared to give the Accord the minimum of publicity, the Bahraini authorities published a news story that quoted the Crown Prince, Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa, hailing it as “mirroring deep-rooted historic relations bonding Bahrain and the UK”. 365 The UK Government has since acknowledged the agreement though it has declined to publish it, stating that it is not standard practice to publish such agreements with any country, for reasons of confidentiality and respect for the other country. When he appeared before us, Dr Murrison denied that the timing of the Accord was a signal of support, telling us that it was rather “part of our routine, ongoing engagement with Bahrain.” 366 However, Dr Eyal commented that for the UK, “When you have street demonstrations, people being arrested and human rights violations being reported, it is a bit embarrassing to sign an agreement with that country, especially on a military subject.” He said that from the Bahraini perspective “it is in their interest […] to suggest that their country is not being ostracised—that its traditional allies are standing by it. That is part of the narrative.” 367 He added that, in private, “they know where we stand.” 368

191. In its earlier written submission to the Committee’s inquiry, the Government rejected outside criticism of its co-operation with the Bahraini armed forces, stating that it “firmly believes that continued engagement provides the opportunity to support reform within the Bahraini military and beyond.” 369 Defending the Accord, the Foreign Secretary pointed out that “To the extent that the relationship includes training and capacity building, that might have benefits in the human rights area. After all, it is often argued by those in authority in Bahrain that what they need is their security forces to know what to do, to be trained in how to handle civil disorder.” 370 RUSI’s written submission provided some support for the Government’s position:

[…] there is little doubt that training received from the UK is more likely to promote a measured and discriminating approach to crowd control – something in line with British policing standards – than training received from Saudi Arabia or any number of other providers. Suppressing dissent is not something most countries have problems with; it is doing so in an acceptable manner that poses the challenge, and that is where the UK’s efforts in Bahrain can help. 371

363 Oral evidence taken before the Committees on Arms Export Controls on 19 December 2012, HC 689-ii, Q 117
364 Ibid.
366 Q 368
367 Q 197
368 Q 199
369 Ev 138
370 Oral evidence taken before the Committees on Arms Export Controls on 19 December 2012, HC 689-ii, Q 118
371 Ev 108
192. Bahrain provides the UK with an immensely valuable home in the Gulf and the defence co-operation is mutually beneficial. Ending defence co-operation and naval basing in Bahrain and seeking a substitute would be an extremely costly and difficult step.

193. We recommend that UK-supplied training, delivered in the UK or Bahrain, should always include human rights elements, and that the Government should set out in response to this report the elements included in its each of the training programmes provided to Bahrain that cover rights, the rule of law and the correct use of force.

194. We are disappointed that the Government has provided so little detail to Parliament and this Committee on its most recent defence accord with Bahrain. It was predictable that Bahrain would consider it a public signal of support and, if the Government did not mean it to send this message, it would have been more sensible to have immediately released information about the Accord and the UK’s reasons for agreeing it at this time. We understand that the Government does not publish Defence Accord Agreements but in its response to this report, the Government should consider what, if any, further information it could release about this Defence Accord and the UK’s reasons for signing it at this time.

The UK’s support for human rights and reform in Bahrain

195. The Bahraini government says it has implemented a number of reforms in response to the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) and it accepted over 140 of 176 recommendations during its Universal Periodic Review (UPR) at the UN’s Human Rights Council in September 2012. However, Amnesty International told the Committee that while there had been some improvements in the situation in Bahrain since 2011, there was “a gap between rhetoric and reality”. In particular, Amnesty International drew attention to the fact that prisoners of conscience were still in prison in Bahrain, that allegations of torture continued, and that there was little accountability for the early violations.  

A number of NGOs cited cases in which the implementation of changes – such as the installation of CCTV in police stations – had simply led to the problem being displaced to unofficial torture centres. Ali Alaswad, a former Al Wefaq MP in Bahrain, called for implementation “on the ground”, rather than “paperwork [and] websites”. He claimed that over 2,000 protestors remained behind bars.

196. A number of members of the BICI panel, including British expert Sir Nigel Rodley, have criticised the failure fully to implement its most substantive recommendations. In January, the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) issued a statement condemning “the continued harassment and imprisonment of persons exercising their rights to freedom of opinion and expression in Bahrain”.

372 Q 272
373 Q 272 and Q 287
374 Q 291
Ongoing violations

197. In addition to its failure to resolve past mistakes, opposition groups and NGOs have accused the Bahraini government of continuing to use violent intimidation, including the use of tear gas as a weapon, and of being responsible for the detention, mistreatment and torture of activists and protestors. Human Rights Watch referred to allegations arising in May 2013 of detainees being subject to electric shock treatment, hung from ceilings, beaten or waterboarded.\(^{375}\) Amnesty noted that allegations of torture and enforced disappearance are still being made.\(^{376}\) Maryam Alkhawaja, of the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights (BCHR), a particularly critical human rights organisation, said that they had seen a “continual deterioration of the situation on the ground.” She alleged cases of extrajudicial killings, house raids during the middle of the night by masked men, torture and excessive use of force against protestors, concluding that “more or less everything that was documented in the BICI report continues to happen today, and in some cases it has gotten worse.”\(^{377}\)

198. The Bahraini Government has also enacted a number of retrogressive policies, including banning street protests, arresting citizens for defaming the King on Twitter, and revoking the nationality of 31 opposition activists, citing them as a threat to “national security”.\(^{378}\) More recently, it has reportedly banned opposition groups from meeting foreign officials without government permission and without a member of the government being present,\(^{379}\) and on 17 September 2013 Bahrain detained a senior member of Al Wefaq, the main opposition group, Khalil al-Marzooq. Al Wefaq argued that the arrest was “a clear targeting of political action in Bahrain.” More broadly, there are ongoing concerns about the lack of judicial independence in Bahrain, and there have been a number of specific cases of trials with serious concerns about due process and fair procedure, including the trials of the medics who stood accused of helping the protestors.\(^{381}\)

199. Bahrain’s government has accepted some criticism, for example in the UN Human Rights Council, but it has robustly defended itself against some of the NGOs’ criticism, which it states is one-sided and does not take into account the government’s position. The Bahraini government strongly criticised Human Rights Watch after it sent a delegation to Bahrain and reported that Bahrain’s rulers had made “no progress on key reform promises” and had failed to release unjustly imprisoned activists or to hold high-level officials accountable for torture. Human Rights Watch concluded that “All the talk of national dialogue and reform mean nothing so long as the country’s most prominent human rights and political activists remain unjustly imprisoned while officials responsible for torture and murder remain in their positions.”\(^{382}\) The Bahraini government responded

\(^{375}\) Q 275
\(^{376}\) Q 276
\(^{377}\) Q 286
\(^{378}\) ‘Bahrain revokes citizenship of activists’, Financial Times, 7 November 2012
\(^{379}\) ‘Bahrain says political groups need permission to meet diplomats, agencies’, Washington Post, 5 September 2013
\(^{380}\) ‘Bahrain arrest of opposition politician fuels crackdown fears’, Financial Times, 17 September 2013
\(^{381}\) See, for example, Human Rights Watch, No Justice in Bahrain: Unfair Trials in Military and Civilian Courts, February 2012, hrw.org
\(^{382}\) “Bahrain: No Progress on Reform”, Human Rights Watch press release, 28 February 2013
that the delegation had misrepresented officials’ remarks and ignored the significant reforms that had taken place. The British Ambassador to Bahrain, Iain Lindsay, gave an interview to the Gulf Daily News shortly afterward, in which he also criticised the Human Rights Watch statement:

I don’t think that accurately reflects what happened here or is happening here and I find their comments about the political dialogue deeply unhelpful. I think it has taken a lot of courage and a lot of effort to get people for the first time in two years to sit around a table to talk about dialogue. That is no mean feat, that is a significant step, and to essentially pooh-pooh that and say these people are wasting their time I think is deeply unhelpful, condescending and patronising.  

200. Bahrain’s implementation of the BICI recommendations has been disappointingly slow and has further damaged its international reputation. Swift implementation of the recommendations would have gone a long way toward preventing the breakdown in trust and fracturing of opposition in Bahrain.

201. We are particularly concerned by recent reports that the Bahraini authorities have banned political groups from having unrestricted access to diplomats. In its response to this report the Government should provide its assessment of the situation including information on whether it has affected any of the Embassy’s meetings, along with any representations it has made to the authorities to lift the ban.

UK engagement on human rights and reform since 2011

202. The UK has responded to events in Bahrain in 2011 and the aftermath with a mixture of support for the government and concern about human rights violations that have taken place. Most submissions and witnesses to this inquiry, whether supportive of the UK Government’s policy or not, have agreed that the UK was initially strongly critical in early 2011, but has since become more outwardly supportive of the Bahrain government. The UK has appeared to try to strike a balance between supporting its longstanding friend and ally to make necessary reforms, and maintaining a strong line against human rights violations in Bahrain. For example, in response to a Written Parliamentary Question in April 2013 on progress in Bahrain, Alistair Burt stated:

I believe the Government of Bahrain remains committed to improving its human rights record, including full implementation of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry and the UN Human Rights Council Universal Periodic Review. However, as I continue to voice both in private and in public, more needs to be done. Our decision to include Bahrain as a case study in 2011 FCO Human Rights Report, and to do so for the 2012 Report, reflects our view of the current trend of events and concerns.


385 See, for example, Q 1, Ev w5, Ev w26, Ev w41, Ev w78

386 HC Deb, 23 April 2013, Col 780W
203. The UK Government has on occasion been openly critical of a number of developments in Bahrain, including publicly expressing concerns about the bans on demonstrations, the court cases of Bahraini medics, and the need for Bahrain to follow through on the BICI and to implement its recommendations. However, the Government has also resisted calls, including from this Committee, to designate Bahrain a 'country of concern' in its annual human rights report, though the FCO did feature Bahrain as a case study and committed to providing quarterly updates on its progress. The UK Government did not respond to pressure from NGOs to boycott the 2012 Bahrain Grand Prix.  

204. The UK has engaged with Bahrain to provide a number of training programmes and initiatives to assist in its implementation of reforms. These include a programme with the HM Prison Inspectorate and funding through the Arab Partnership for a project to develop a national monitoring mechanism for human rights.

Too close to Bahrain?

205. NGOs and witnesses criticised or expressed concerns about the UK’s policies in five main areas:

a) Almost all NGOs and several witnesses expressed concern that the UK was overestimating reform in Bahrain, and under-reporting the serious ongoing problems, which include recent allegations of torture. David Mepham told us that he was unsure how the UK had reached its conclusion that the trajectory in Bahrain was positive, while Ali Alaswad compared the UK’s approach to that of the US, whose statements and recent reports were “much clearer than the report published by the UK government.”

b) Both British and Bahraini NGOs criticised the UK for failing to assist their work, either by not helping to ensure access for NGOs and journalists to Bahrain, or by not meeting Bahraini NGOs when requested. Maryam Alkhawaja claimed that “as human rights defenders, my colleagues on the ground have a very difficult time getting meetings with the UK embassy to discuss the situation. I have colleagues who have been told flat-out by the ambassador that he will not meet them.”

c) Bahrain Watch criticised the lack of transparency over meetings between the UK and Bahraini ministers and officials, noting that the main source of information on such meetings was the Bahraini government press, which provided an unreliable report.

d) Several NGOs criticised the UK for hosting Bahraini officials and Ministers in the UK, including one with an allegation of torture against him.

e) Many submissions criticised the presence of British advisers (such as John Yates, former Assistant Commissioner in the London Metropolitan Police Service) and...
British companies (including PR companies), which were employed by the Government. \(^{392}\)

206. Overall, there was considerable criticism of the UK for being too supportive of the Bahraini government, which some believed had allowed the Bahraini government to become complacent and fail to carry out reforms. David Mepham of Human Rights Watch said that engagement had been tried for two years without much impact. Witnesses compared the UK’s support for Bahrain unfavourably with the position held by the UK in relation to Arab Spring protests elsewhere in the region, and have warned that it is damaging the UK’s reputation. Maryam Alkhawaja said that “We have seen a rise in anti-US and UK sentiment among people on the ground, which has happened quickly over the past two years.” \(^{393}\)

207. Mr Burt was bullish in response to criticism of the UK’s approach:

The United Kingdom has set out its stall. I make no apology for this and I will be totally up front: we think that the best chance for stability in Bahrain lies through the successful national dialogue process by Bahrainis, which will seek their own political settlement, which is highly likely to encompass the Al Khalifa leadership and the structure of Bahrain. \(^{394}\)

The FCO argued that its close relationship with Bahrain has allowed it to support human rights and reform. Mr Burt highlighted the benefit of the joint working group in increasing the UK’s support for reform in Bahrain \(^{395}\) and argued that it gave the UK the opportunity to discuss where it could do more:

sitting across the table from those responsible for implementing BICI, I can say, “How is this going? Why have some parts stalled more than others? What are you going to do about such and such? Why aren’t we making progress on that?” The working group gives the opportunity to do that. \(^{396}\)

RUSI Director Dr Jonathan Eyal appeared to support this position, stating that, in private, the dialogue post-2011 was “very intensive and shockingly frank... But we cannot say [these things] in public. We can only do that because we are perceived to be friends.” \(^{397}\)

208. Mr Burt strongly refuted our witnesses’ criticism of the UK’s approach, arguing that the Embassy had been “meticulous” in seeing opposition groups, apart from those that it deems are connected with violence. \(^{398}\) He added that he did not “mind facing up to the criticism for supporting the Bahraini authorities in trying to see through reform, and I am prepared to criticise them when they do not. [...] If we take a reputational knock fairly,

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\(^{392}\) See, for example, Ev w93 [Islamic Human Rights Commission], Ev w102 [Bahrain Watch], Ev w77 [Index on Censorship]

\(^{393}\) Q 308, see also Q 17 [Jane Kinninmont] and Ev w60 [The Bahrain Federation of Expatriate Organisations]

\(^{394}\) Q 454

\(^{395}\) Q 436

\(^{396}\) Q 437

\(^{397}\) Q 185

\(^{398}\) Q 454
that’s fine, but sometimes it is a bit unfair.” 399 Mr Burt said that British advisers were independent but he saw no reputational risk associated with the advisers, who “are trying to do something of benefit to the people of Bahrain and the political process [...] I would say that our involvement is a good thing and seek to persuade others that that was the case.” 400

209. Conversely, the UK has also some received criticism for its public demonstration of human rights concerns in Bahrain: George Williams, Editor of the Gulf Daily News, said: “Britain is always waving the banner of human rights, democracy and freedom in [Gulf governments’] faces, all of which ARE developing here. Such a brow-beating and sometimes patronising attitude, accompanied by endless statements, often resulting from an ignorance of street realities, creates doubts and damages the reputations and economies of GCC nations.” 401 Neil Partrick was sympathetic, telling us that UK diplomats had an “almost impossible path to try to tread”, and that it had received both criticism from the opposition and “knock-back” from the Bahraini government for its efforts. 402

210. We conclude that the Government is right to pursue a strategy of engagement with Bahrain and to demonstrate the benefits of a reforming, moderate approach. However, British engagement and support should not be unconditional in the face of continued violations and slow implementation of reforms. There is a danger to the UK’s credibility if it allows itself to become associated with the problems in Bahrain rather than solutions.

211. We recommend that the UK seek to meet members of the opposition groups whenever possible, and advocate on behalf of international and British NGOs for access to Bahrain. In its response to this report, the Government should set out the meetings held with Bahraini NGOs and opposition figures in the last 12 months, and the steps it has taken to improve NGO access to Bahrain.

UK support for action by NGOs and International Organisations

212. In addition to bilateral dialogue and pressure, the UK has also supported international action in the United Nations, for example. In its written submission, Human Rights Watch emphasised the importance of these mechanisms and recommended that the UK:

Should take a strong and consistent position on rights abuses in these countries in dedicated forums like the UN Human Rights Council. It should press all of these countries to allow regular and unfettered access to UN special mechanisms (rapporteurs, for example) and international human rights organisations. 403

The UK participated in Bahrain’s Universal Periodic Review (UPR) at the UN Human Rights Council in 2012 and made recommendations for further reforms by Bahrain. However, in April 2013 Bahrain postponed a visit by the UN Special Rapporteur on

399 Ibid.
400 Q 442
401 Ev w9
402 Q 33
403 Ev 114
Torture. The visit, which had been postponed once before, was seen as an important part of the reforms and improvements Bahrain had committed to make as part of its UPR. The Special Rapporteur, Juan Mendez, criticised the decision by the Bahraini authorities, stating:

“This is the second time that my visit has been postponed, at very short notice. It is effectively a cancellation as no alternative dates were proposed nor is there a future road map to discuss.”

A spokesperson in the FCO told the BBC that the decision was “disappointing”, and said then FCO minister Alistair Burt, had raised the issue with the Bahraini government “stressing the importance we and the international community place on the visit”.

213. We recommend that the Government make securing an invitation to the UN Special Rapporteur on torture a priority in its next Joint Working Group with the Bahraini authorities.

214. The UK is right to be understanding of Bahrain’s dilemmas. For its region, prior to the protests it was liberal and reforming, and there is not an easy answer to its internal political issues. However, many of Bahrain’s problems are of its Government’s own making. The UK must press with greater urgency and force for Bahrain to implement the BICI reforms, engage seriously in dialogue and welcome UN mechanisms in order to re-establish good faith in its intentions. If there is no significant progress by the start of 2014, the Government should designate Bahrain as a ‘country of concern’ in its Human Rights Report.

Bahrain’s international context

215. Owing to its size and relatively limited wealth, Bahrain’s capacity to act as a foreign policy partner to the UK is inevitably limited, although it has proven to be a useful partner in multilateral action (see defence section, above) as well as by supporting initiatives in the United Nations and GCC. However, Bahrain’s position in the Gulf and its religious make-up (a majority Shia population ruled by a Sunni leadership) has made it a source of intense interest to the main regional rivals of Iran and Saudi Arabia.

216. Although Bahrain regularly blames Iran for its current crisis, the BICI report found no evidence of Iranian interference at the time of the outbreak of protests in 2011. Nevertheless, most of our witnesses agreed that while Iran had not created the protests, it was now exploiting the situation and ‘stirring up’ the discontented Shia population in Bahrain in order to advance its own agenda. Dr Eyal drew our attention to “at least five television stations broadcasting in Arabic, 24 hours a day into Bahrain”, adding:

The Iranians have perfected a new technique, which is the invention of news stories. A lot of the tension in Bahrain is from invented stories. Press TV has buried the Saudi royal family three times over, simply by announcing that the Saudi King is


405 ‘UN torture investigator ‘deeply disappointed’ with Bahrain’, BBC News online, 24 April 2013
dead. They know that people will discover that it was not the case, but it keeps the tension going.  

RUSI told us that Iran thereby “amplifies Bahrain’s civil strife by vilifying the Government and the security forces, exaggerating casualty figures, fabricating outrages against Shias and generally inciting sectarian hatred.” Dr Eyal concluded that “the bombardment of Bahrain by Iranian propaganda and the raising of the stakes have made it impossible for a Bahrainian leadership to deal with it rationally.” In response, others have argued that Bahraini state broadcasting has also been inflammatory and divisive. Nonetheless, we understand that Iran also includes Bahrain as part of its territory on its maps and holds seats in its parliament for representatives from Bahrain.

217. Mr Burt agreed that Iran’s TV coverage was significant and that some of the material “is not designed to be helpful or conducive to peace.” More worryingly, he added that “We have had evidence more recently of some more active involvement on the ground. Alas I am not able to share that evidence.” This reflected earlier comments by Iain Lindsay, British Ambassador to Bahrain, who had given an interview to local press in Bahrain just before our arrival in Manama, in which he labelled those behind a spate of bombings across the country as “terrorists”, and said there was “increasing evidence” that Iran was “providing support to people here who are bent on violence”. Mr Burt commented that:

I am very conscious that there are some in Bahrain who would like to see Iran as the source of all the problems, but I don’t think that is fair or correct. [...] My overall impression remains that Iran can and does exploit the situation, but there are many issues in Bahrain that can be settled by Bahrainis between themselves.

He added that successfully seeing through reform “is the most likely counterbalance to anything the Iranians might wish to do.”

218. Saudi Arabia is Bahrain’s nearest neighbour and strongest ally. It has a strong interest in ensuring that Bahrain’s society remains stable, given the potential knock-on effect for its own Eastern province, which has a sizeable Shia minority. Sir Roger Tomkys told us that “I believe that the Saudis have made it quite clear that they do not intend to let radical change take place.” Bahrain is therefore subject to considerable external pressure in opposing directions, and has the potential to export sectarian problems to its neighbours in the Gulf if its domestic crisis is not resolved.

219. We conclude that Bahrain is subject to intense pressure from other states in the Gulf, which have strong and opposing interests in what happens in Bahrain. The UK
Government should work to improve the international context in which Bahrain seeks a national reconciliation. Regional players must be involved in the reform and reconciliation process if it is to have any chance to succeed. The sectarian element to Bahrain’s troubles are a complicating factor, but also make Bahrain’s reconciliation even more of a prize: if these communities can find a way to reconcile and work together then it will be an example in the region.
5 FCO resources in the Gulf

Staff resources

220. The UK has a substantial presence in the Gulf, with an embassy in every Gulf state, as well as an additional consular office and UKTI Trade Office in Saudi Arabia. Across the Gulf region as a whole, the FCO told us it had increased its staffing since 2010 through the creation of four new UK-based posts, and that local staffing was being increased “where required”. In his written evidence, former Ambassador to Saudi Arabia Sir Tom Phillips told the Committee that the “in a time of resource cutbacks the priority of the work done by posts in the Gulf region was recognised” through the allocation of extra staff.

Arabic language skills

221. In June 2013 the Foreign Office disclosed in response to a Freedom of Information request that of the 16 British Ambassadors in the Arab world, only three have the highest level of fluency (Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia). In the Gulf states, there was a relatively low level of proficiency except for in Saudi Arabia.

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<tr>
<th>Post</th>
<th>Arabic proficiency of Ambassador</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Below A2 Confidence</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bahrain</td>
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<tr>
<td>Qatar</td>
<td>None</td>
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<td>Kuwait</td>
<td>A2 Confidence</td>
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<td>Oman</td>
<td>B2 Functional</td>
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<tr>
<td>United Arab Emirates</td>
<td>A2 Confidence</td>
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<tr>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>C2 Extensive</td>
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Proficiency key: C2= the most advanced level of fluency; C1= roughly equivalent to degree level; B2= Can engage confidently in the local language on a wide range of topics; A2= Can deal confidently with routine everyday issues.

222. Former diplomats who have appeared as witnesses (Robin Lamb, Sir Roger Tomkys, Sir Alan Munro) expressed disappointment at a perceived deterioration in Arabic language capacity within the Diplomatic Service in the Gulf. Sir Roger Tomkys told us that in the 1980s, it was “very much the exception” that there should be an ambassador in an Arab-speaking post who had not been through the FCO’s Middle East Centre for Arabic Studies (MECAS) process of 18 months. He added that “downgrading linguistic competence is a terrible mistake.” Robin Lamb said that “most of us spoke Arabic in the Gulf. I think that may have diminished since.” He added that “If you do speak Arabic, even those who speak English will warm to you […] you have shown enough interest in them to study their language.”

416 Ev 141
417 Ev 111
418 ‘British Ambassadors struggle with Arabic’, The Telegraph, 31 May 2013
419 Q 63
420 Q 64
421 Q 63
422 Q 64
223. The Government said that it had recognised the problem with Arabic language capacity and already begun to take steps to begin “reversing the trend of being less interested in local speech”. Alistair Burt highlighted the FCO’s Diplomatic Excellence programme, which aims to strengthen diplomatic ‘core skills’ including languages, as well as the re-opening of the FCO language school. The Government has also designated a further six UK-based roles in the Gulf as Arabic speaker slots to encourage the development of language skills, and Alistair Burt told us that 60% of staff in speaker slots had reached “target level” in speaking Arabic, and approximately 75% have some level of proficiency. A further 25 members of staff are undergoing full-time Arabic training in preparation for their posting to the region; a further 70 are undertaking after-work classes in London, and 80 are using an e-learning package. He told us that “once our trained speakers are in place we will have 40% more speakers of Arabic in our posts overseas than in 2010.”

224. At the senior levels, Alistair Burt told us that the Government was “seeking to increase the pool of those who will be in position for the senior positions of Arabic speakers” and that it is “steadily getting more important” for Ambassadors to speak Arabic. He said that it would take some time for the changes to trickle through, but he assured us that in the meantime, “where we need an Arabic speaker, there is an Arabic speaker” and that 70% of heads of mission in Arab countries speak Arabic.

225. Jon Davies, Additional Director of the FCO’s Middle East and North Africa Department, told us that when recruiting for a post, language skills were just one of a number of criteria that were taken into account, including leadership skills. However, he agreed that language skills were important and told us that they were “getting more attention.” Since we took evidence, the FCO re-opened its language school in September 2013. The Government announced that the centre will offer 70,000 hours of teaching for up to 1,000 full and part-time language students each year.

226. We welcome the Government’s efforts to improve the FCO’s Arabic language skills in the Gulf, in particular by designating more posts as ‘speaker slots’. However, it appears that 25% of staff in those speaker slots have low levels of Arabic proficiency, and 40% have not reached the required standard for their grade, undermining the effect of this policy. For reasons of public diplomacy (to local television interviews, for example), as well as to demonstrate respect for the partner state, it is important that...
high-level FCO diplomats speak Arabic even in those states where they can manage in English or with a translator. In this context, we welcome the re-opening of the FCO’s language school, fulfilling a pledge made by the Foreign Secretary in 2011.

227. We understand that it will take time to re-build Arabic language capacity, particularly at the senior levels of the FCO, but we believe that it is important that the Government demonstrate its commitment to the goal of improving language skills at all levels of the FCO and incentivise FCO staff to learn Arabic. We recommend that the FCO set a timeframe in which it expects to make a minimum level of Arabic language skills mandatory for those who wish to be appointed to senior diplomatic posts in the region.
6 Future of UK-Gulf relations

228. The Government has placed a renewed emphasis on its long-term relations with both Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, in part by relying on our rich heritage of historic links with these traditional allies. This is a pragmatic and shrewd approach given the particular weight that personal and long-lasting relations have in the region, and the UK has been successful in maintaining and deepening warm relations with both states, despite a challenging period.

229. The future of the UK’s relationship with the Gulf States, as well as the future stability of the Gulf as a whole, depends upon continuing (and accelerating) political and economic reforms. There was disagreement among our witnesses, and in the academic community more generally, about how far the Gulf rulers have the will or capacity to enact the necessary reforms. Having made a big commitment to its relationships with the Gulf rulers, the Government must consider how best it can support these vital reforms in the Gulf.

230. The situation demands a nuanced foreign policy that takes account of what is achievable, how that can be encouraged, as well as what would be counter-productive. However, the British public also rightly demand an absolute position regarding human rights and values around the world. Marrying the two is the job of the FCO. Though it appears to be doing that job, it has not yet persuaded the public in the UK or internationally of that. In a time of global interconnectedness, of a growing role for public opinion and mobilisation, and where our speeches and action can be compared across the world, this is no small failing.

231. Yet the UK should not over-estimate its influence. Our witnesses argued that the Gulf States will inevitably make decisions based on their understanding of their own interests. In addition, witnesses identified regional powers such as Egypt and Turkey as the “real players” who were more important to the Gulf States, as well as the fact that Gulf trade patterns are shifting East, toward China and other Asian partners. The UK must make the most of what it can offer the Gulf: an established partner with understanding of the region, and a bridge to the larger powers of the United States and European Union. The Gulf will remain a region of important strategic significance in the coming years, but the UK will have to work harder in future to maintain its influence and secure its interests in the Gulf. The Government should ensure that it does not lose its current momentum and should be willing to dedicate further staff and other resources to this important region. The Prime Minister has established a team to create a strategic framework for future relations with the Gulf. The Government should set out in its response to this report how the FCO is contributing to the Prime Minister’s review of UK-Gulf relations, and what will be made public as a result of this review.

232. Finally, both states have young and growing populations, and it remains to be seen if the historical ties between our states will resonate for the younger, more educated and globally-connected generation. Without drawing comparisons to the revolutions of the Arab Spring, one of the lessons that this Committee drew was the need to connect with the public in each state, rather than relying on traditional ‘elite’ ties. The Government must make the UK’s public profile and reputation a more central part of its work in the Gulf, and ensure that constructive relationships are built with a wide cross-section of society, if it is to remain a principal partner in the future.
Annexes

Annex A: Committee meetings in Riyadh and Manama

1 Committee meetings in Saudi Arabia
   • Briefing by HMA John Jenkins and officials
   • Meeting with Foreign Affairs Committee and Human Rights Committee, Shura Council
   • Lunch with members of the Shura Council
   • Meeting with the Deputy Speaker of the Shura Council
   • Meeting with the Saudi Human Rights Commission
   • Meeting with the Minister of Justice
   • Lunch with senior ambassadors
   • Meeting with the British Military Mission
   • Visit to the British Council Riyadh
   • Meeting with representatives of investors in Saudi Arabia
   • Meeting with Al-Nahda Philanthropic Society for Women
   • Dinner at the Ministry of the Interior

2 Committee meetings in Bahrain
   • Briefing by HMA Iain Lindsay and officials
   • Lunch with the Bahrain Britain Business Forum
   • Visit to the offices of the British Council
   • Briefing by Commodore Simon Ancona RN, UK Maritime Component Commander
   • Visit to HMS Shoreham
   • Meeting with representatives of the expatriate community
   • Dinner with ambassadors to Bahrain and foreign analysts
   • Meeting with journalists, commentators and analysts
   • Meeting with the Minister of Justice, HE Sheikh Khalid bin Ali Al Khalifa
• Meeting with the Prime Minister, HRH Prince Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa, and the Minister for Foreign Affairs, HE Sheikh Khalid bin Ahmed Al Khalifa

• Meeting with the Minister of Interior, HE Sheikh Rashid bin Abdullah Al Khalifa, the Chief of Public Security (General Ibrahim), and the Police Ombudsman

• Meeting with HRH Crown Prince and First Deputy Prime Minister Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa

• Meetings with representatives of opposition political societies

• Meeting with human rights NGOs and activists

• Meeting with National Institute for Human Rights

• Meeting with women’s representatives

Annex B: Informal meetings in the UK relevant to this inquiry

• **Tuesday 30th October 2012**

Ms Xenia Dormandy, Senior Fellow, Dr Robin Niblett, Director, Professor Shaun Breslin, Lord Williams of Baglan, Mr David Butter, Ms Jane Kinninmont and Ms Glada Lahn, Chatham House

• **Wednesday 7th November 2012**

British Council: Mr Patrick Brazier, Regional Director (MENA), Mr Adrian Chadwick, Country Director, Saudi Arabia, and Mr Malcolm Jardine, Country Director, Bahrain

• **Thursday 8th November 2012**

HE Dr Salah Ali, Human Rights Minister, Bahrain, HE Alice Samaan, Bahrain Ambassador to the UK, Sheikh Khalifa bin Mohamed Al Khalifa, Director, Human Rights Organisations, Major General Ibrahim Habeeb Al Gaith, Inspector General, Ministry of Interior, Brigadier General Mohamed Rashed, Assistant Under Secretary, Legal Affairs, Ministry of Interior, Mr Hussain Makhlook, First Secretary, Bahrain Embassy London and Mr Nayef Yousif Mahmoud, Attorney General’s office

• **Thursday 24th January 2013**

Sheikh Ali Salman, Secretary-General of Al Wefaq, Bahrain and Ali Alaswad, Former
MP for Al Wefaq, Bahrain

- **Tuesday 26th February 2013**

Mr Adel Abdulrahman Al-Maawdeh, Deputy Speaker, Bahraini Parliament, and Members of Parliament: Mr Abdul Hamid Jalal Al-Meer, Mr Mahmood Yusuf Almahmood, Ms Hala Ramzi Fayiz Qurisa, and Ms Nancy Dinah Elly Khedouri; and Mr Ali Hasan Al-Khazali and Mr Mohamed Al-Abbasi, Parliamentary Advisors

- **Wednesday 6th March 2013**

HE Dr Abdullah M Alsheikh, Speaker, Saudi Arabian Shura Council and Members of the Shura Council: Dr Hamza Hussain Alshareef, Dr Zuhair Fahad Alharthi, Mr Saud Abdulrahman Alshammari, Dr Said Abdulla Alshaikh, Dr Amr I. B. Rajab, Dr Thoraya Ahmed Obaid and Dr Nuhad Mohammed Aljishi; Dr Abdulrahman Al Soghyar, Director General, Consultative Council, Mr Mohammed Al Brahim, Director, Protocol Department

- **Monday 18th March 2013**

FCO briefing: Mr David Quarrey, Director, MENAD, and Kenny Taylor, Saudi Arabia Desk Officer, FCO

- **Tuesday 19th March 2013**

Sir Sherard Cowper Coles and Mr Bob Keen, BAE Systems

- **Monday 17th June 2013**

Meeting with the Council of Arab Ambassadors
Appendix 1: List of MOUs and treaties between the UK and Saudi Arabia

Provided by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, November 2013

UK-SAUDI ARABIA MEMORANDA OF UNDERSTANDING

Sport
Memorandum Of Understanding Between The Government Of The Kingdom Of Saudi Arabia and the Government Of The United Kingdom Of Great Britain And Northern Ireland On Cooperation In The Field Of Sport And Youth Welfare signed December 1987

Health
Memorandum of understanding on Healthcare Cooperation signed April 2011

Defence

First Extension to the Memorandum of Understanding between the Government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland concerning the Provision of Equipment and Services for the Royal Saudi Air Force signed on 21 September 1977

Second Extension to the Memorandum of Understanding between the Government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland concerning the Provision of Equipment and Services for the Royal Saudi Air Force signed August 1982

Memorandum of Understanding between the Government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland for the Provision of Equipment and Services for the Royal Saudi Air Force signed on 29 September 1985

Memorandum of Understanding between the Government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland concerning the Supply of Aircraft, Equipment, Services and Facilities for the Royal Saudi Air Force signed on 17 February 1986
Memorandum of Understanding between the Government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland on the Al-Yamamah Offset Programme on 30 September 1987

Understanding Document between the Government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland on the development of Saudi Armed Forces within the close defence relationship between the two countries signed on 21 December 2005

TREATIES

Agreement Between the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia on the Transfer of Sentenced Persons
Treaty Type: BILATERAL
Signature Date: 02-Jan-2012
Country: DT Isle Of Man, SAUDI ARABIA, UNITED KINGDOM

Convention between the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia for the Avoidance of Double Taxation and the Prevention of Fiscal Evasion with Respect to Taxes on Income and on Capital Gains, with Protocol
Treaty Type: BILATERAL
Signature Date: 31-Oct-2007
Country: SAUDI ARABIA, UNITED KINGDOM

Agreement between the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia for the Avoidance on a Reciprocal Basis of Double Taxation on Revenues Arising from the Business of International Air Transport and on the Remuneration of Employees of Enterprises engaged in such Business
Treaty Type: BILATERAL
Signature Date: 10-Mar-1993

Agreement between the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia concerning the Investigation of Drug Trafficking and Confiscation of the Proceeds of Drug Trafficking
Treaty Type: BILATERAL
Signature Date: 02-Jun-1990
Agreement between the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia on Cultural and Technical Co-operation

**Treaty Type**: BILATERAL

**Signature Date**: 23-Nov-1975

Agreement between the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia for Air Services between and beyond their respective Territories

**Treaty Type**: BILATERAL

**Signature Date**: 20-Jan-1975

Exchange of Notes concerning the Exercise of Jurisdiction over all individuals who are subjects of the Rulers of:- Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Kuwait, Qatar, Muscat and Oman or any of the Trucial States

**Treaty Type**: BILATERAL

**Signature Date**: 20-Apr-1952

Exchange of notes between His Majesty’s Government in the United Kingdom and the Government of Saudi Arabia prolonging the Treaty of Jeddah of 20th May, 1927 as modified by the Exchange of Notes of 3rd October, 1936

**Treaty Type**: BILATERAL

**Signature Date**: 03-Oct-1943

Agreement for Friendship and Neighbourly Relations between the Government of the United Kingdom (acting on behalf of His Highness the Sheikh of Kuwait) and the Government of Saudi Arabia [with Schedule and Exchange of Notes containing Lists of Tribes]

**Treaty Type**: BILATERAL

**Signature Date**: 20-Apr-1942

Exchange of Notes between His Majesty’s Government in the United Kingdom and the Government of Saudi Arabia for the Modification of the Treaty of Jeddah of the 20th May, 1927

**Treaty Type**: BILATERAL

**Signature Date**: 03-Oct-1936

**Country**: UNITED KINGDOM

Exchange of Notes between His Majesty’s Government in the United Kingdom and the Government of Saudi Arabia regarding Transit Dues at Bahrain.

**Treaty Type**: BILATERAL
Signature Date: 17-Nov-1935

OTHER AGREEMENTS
The British Council continue to operate under a Cultural Agreement, signed between the UK and Saudi Arabia signed in November 1975
Draft Report (The UK’s relations with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 5 read and agreed to.
Paragraph 6 read, amended and agreed to.
Paragraphs 7 to 9 read and agreed to.
Paragraph 10 read, amended and agreed to.
Paragraphs 11 to 19 read and agreed to.
Paragraph 20 read, amended and agreed to.
Paragraphs 21 to 28 read and agreed to.
Paragraph 29 read, amended and agreed to.
Paragraphs 30 to 45 read and agreed to.
Paragraph 46 read, amended and agreed to.
Paragraphs 47 to 54 read and agreed to.
Paragraph 55 read, amended and agreed to.
Paragraphs 56 to 71 read and agreed to.
Paragraph 72 read.
Amendment made.

Another Amendment proposed, at the end of the paragraph, to add “However, given the continued lack of transparency in connection with some defence sales, corruption remains a potential concern.” —(Ann Clwyd.)

Question proposed, That the Amendment be made.—Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.
Paragraph, as amended, agreed to.
Paragraphs 73 and 74 read and agreed to.
Paragraph 75 read.

Amendments made.

Another Amendment proposed, at the end of the paragraph, to add “Given that some UK civil servants and staff in Saudi Arabia are effectively paid by the Saudi Government, and work closely with their Saudi counterparts, there is the potential for conflicts of interests to arise. In response to this report, the UK Government should address this concern.”—(Ann Clwyd.)

Question put, That the Amendment be made.

The Committee divided.

Ayes, 1
Ann Clwyd

Noes, 4
Mr John Baron
Mark Hendrick
Mr Frank Roy
Sir John Stanley

Amendment accordingly negatived.

Paragraph, as amended, agreed to.

Paragraphs 76 and 77 read and agreed to.

Paragraph 78 read, amended and agreed to.

Paragraphs 79 to 132 read and agreed to.

Paragraph 133 read, amended and agreed to.

Paragraphs 134 to 137 read and agreed to.

Paragraph 138 read, amended and agreed to.

Paragraph 139 read and agreed to.

Paragraph 140 read, amended and agreed to.

Paragraphs 141 to 147 read and agreed to.

Paragraph 148 read, amended and agreed to.

Paragraphs 149 to 156 read and agreed to.

Paragraph 157 read.

Amendment proposed, in line 4, to leave out “commend” and insert “note”—(Ann Clwyd.)

Question proposed, That the Amendment be made.—Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Paragraph agreed to.

Paragraphs 158 to 161 read and agreed to.

Paragraph 162 read, amended and agreed to.
Paragraphs 163 to 166 read and agreed to.

Paragraph 167 read.

Amendment proposed, in line 7, to leave out from “Bahrain” to the end of the paragraph.—(Ann Clwyd.)

Question proposed, That the Amendment be made.—Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Paragraph agreed to.

Paragraphs 168 and 169 read and agreed to.

Paragraph 170 read.

Amendment proposed, in line 2, to leave out “particularly welcome its commitment” and insert “believe it is important that it remains committed”.—(Ann Clwyd.)

Question proposed, That the Amendment be made.—Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Paragraph agreed to.

Paragraphs 171 to 179 read and agreed to.

Paragraph 180 read.

Amendment proposed, in line 3, after “policies.” to insert “It should also take into account any strong public feeling in Bahrain about the provision of defence equipment”.—(Ann Clwyd.)

Question proposed, That the Amendment be made.—Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

An Amendment made.

Paragraph, as amended, agreed to.

Paragraphs 181 to 209 read and agreed to.

Paragraph 210 read, amended and agreed to.

Paragraphs 211 to 232 read and agreed to.

Summary read and agreed to.

Annex A read, amended and agreed to.

Annex B read and agreed to.

A Paper was appended to the report as Appendix 1.

Resolved, That the Report, as amended, be the Fifth Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chair make the Report to the House.

The following written evidence, ordered to be reported to the House for publication on 18 December 2012 in the previous Session of Parliament, was ordered to be reported to the House for printing with the Report:

1 Sir Roger Tomkys (SAB 02)
2 Robin Lamb (SAB 55)
The following written evidence, ordered to be reported to the House for publication on 14 May 2013, was ordered to be reported to the House for printing with the Report:

1 Bahrain Centre for Human Rights (SAB 36) (Part of the submission)
2 Chris Doyle, Director of the Council for the Advancement of Arab British Understanding (Caabu) (SAB 67)
3 Middle East Association (SAB 68)
4 Sir Tom Phillips (SAB 69)
5 Al Wefaq National Islamic Society, Liberties and Human Rights Department (SAB 62) (Part of the submission)
6 Supplementary written evidence from Alistair Burt MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (SAB 71)

The following written evidence, ordered to be reported to the House for publication on 16 July 2013, was ordered to be reported to the House for printing with the Report:

1 Al Wefaq National Islamic Society (SAB 66)

Ordered, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available, in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order No. 134.

[Adjourned till Tuesday 19 November at 1.45 pm.]
Witnesses

Tuesday 22 January 2013

Jane Kinninmont, Senior Research Fellow, Chatham House, and Neil Partrick, Associate Fellow, Royal United Services Institute


Tuesday 29 January 2013

Rosemary Hollis, Professor of Middle East Policy Studies, City University, London, and Chris Doyle, Director of the Council for the Advancement of Arab British Understanding (Caabu)

Sir Alan Munro, Honorary Vice-President of the Saudi-British Society and board member of the Arab British Chamber of Commerce, former Under-Secretary of State for the Middle East and Africa, and British Ambassador in Saudi Arabia (1989 to 1993)

Tuesday 12 February 2013

Sir David Wootton, former Lord Mayor of the City of London (2011–12), and David Lloyd OBE, Senior Consultant, Middle East Association

Tuesday 5 March 2013

Dr Jonathan Eyal, Director of International Security Studies at RUSI, and Howard Wheeldon, independent Defence, Aerospace and Industry Analyst, former Director (Policy, Public Affairs & Media) at ADS

Sir Tom Phillips, former British Ambassador to Saudi Arabia (2010-2012)

Tuesday 14 May 2013

David Mepham, UK Director of Human Rights Watch, and Philip Luther, Middle East and North Africa Director for Amnesty International

Ali Alaswad, Former MP for Al Wefaq, and Maryam Alkhawaja, Bahrain Center for Human Rights

Sir Nigel Rodley KBE, Professor of Law and Chair of the University of Essex Human Rights Centre, former Commissioner on the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry

Caroline Montagu, Countess of Sandwich

Tuesday 18 June 2013


List of printed written evidence

1  Sir Roger Tomkys                     Ev 96
2  Robin Lamb                           Ev 99
3  Chris Doyle, Director of the Council for the Advancement of Arab British Understanding (Caabu) Ev 102
4  Middle East Association             Ev 105
5  Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) Ev 106
6  Sir Tom Phillips                    Ev 110
7  Human Rights Watch                  Ev 111
8  Amnesty International               Ev 114
9  Al Wefaq National Islamic Society, Liberties and Human Rights Department Ev 119
10 Al Wefaq National Islamic Society   Ev 124
11 Bahrain Centre for Human Rights    Ev 126
12 Caroline Montagu                    Ev 130
13 The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) Ev 133: 141

List of additional written evidence

(published in Volume II on the Committee’s website www.parliament.uk/facom)

1  Bahrain Human Rights Monitor         Ev w1
2  Brigadier Peter Sincock, Chairman The Bahrain Society in UK Ev w4
3  Peter Francis, Chemical Engineer (Retired) Ev w6
4  Mary Martini                         Ev w6
5  Bharat Jashanmal                     Ev w7
6  George Williams, Editor-in Chief of the Gulf Daily News Ev w9
7  Amjad Bseisu                         Ev w10
8  Raymond Weaver                       Ev w11
9  Bahrain Human Rights Watch Society   Ev w12
10 Marilyn Collins                      Ev w13
11 Dr Omar Al-Hassan                    Ev w15
12 Rehman Chishti MP, Member of Parliament for Gillingham and Rainham Ev w19
13 Human Rights First
14 Sir Harold Walker
15 Sir John Shepherd KCVO CMG
16 Dr. Shaikh Khalid bin Khalifa Al-Khalifa, Chairman, Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defense and National Security, Shura Council Kingdom of Bahrain
17 Philip Smith
18 Paul Mercer, Kuwait Finance House (Bahrain)
19 Lieutenant General (Rtd) Sir Graeme Lamb KBE, CMG, DSO
20 LuaLua TV
21 Bahrain Freedom Movement
22 Citizens for Bahrain
23 Abdulrahman Rashid Bumjaid MP, Head of Foreign Affairs, Defense and National Security Committee, Council of Representatives, Kingdom of Bahrain
24 Dr Mike Diboll
25 Caroline Nokes MP
26 The Bahrain Federation of Expatriate Associations (BFEA)
27 Campaign Against Arms Trade
28 John Horne, Bahrain Watch
29 Index on Censorship
30 Bahrain Justice and Development Movement
31 The Redress Trust (REDRESS)
32 C.R.G. Murray, Newcastle Law School, Newcastle University
33 Islamic Human Rights Commission (IHRC)
34 Human Rights Department of the National Unity Assembly Association
35 Bahrain Watch
36 Douglas Hansen-Luke and Rosamund de Sybel
37 Mr Abdulla Faisal Al Doseri, President of the Mabadea Society for Human Rights
38 Dr Kristian Coates Ulrichsen
39 Robert Lacey
40 The British Council
41 Rt Hon The Lord Mayor Alderman Roger Gifford
42 Bill Marczak
43 Lawyer Mohamed Altajer President of BRAVO, board member, Bahrain Human Rights Observatory
Oral evidence

Taken before the Foreign Affairs Committee
on Tuesday 22 January 2013

Members present:
Richard Ottaway (Chair)
Mr Bob Ainsworth
Mr John Baron
Sir Menzies Campbell
Ann Clwyd
Mike Gapes
Mark Hendrick
Andrew Rosindell
Mr Frank Roy
Rory Stewart

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Jane Kinninmont, Senior Research Fellow, Chatham House, and Neil Partrick, Associate Fellow, Royal United Services Institute, gave evidence.

Q1 Chair: I welcome members of the public to the first evidence session for the Committee’s inquiry into UK relations with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. As this is the first session, may I take the opportunity to point something out to the wider public? There has been a considerable amount of press speculation that this is an inquiry into human rights abuses in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. It is not. It is, as set out in our terms of reference, a much wider inquiry, looking at the broad relationship between the United Kingdom and these two countries, how we effectively balance our interest, the extent to which the FCO’s Gulf initiative has met its objective, how we see Saudi Arabia as foreign policy partners, and much more. I hope that those who wish to divert the Committee’s attention will understand that we intend to stick very firmly to our terms of reference.

The first panel today is going to allow the Committee to consider the UK Government’s policies for the Gulf, their interests and relationships in the region generally, and their approach to Saudi Arabia and Bahrain in particular. To help us in our deliberations we have Neil Partrick, associate fellow at RUSI, and Jane Kinninmont, senior research fellow at Chatham House. I welcome you both. Jane, it is good to see you again. Dr Partrick, this is the first time we have met and I thank you for coming along. Is there anything you would like to say by way of an opening statement? I have a fairly general, gentle first question for you, unless you want to say something.

Neil Partrick: I should obviously keep it brief. I just want to say that there is a sense in the Gulf, and probably around Westminster and Whitehall, that the difficulty of marrying values and interests is, to some extent, partly being overcome. There is a sense in the Gulf that our traditional values are being more strongly asserted, although there is also a sense that they are not applied equally to all countries in the GCC area. They are aware of what I perceive, at least, to be a need on the part of HMG to be aware of a stronger desire for reform. I don’t mean profound, overwhelming change, but at least reform. I hope the Committee can think about what that actually entails in a number of instances in the region.

Alongside that, the Gulf states are very aware of the role that they play in very different British interests: counter-terrorism—al-Qaeda being emphasised by the Prime Minister as supposedly a fairly uniform threat throughout great swathes of Africa at the moment—and, indeed, containing and pressuring Iran. Marrying those aspects is obviously a very difficult exercise. I would hope we can think about that, and about the difficulty of Gulf leaders, some of whom are quite aged and ailing—and even the younger ones—marrying their traditional coalitions, if you like, with the expectations of a more articulate, wired younger generation and, depending on which country in the region we are talking about, a more assertive political opposition. So these are difficult waters for the British Government. Having said all that, I hope there is not any sense of panic. In broad terms, HMG is starting to align more closely its interests and values when it thinks about Gulf states rather than the wider Arab region. There are concerns about sustainability in terms of the political economy, particularly of Saudi Arabia, because of 18 million nationals. But let’s not panic: let’s not at the same time think we are facing imminent doom and disaster. Let’s think of the realities and some of the careful nuances as well.

Jane Kinninmont: I would like to start with a note about the sources of funding for my research, just in case there were any conflict of interest concerns. I wanted to highlight that. The Middle East and North Africa programme at Chatham House, where I work, receives some funding from the UK Government for its research. We have also recently worked with the UAE Government on a conference. Some of my other colleagues at Chatham House also from time to time receive funding from the British Government and from Gulf Governments. It is a fairly boring thing to start with but I thought it was worth putting on the table.

Moving on to more substantive issues, I share with Neil the sense that certainly, it is a difficult time for diplomats. You guys also have a difficult job in assessing the complex relations with the Gulf. It has become increasingly hard over the last two years for any country or any movement to sketch out anything
that begins to approach a consistent policy towards a Middle East that is increasingly politically diverse. Unfortunately, this is also a time of heightened sensitivity among the Gulf rulers. All the Gulf countries have imprisoned people in the last couple of years for insulting the ruler. They are also extremely sensitive to criticisms from their friends outside. But that said, Britain, as a tried and tested friend of the Gulf, will not be doing its allies any favours if it pretends that everything is fine and that these countries will be totally immune to the pressures that have built up elsewhere.

Diplomats on the ground will face a lot of push-back from Gulf Governments. But that needs to be weighed up against wider British strategic interests, including the credibility of attempts elsewhere in the region to show that the UK supports transitions to more open societies. In the case of Bahrain, it seems interesting that now Britain is probably Bahrain’s closest non-Arab ally. I think there was some self-congratulation about the fact that the crown prince selected the UK for particular praise in his speech at the Manama dialogue and pointedly did not mention the US. There are questions about whether we could be showing a bit more of a united front with the US, with European partners, when it comes to issues of reform, human rights and political inclusion.

It is also puzzling to see how the relationship has re-emerged so strongly when the relations were tested by the uprising and by the crack-down. Initially Britain was fairly critical of the violent response of the local police forces to the demonstrations. As you will be well aware, a number of defence export licences were withdrawn from companies who wanted to sell arms to Bahrain. But the Bahraini authorities responded strongly in two ways. The first was to push back, including the threat of cancelling defence co-operation with Britain in Bahraini territory. The second was to promise to reform. The Bahrain independent commission of inquiry presented a good opportunity for Britain to embrace what seemed to be a reform process, while also being able to deal with that push-back against some of its defence interests.

Now there is a dilemma, now that that story of reform is beginning to wear thin. When there have been setbacks, there seems to be little or no response from the British Government. The overall impression that Britain is giving is that it is content to do business as usual, even if there is back-sliding on human rights abuses and even if there is, as there is currently, no process whatsoever of political dialogue designed to deal with any of the root causes of the uprising. I will stop there. I look forward to your questions.

Q2 Chair: May I take you back a bit and ask a very simple question: why is the Gulf important to us? Jane Kinninmont: The Gulf has been very important to Britain since well before the discovery of oil. It is essential to bear in mind that the trade importance of these countries has very long roots in British history, and we have relationships and friendships that go back deeply into the 19th century. I believe that today, the GCC countries, as a combined market, are the seventh biggest export market for the UK. There are significant exports of both goods and services, and there is also very significant investment from some of the Gulf states, epitomised by the Shard here in London.

The UK sees the Gulf countries as important regional partners in dealing with the wider Arab world. Again, I think that questions have to be asked, because the Gulf countries are not necessarily representative of wider Arab public opinion, and they should not necessarily be our No. 1 go-to partners when trying to decide what is important for a country such as Egypt.

Neil Partrick: First, I should say that I am speaking in an entirely personal capacity, although I am an associate fellow at the Royal United Services Institute. As Jane said, the Gulf has obviously been historically important to us. The role that Saudi Arabia plays in terms of its oil production capacity and its as yet not completely developed gas production capacity is particularly important.

The trouble with that sort of argument is it is a terrible cliché. Saddam Hussein, under enormous pressure from sanctions throughout the 1990s, periodically upset the oil market, but in general terms he was keen to sell his oil, for fairly obvious reasons, and we were rather keen for that oil to get to Jordan. Some of that oil, being a fungible commodity, entered the world market and supplied Americans, among others. All oil producers have to sell their product.

Saudi Arabia is a reasonable, pragmatic player within OPEC—that is perhaps the most important detail in terms of its energy role. It is neither a price hawk nor a price dove, and it is a de facto swing producer in the sense that it can affect the price of oil because of its sheer spare capacity. At least, it is at present. There are enormous questions about that going over the medium term, however, because of the amount of oil consumed domestically.

It is a big market. We have enormous defence sales in the Gulf region. There is intelligence co-operation. Perhaps that is overstated, but if it were withdrawn, it could affect us, particularly as we remain concerned about al-Qaeda and other jihadi concerns. In other areas, Saudi Arabia’s and the other Gulf states’ dynamism could potentially be overstated. On foreign policy, there was a period 10 years ago when there was enormous optimism about the role that Saudi Arabia could play in reinvigorating the peace process. For various reasons that I hope to go into in this session, it was not able to deliver. So the Gulf is important, but let’s not overstate it.

Q3 Chair: If at the end, Dr Partrick, you feel that we have not asked you the right questions to allow you to come back on that point, tell us. The British Government say that they are trying to re-energise their relationship with the Gulf states. How are they doing in the re-energising stakes?

Neil Partrick: Before the last election I was struck by the Conservative Opposition’s concern about giving more attention to a relationship that they felt was neglected. I don’t think the leaders of the GCC states actually did feel neglected, other than on the crucial issue of Iraq, where they felt their advice was somewhat disregarded. That is a fairly important exception to the general argument I am trying to put...
forward, but I certainly do not think they felt that their opinions were disregarded, or that there was any lack of attention or visits from Labour Government officials. The Gulf initiative is an attempt to put on a more formal footing the interest that there is across Government Departments in further co-operation, trade, intelligence, defence, etc. with the GCC. That, it seems to me, is welcomed. But I had no sense that they felt in any particular way let down in the late 1990s and the 2000s. This was not in any sense the post-1968 environment, when Britain withdrew east of Suez. I do not think that the UK Government had a lot of catching up to do. But constantly, Gulf states will say that they need to be listened to—on Iraq in the last 10 years, under the current and the past, and Iran now. It is a crucial relationship in that sense. In terms of containment and wider pressure on Iran, in the last 10 years, under the current and previous Governments, periodically they have felt that they have not always been as closely listened to as they should have been.

Jane Kinninmont: I think I’d agree that there is a fair amount of continuity. The Saudi king’s only state visit to the UK was under the previous Government. I am not sure there has been a drastic step change in the way the coalition Government have treated the Gulf counties.

Q4 Chair: How do the Gulf states see Britain, compared with France, Germany or even the United States? Do we compare favourably, or are we just plain different?

Neil Partrick: The cliché is, “You understand us. You have been around roughly for 150 years” in terms of formal strategic agreements with the ruling families of the small Gulf states, although not with Saudi Arabia. That is historically a more informal relationship in terms of degrees of partnership or even adversity if you think about our defensive concerns about protecting Iraq and Jordan and our small Gulf allies.

In broad terms, the cliché is, “You know the region. You have been around a long time.” The Americans are in a sense Johnny-come-latelities. At the same time there is a recognition that our weight is not what it was 150 years ago. It is still a world power, or we are nothing.” Two or three years later, he withdrew east of Suez. We need some context. I don’t think, looking at the current Government’s relations with Europe, that they necessarily think we are the bridge, either, between America and Europe.

We are important; they value our role. They hope that we are listened to more closely by the Americans, French and Germans. They like us as interlocutors. It was not that long ago when British ambassadors were more important to the decisions of some rulers in the area than some of their own family members and senior officials, but I don’t think we should get carried away with that role and the difference that we could make.

Countries within the broader Arab world—Turkey and Egypt, for example—are now increasingly seen as the real players when it comes to the Gulf. We shouldn’t overstate what they can do to impact on reform or possibly upset our interests in the region. If there are limits to what they can do, there are definitely limits to what we can.

Jane Kinninmont: British relations in the Gulf are still profoundly affected by the legacy of the colonial period, which ended not so long ago in the Gulf. That has advantages and disadvantages. Because it was an area that was not directly colonised, relations between elites have been more mutually respectful and there are not the same issues of resentment that people might find in other colonies, at least not to the same level. But of course, there are resentments. For instance, within Gulf ruling families there will often be particular shiekhly families or branches of the family that feel they were disadvantaged by the machinations of British political residents at the times they were in power. Often, those memories are brought up almost as fresh memories that people learn through oral history from their own families.

I think there can also be a tendency among civil society in the Gulf to over-estimate the role that Britain plays, as there is across the whole Middle East a tendency to over-estimate the role the US plays. There is a very big mismatch between the perception of British diplomats, who tend to say that our leverage is limited, there are new actors and it is not the colonial era any more, and the perceptions that exist among many of the people who think that behind the scenes there may still be Brits pulling strings.

Q5 Andrew Rosindell: Could you give us your views on how the Gulf states that are monarchies don’t seem to have been affected by the Arab Spring in quite the same way as other countries that had dictatorships? Do you feel that the system of monarchy has provided stability and prevented the types of revolution that we have seen elsewhere? Or is it just a stop-gap before it also happens in those countries?

Jane Kinninmont: I think this is massively over-stated, I have to say. We need to remember that revolutions have not happened in most Arab countries, but nearly all of them have seen significant protests that have centred on similar issues relating to dignity, social justice and so on. There have been massive protests in four out of the six Gulf monarchies. There have been significant protests in Jordan and Morocco, enough to spur those Governments to promise reforms. We have yet to see the results. The reasons why the uprising in Bahrain did not go further probably have more to do with the very strong external support that was available to its rulers and less to do with an intrinsic legitimacy of monarchy. That said, however, there should be options for monarchies to reform. There are plenty of case studies from elsewhere of monarchs who have been able to keep status, money and the role as Head of State, but give up some of the day-to-day decision-making powers. It is just not clear how much political will there is in the Gulf to follow that kind of route.

Neil Partrick: I think it is broader than that. If you look at countries such as Iraq, Syria and Egypt, there is a strong tradition of the role of the military within politics. That is a lesson learned by the different Gulf states. One of the reasons why we look at high spend
on the one hand in the GCC, but actually fairly low numbers of regular recruits within the armed forces is because they have been traditionally very, very fearful of military intervention. In a sense, it is perhaps something about the judgment of monarchies that have created a degree of stability, with Bahrain being a big exception, but it is also about how they have also seen their interests as rulers in terms of keeping other interests out of the game.

The other element, particularly with Saudi Arabia of course, is not just that it is a monarchy, and one that requires a degree of consensus not just within the ruling family, but one that historically—it can be overstated and over-egged—had a partnership with the official clerical class, which has provided a degree of underpinning and legitimacy in historic terms for the Al Saud. That does not mean that every Saudi national feels content about that partnership and does not have criticism of the religious clerics, because they certainly do. Monarchy is a part of the story. These are not party regimes. Historically, party politics has not played well in the Gulf—for all the fact that some merchants were closely involved with Pan-Arabism, with Gamal Abdel Nasser, for example, in the ’50s and ’60s. The more traditional system has played a useful role in bringing people outside of a narrow party clique, for example. It is also about policing the military. We should not lose sight of the fact that there have been pressures—Bahrain is the most obvious—and there have been degrees of demonstrations in Oman and even in a very modest sense publicly in Saudi Arabia.

Q6 Andrew Rosindell: Do you think that Britain’s support for democracy within the Middle East has affected the way that the Gulf states view Britain? Do you think that Britain could actually be in a unique position to play a part in helping them to evolve towards more of a democratic system, bearing in mind the history between our country and the Gulf states? To what extent did others as well.

Neil Partrick: It means that Britain, given the historic relationship, is listened to, but their judgments ultimately will be about their own national political reality. That is obviously more the case with Saudi Arabia than it is in Bahrain, which, with its financial and security dependence on Saudi Arabia will clearly look to Riyadh as well. Generally speaking, throughout the Gulf, they are making their own national judgments. If we over-egg or over-do it—in Bahrain, we have had, as Jane said, some quite public push-back from sections of the ruling families, some of which are rather more powerful than, for example, the Crown Prince or even the King. We need to be careful how we do it. They will listen to us. We may get more of a special audience than some of our competing European nations, for example, but they will judge it in terms of where their interests lie.

Democratisation, broadly speaking, is not on anyone’s agenda. I do not think that it is clearly on our Prime Minister’s agenda, but we are more overtly asserting political participation. They are aware of that. In the case of Kuwait at least, they have been down this road an awfully long time—as compromised and as difficult as that exercise in participation is in Kuwait.

In general terms, with Kuwait being at the far end of openness and pluralism within the GCC and perhaps particularly the Emirates being at the lightest end in terms of openness and pluralism and political development, they will make their own judgments in terms of what they see as plausible in terms of their traditional alliances and how they see their security in the region being affected by it.

Jane Kinninmont: I am not sure to what extent we can say that Britain does support democracy in the Middle East, and I think more could be done actually to clarify where democracy fits into our agenda and what the difference is between maybe a preference for democracy and an active support of democratisation, which are obviously different things. But I think that, in the rest of the region, the support for transitions came after the fact in most of the cases, with Libya and Syria being exceptions. Certainly, some of the Gulf countries have been unnerved by what they see as a British readiness to engage with the Muslim Brotherhood in other parts of the region. I think that plays into certain feelings of insecurity about how reliable Britain is as an ally in the longer term.

Mr Baron: I hear what you say about legitimacy, but it cannot be denied—or perhaps it is just a coincidence—that the Gulf states seem to have got through this period, from their point of view, better than a good number of other countries within the Arab spring. Can I press you a little bit on that? This is a part of the world where status is important. Legitimacy, I do not think, can be marginalised too much for all the reasons we know, but to what extent has economic largesse played a role in all of this? We remember the flash point; the catalyst for the Tunisian uprising, but the Gulf states seem to be in a better position from that point of view. To what extent did that play a role in seeing them through these troubled waters?

Jane Kinninmont: Sure. It is most pronounced in the wealthiest states; both the fact that the state has been able to increase spending and create new jobs and the fact that there is virtually no indigenous working class in any of the Gulf countries except, partially, Bahrain and Oman, contributes to political stability. It is interesting to study the case of Kuwait, which is a very wealthy country, but one that has a particularly highly educated and politically active population and a tradition of political debate. It has been seeing protests; Reuters estimated that the one on the eve of the election on 1 December was 50,000 people-strong, and this is a small country. The protests there are over issues of dignity, corruption, and also very specific political issues about the extent to which the Emir and his family should be able to take decisions versus elected representatives. Political culture is not the same in the other Gulf countries yet, but it could be a sign of things that could be coming in some of the others as well.

Neil Partrick: That is an undisputed point. It is no accident, aside from what we could argue about the majority-minority politics of Bahrain, that Bahrain is clearly one of the poorer members of the GCC; its oil revenue is very much dependent, essentially, on Saudi
largesse, and they are not as generous as we might expect.

Oman saw public demonstrations. Again although, potentially it could develop more of its resources, it is not remotely in the same league as Qatar, the Emirates, Kuwait or Saudi Arabia. But there is concern in all these countries about how the energy wealth, to the greater or lesser extent that it is possessed in these countries, is used by the leadership. Issues like dignity, which were being expressed on the streets of Tunis and Cairo, are being expressed not necessarily out on the streets but in very public forums—virtual and real—in the Gulf in terms of how that resource is used by ruling families. Issues of corruption are publicly expressed in the Kuwaiti Parliament and are fairly widely discussed, even in Saudi Arabia. So, even if you are wealthy, there are questions about how you use that wealth. In Saudi Arabia, its wealth, in a sense, is nothing like Qatar’s because it has 18 million nationals as opposed to something like 250,000. In that context, publicly acknowledged unemployment in Saudi Arabia of 25%—that is publicly acknowledged: if you calculate from the recently introduced unemployment benefit, you get a figure of a quarter of the workforce—raises some real questions over the medium term if economic largesse is a key prop of legitimacy.

Mr Baron: Related to that very briefly, Dr Patrick, there have been reports suggesting that the oil price has to go over $100 a barrel or the balance, if you like, has to be ratcheted higher for some of these Gulf states to maintain that economic largesse, given the economic forecast going forward. To what extent do you subscribe to that view, and do you have any figures in mind?

Neil Patrick: There are no such things as NGOs in Saudi Arabia, so strikingly, an investment bank significantly owned by an important section of the ruling family issued a report recently that was looking at an oil price of some $350 a barrel being necessary by 2030, which is not that far away, to sustain current spending levels.

Q7 Mr Baron: $350 a barrel?

Neil Patrick: Yes—phenomenally high. Nobody expects an oil price to be constantly on an upward trajectory, but the point is that current spending levels, partially in response to fears about the Arab spring, but always significantly high, never efficiently and sensibly marshalled never necessarily sensibly dispersed around the country as they should be. They require an awful lot in terms of traditional expectations. Now they are trying to play and even to some extent substantially alter some of those expectations by putting more pressure on their nationals to think about work in the private sector, but they have an awfully long way to go, and certainly 2030 rears rather more closely, I think, than the projections of a major cultural shift in terms of employment practices.

Q8 Sir Menzies Campbell: Before I ask any questions, I should draw attention to the entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests, which reveals that I visited Saudi Arabia as a guest of the Government in September 2009. I want to ask questions about strategic relationships. How would those in Riyadh assess the strategic importance of a relationship with the United Kingdom? Would it to a large extent, or even exclusively, depend on the supply of arms and the commercial arrangements that lie around that?

Neil Patrick: There is no question but that Saudi Arabia looks at the relationship with Britain as important in terms of supply of kit and arms, which goes with that. I think that the expectations in the Gulf, increasingly of scenarios where Britain plays a role with its western partners in, to put it crudely, propping up regimes—those days are probably over. That is their expectation. They were starting to think like that, frankly, with the extent of the US draw-down from Iraq, even though they did not actually welcome the Iraq invasion for the most part.

Since the Arab spring and the response of the United States, Britain and others to the changes—Mubarak, for example, was a close ally of Saudi Arabia and a personal friend of King Abdullah, and there has been a perception that he was dismissed partly due to the machinations of western Governments promoting the United States—they are not looking therefore on western allies, and the question was about Britain particularly, as a kind of cavalry waiting to come over the hill. They are hoping, as I think we hope, that not just the money, but the symbolism of the defence sales and the training that goes with them, and the formal defence agreements that have been in place with most of the Gulf States—except Saudi Arabia—since 1990–91, will play a role, but they do not view it as a prop to regime survival in the way that they used to.

Q9 Sir Menzies Campbell: That’s a slightly different nuance, for example, than in the first Gulf war when of course the relationship between the United Kingdom—and other allies—and Saudi Arabia was enormously important. I think it is true to say that Saudi Arabian tanks were first over the start line when it came to the expulsion of Iraq from Kuwait. Perhaps I might ask Ms Kinninmont a question. In addition to that strategic relationship that Dr Patrick has outlined, how strong do you think the intelligence relationship is? Would you consider that question against the now public information that intelligence was supplied in relation to the so-called printer bomb that was found in a cargo aircraft at East Midlands airport? Do you think intelligence is an important part of this or not?

Jane Kinninmont: Intelligence and counter-terrorism co-operation are extremely important. That was obviously cited as one of the reasons for the Serious Fraud Office dropping its investigation into defence industry corruption allegations, but I cannot say very much about how deep those relations are, because they are not transparent to me.

Q10 Sir Menzies Campbell: Just to go back to the dropping of the investigation in relation to allegations against BAE, what impact did the dropping rather than the instigating of the DPP’s investigations have?
Sir Menzies Campbell: broadly speaking—they have opened up a naval base in Abu Dhabi. I extent in Saudi Arabia, not a very public one to the heart of your question. There is a debate to some extent answered that question already, but I wonder whether you could revisit it for a moment. I think you superimposed that corruption eats away at legitimacy. from his end, because he has clearly been very aware taken steps to make the procurement more transparent done under a different ruler, and King Abdullah has steps that, typically, their Governments invest more in expensive arms from the US and the UK than they spend on health care and education for their own people, which is, of course, much closer to the average person’s heart.

Q11 Sir Menzies Campbell: Would al-Yamamah be a particular target for that kind of feeling? Jane Kinninmont: There was certainly a documentary that al-Jazeera made about it, which was fairly widely publicised at the time, but bear it in mind that in those days Qatar and Saudi Arabia’s own relations were not so good. Although, as a caveat, it was an old deal, done under a different ruler, and King Abdullah has taken steps to make the procurement more transparent from his end, because he has clearly been very aware that corruption eats away at legitimacy.

Q12 Sir Menzies Campbell: If I could move on, and perhaps Dr Partrick you would be good enough to help with this: what other states, apart from the United States, would Saudi Arabia regard as being important from a strategic point of view? You have to some extent answered that question already, but I wonder whether you could revisit it for a moment. I think you suggested that maybe France would not necessarily be in that bracket. What I am really getting at is the conclusion from this, that Saudi Arabia really has very few strategic relationships outwith its own region. Neil Partrick: The French clearly have a role, and they have opened up a naval base in Abu Dhabi. I know your question was about Saudi Arabia, but broadly speaking—Sir Menzies Campbell: I have no objection to your widening it.

Neil Partrick: Sure. I mentioned the defence agreements with the five Gulf states, accepting Saudi Arabia, after the 1990–91 Gulf conflict. France, and indeed Russia and China, have also signed defence agreements, and with that comes sales. The traditional sense that the Gulf states have, while looking historically to Britain and then replacing us with the US, of wanting to project themselves in terms of image as well as substance as having a welter of western allies, has not adequately been replaced or competed with by regional strategic allies, to get to the heart of your question. There is a debate to some extent in Saudi Arabia, not a very public one admittedly, that is projecting the idea that we need to look more firmly at the kind of role that we can develop with countries such as Turkey, and even in some scenarios—with a lot of caution at the moment—with Egypt. If you go back 20 years, it was being projected as a Gulf security partner, albeit with some nervousness, by some Gulf states. There are plenty of other voices in Saudi Arabia who will say that Egypt, in a sense, is part of our problem, or is certainly causing major problems in terms of the Muslim Brotherhood relationship in the UAE, in a neighbouring Gulf state. There are other voices too that are suggesting that we need to think of the kind of future role that Egypt may play in different scenarios, perhaps in the short to medium term, and that Turkey,—in a sense as a bridge, as a member of NATO, but one that has ideological influence including to some extent over sections of the would-be opposition throughout the Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia—is a country that we perhaps need to hug a bit harder, rather than necessarily historically keeping it at some competitive distance. These are early days on those debates.

Q13 Sir Menzies Campbell: I wonder, finally, if I might ask you about the Gulf Co-operation Council and about the possibility of closer defence integration. I think it has been a constant refrain for a very long time that the GCC should be more integrated in defence terms. You will remember that it goes back in particular to the period immediately after the first Gulf war, although cynics said that the intention was that Oman should run it and Saudi Arabia should pay for it. Do you think that there is any likelihood of some of these aspirations, which have been around for a long time, actually being realised in concrete defence arrangements among the GCC? Neil Partrick: Not in substantive terms. Ballistic missile defence is an area that the Americans are particularly keen on, and that is the area where they perhaps push the strongest on GCC integration, because they would be partners in such a development. That would by definition require intelligence sharing, overcoming sensitivities about national sovereignty in the GCC. That is one area, but there has been a lot of discussion about that over a number of years and no progress yet. In terms of integration within the GCC itself, they recently committed themselves to a joint military command, but that was of their currently limited integrated defence forces, which in real terms have been more symbolic than capable. Defence is the area they talk about the most with the more recent attention to closer GCC integration, but I am not seeing any substantive sense that is actually going to happen.

Q14 Sir Menzies Campbell: Do you want to add anything to that, Ms Kinninmont? Jane Kinninmont: I want to add something on the other strategic powers as seen from the Gulf. It is very clear that the pattern of trade is shifting east. Dubai has survived its economic woes partly by reinventing itself as a city that is catering to the emerging middle class from India and China. That is driving where they put their airline routes as well as where they put
diplomatic efforts. King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia's first visit after coming to the throne was to Asia. It is clear that that is where the trade logic leads their focus, and of course they might hope that rising powers, notably China, would not lecture them about human rights and democracy. However, at the same time, those rising powers also will not try to bring about a resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, or indeed in Syria. So I think that honeymoon may be slightly souring as they realise that they will not play quite the role that they want them to play.

Q15 Chair: Dr Partrick, I have a quick question for you on defence sales. British Aerospace said in December that it had been unable to conclude its deal on Typhoon jets with Saudi Arabia. Have you any idea why this is?

Neil Partrick: First, as you know, Chairman, that is the second tranche; the first tranche was successfully sold. My sense is that it relates to a bigger question that is worth thinking about: Saudi decision making. It is, as I think any British business people operating in Saudi Arabia and the wider Gulf are aware, a painfully slow process. That has been compounded, because obviously decisions of that nature have to be taken right at the very top, by the issue of the health and age of the most senior leaders. I do not get a sense that it has been tied up with any kind of political posturing or any reconsideration, but I am not close to the detail of it.

Chair: May I say to you both that we have still got a lot of questions that we want to ask you and time is running away, so could you please keep your answers focused?

Q16 Ann Clwyd: What do you think the prospects are for political reform, in both Saudi Arabia and Bahrain? Saudi Arabia has a particularly bad record on the human rights fronts and has been heavily criticised for a whole host of human rights allegations against it. Could you give us some idea of what you think of the prospects of political reform—is it on the cards or isn't it?

Neil Partrick: Jane knows Bahrain better than I do. I note that the King of Bahrain announced today the prospect of a broader national dialogue. My sense is that the majority position among the Bahraini Opposition, which in its broadest sense represents more than the Shi'a community—it represents some sections of the minority Sunni community—is that they feel that dialogue is a necessary process, but they feel frustrated that even an initiative coming from the King does not necessarily speak, as I mentioned earlier, to the heart of power in that country, and that security interests, broadly reflecting the situation in Saudi Arabia, will tend to trump the diplomatic expressions that one might hear from, for example, the Bahraini Crown Prince, who has a close relationship with Britain, or, for that matter, the kind of language that one would hear to some extent from the Saudi Foreign Minister about that country's relations.

In both countries, security priorities are largely seen from a domestic perspective—they are not necessarily seen, despite the rhetoric, in terms of Iranian interventionism, but calculated largely in terms of domestic interests, which tend to trump how they approach the issue of reform. In Saudi Arabia there is no empowered Parliament. There is no tradition of such a process. A fuss was made recently of having the equivalent of 20% female representation in what Saudi Arabia likes to call its Parliament. A respected Saudi commentator, whom I won’t name, but who is widely published and not censored in Saudi Arabia said, “I don’t care if it is women or transvestites, they have no power”. Apologies if that sounds disrespectful, but the point is that this is an entirely consultative body. Its voice is listened to with respect. There is a much bigger issue here, and it is one that is heard at the very top. That is the extent to which to which the so-called Majlis al-Shura, the consultative assembly, the national consultative body in Saudi Arabia, might be prepared not just to open up to women, but might be allowed to take on more than just consultancy and actually have an input into legislation and possibly even have a partly elected role. That was flirted with before Abdullah came into power in 2005 as an idea. It got pushed back by other members of his family, the sons of whom remain significant. I am not clear—I have just hinted that it might make a difference—moving on beyond the age and infirmity to some extent of Saudi Arabia’s leaders, whether the new generation, would necessarily make a difference, partly given the monopoly on decision making on the security apparatus. I am not clear whether, if we suddenly moved to a quick succession in Saudi Arabia and down to the next generation, there might be moves seriously to open up that consultative body. That platform of making that consultative body more than consultative—empowered and at least partly elected—is one that attracts increasingly wide support across a number of interesting elites in Saudi Arabia, from genuinely popular and quite conservative by our standards Islamist clerics through to the remnants of the old Nasserite fringe and an awful lot of young bloggers. That is an opinion worth noting, one that I suppose we can gently and diplomatically encourage, but which we have to be very careful about.

Jane Kinninmont: All the Gulf Governments would say that they are committed to a process of gradual reform but it is a convenient word, beloved of elites because it is vague, relativistic and has no deadlines attached. One of the important questions to ask is whether there is willingness among decision makers to share political power. Here the ruling families do not have internal agreement. That is one of the issues that is weakening their decision making. On the human rights front, if anything, political rights for nationals have been reduced in the last two years across the board in the Gulf, with more criminalisation of dissent. This is something where international pressure can make a difference. We have seen it with migrant workers' rights, where international pressure has led Gulf Governments to take some positive steps.

Q17 Ann Clwyd: What do you think the dangers are of doing nothing or doing little, for instance the radicalisation of the Opposition if they are continually frustrated?
Jane Kinninmont: There is a worry of growing anti-western sentiment at both ends of the political spectrum, certainly among the Opposition. Even in the traditionally pro-Western Opposition there is a rising frustration with what is basically seen as British support for the regime and only very mild occasional protestations about human rights concerns. At the same time, hard-liners within the ruling establishment have been promoting a quite alarmingly anti-Western conspiracy-based narrative, particularly directed at the US—probably not a great idea in the long term when your country hosts the main US naval base in the Gulf. But there have been allegations also that Britain is part of a grand nefarious conspiracy against Bahrain. There will, of course, be people on the Sunni pro-Government side of the political spectrum who believe these things—not a sensible approach.

Neil Partrick: The mainstream of the Bahraini Opposition still look to Britain, interestingly, and do not despair of us having some influence. As I think Jane said earlier, they are in danger of overstating the influence we have. Saudi Arabian opposition—and I mentioned it is wide and broad—is already radical. It encompasses elements that would take a hard-line view in terms of Islamic jurisprudence and would be very cautious about the traditionally deep relationship of Saudi Arabia with Britain. It encompasses elements of the Muslim Brotherhood, that we see in power elsewhere in the region, and it encompasses degrees of nationalist opinion—to a degree, a secular variant. So opinion is already quite radical. We will probably not see in Saudi Arabia—if there was, and I do not predict it—a significant change in its politics to becoming an easy and comfortable partner. So it is already radical. I do not think whether we act or not will necessarily radicalise it one way or the other.

Q18 Ann Clwyd: You sounded a bit sceptical earlier about the ability of the Saudi leadership to hand over to the next generation. Do you see some resistance there?

Neil Partrick: No, I think the resistance—the problem, if you like—its their ability to forge a united position on doing so. There are some significant signs that it is being thought about. There have been some recent personnel changes—not least the Interior Minister—that suggest it is happening to a degree. But there is no overall programme and consensus about doing so. Ironically, this is partly about the age of the people who would have to make the decision. It is partly also about having an agreement among the key members of that second generation.

Q19 Mr Ainsworth: Saudi Arabia is seen as a mysterious and extremely conservative country. There are those in Saudi Arabia who would tell you—and constantly do—that King Abdullah has been a reforming King. Does he deserve that reputation?

Neil Partrick: He does, relative to a number of his half-brothers, one or two of whom have passed on since, who were also affecting decision making in his early years as King. Overwhelmingly, we are talking about reform in terms of atmosphere and interventions of a more benign kind in the legal process. We are talking about the symbolism of the National Dialogue. Almost by definition in Saudi Arabia's case, we are not talking about institutional reform. Saudi Arabia does not have institutions in a sense that we would recognise. It has a problem, perhaps like we do, in terms of having clear precedent. Precedent, in our system, is what we take to be the basis of a constitution. Saudi Arabia has what it presents as a constitution, but it does not have a system of rules that actually dictate how politics works. That happens more by the style and manner of the key decision makers, and the atmosphere that they allow, or do not allow, in terms of debate.

So the atmosphere has improved under King Abdullah, and some of the symbolism has been useful, in terms of women's representation in a consultative body. But that representation could easily be changed by another royal decree or, more likely, the degrees of advance that have been made in terms of a dialogue, and the symbolism of that, or women's representation in the consultative assembly, will simply be frozen and will not be built upon. All of that, as I say, is not about institutional change. It is about an atmosphere, a flavour, which is pushed at the boundaries, if you like. It has always been there—like. For example, when the idea was raised of making the consultative body at least partly elected, it was pushed back and has not been raised at the very top since.

Q20 Mr Ainsworth: May I throw the challenge back at you? At the start, you said we have articulated our desire for reform, but maybe the Committee, during this investigation, needs to think about what it means by reform. What do you see as a possibility? You said—I am thinking about Saudi Arabia in particular—that the Opposition is already radicalised. You did not give any indication that the Opposition is in any way more liberal minded than the regime as it exists. Some of the things you said would indicate the reverse. What do you think should be our desire for reform?

Neil Partrick: I am afraid that it is probably more of the same. The UK position used to be good governance in terms of the Gulf. That was the mantra. It is still the mantra, but it is now accompanied by a stronger emphasis, as I read it, on political participation and the rule of law. That seems to me to be the area we need to push at. If significant figures in Bahrain will be disrespectful towards us, then quite clearly significant figures in a more important country, Saudi Arabia, will be more than disrespectful towards us if we push too strongly. There is a limit to how much we can push. We would hope for a more open political process. We would hope that the degree of debate that Saudis are having about an elected and, to some extent, empowered legislative body might be the area in which there is some movement. We would hope that, but it is not necessarily going to be the case. But that is perhaps the best hope, because bodies such as that, currently only consultative, do have the virtue, even only symbolically perhaps at this stage, of tying in different parts of the country and different groups within society.

Worst-case scenarios—you have seen this in some ex-American officials' position papers recently, perhaps—talk about kingdom break-up and so on.
Indeed, elements close to the Bush Administration less than 10 years ago were even apparently flirting with the idea, which was taken therefore by the Saudis as policy. Those scenarios, although I do not predict them, are things that are not in our interests. Pushing at degrees of potential for reform is in our interest. That does not mean it will happen, and we have to be very careful about the way in which we go about it.

Jane Kinninmont: Usually, you are not going to get a perfect liberal, open-minded opposition emerging in conditions where people are not allowed to organise politically. This is clearly one of the terrible problems, at the extreme end, that is being had in Syria. We do need to be culturally respectful and we need to be very clear that we are not asking countries to impose specific British models, but that Britain would encourage Gulf countries to give their own people the space that they need to debate their political future. That space is being closed down in every single one of the Gulf countries.

Q21 Rory Stewart: I just want to push you a final time on this. You seem to have a model of state transformation wherein whereby the way to achieve good governance, political participation and the rule of law is through Britain pushing. What makes you think that that is a sensible model of political transformation? What evidence do you have for that in the Middle East? Is that how it worked in Tunisia, Egypt, Syria or Iraq? Where does this actually work?

Jane Kinninmont: I think it is not the model that I am advocating. When I mentioned Britain’s call, I was speaking about Britain suggesting to its friends, with whom it speaks regularly about political issues in the region, that they allow their own people the space to debate their political futures. It should not be up to Britain to decide what the political systems are of these countries or who rules them, but currently Britain’s relations do seem to be very skewed towards relations with the ruling families, towards defence, security and policing and military support to those—

Q22 Rory Stewart: That’s what Britain is doing, but do you have a concrete historical example of something like this working—or this strategy working? Where in the Middle East can you point to an example where a country like Britain changing its policy in the way that you suggest has actually resulted in the kinds of things that you are talking about?

Jane Kinninmont: Britain, of course, was always very influential in the way that the Gulf countries developed their own political models through the 19th and 20th centuries.

Q23 Rory Stewart: Just to clarify, where have political participation, the rule of law and good governance been achieved in the Middle East in the last 30 years through the actions of western Government—this working of the kinds of things that you are talking about? It seems to me that political transformation does not happen like that. It happens, generally, through something akin to revolution, not through the gentle pressure of foreign Governments. Neil?

Neil Partrick: I am very hesitant, as I think I have suggested, about Britain overplaying its hand and the need, in my view, to reach out as diplomatically as it can to a broad swathe of opposition. That does not mean it should necessarily be hectoring Governments—I don’t think Jane is suggesting this—about major reform. We might perhaps push at certain ideas. We should show that we are concerned about the arrests of people from a broad spectrum of backgrounds, for example, not just certain types. But we can’t necessarily hope to change what Governments actually do. When they do make changes—Morocco is an interesting example out of the region we are discussing today. It was partly a response to public pressure, but also a sense of playing within the rules, if you like—unwritten—of what that political system was able to accommodate. Jordan is now pushing slightly at something similar, which it started pushing at in the late 1980s, but a history of accommodating, to some extent, in Jordan the Muslim Brotherhood allows it to think about going in that direction. It won’t be a judgment it makes because the UK Government encourages it or discourages it. I think we have a responsibility to try to marry our interests and our values, but we cannot necessarily hope to change what domestic, largely sovereign Governments will do in terms of judging their own best interests.
the opposition in Jordan, Morocco and elsewhere, under degrees of constitutional monarchy, are emerging as more powerful forces. I am not saying that we can hope to direct what goes on. What I am saying is that that will be a sovereign judgment of leaders on the ground in terms of where their interests lie.

Jane Kinninmont: There is no scenario in which Britain is not involved and is making only symbolic statements. We need to look very closely at whether British Government institutions and British private individuals are, in fact, helping to create an architecture of smarter repression in the region. I don’t think that we can characterise this as just standing back and saying things; there is quite a deep involvement. There are cases in Bahrain where one can point to British and American advice having a positive impact—for instance, in the Government’s decision not to ban the largest political movement in 2011. In other cases, we have not taken such strong positions, but I think you can point to cases where there is an impact, but that impact is not by any means always on the side of good governance or popular participation.

Q27 Mr Ainsworth: Why is Bahrain so important to the United Kingdom? Dr Partrick, earlier you talked about the heart of power. If the heart of power in Bahrain is not the King, where is it?

Neil Partrick: Well, it is a contentious issue. The King clearly has leverage, at the risk of being facetious. The usual clichés are that it is the uncle of the King, the man who has been Prime Minister since Bahrain’s independence. There is a security apparatus, which involves the heart of the Bahraini defence forces, his brother, who runs the very important job in all these countries of heading up the Royal Court. Those two brothers overlap not just in familial terms but, it seems, in particularly conservative takes, on Bahrain’s national interest. That is not the sole heart of power. Clearly, the King has influence, the Crown Prince has a degree of influence, and the Prime Minister is there, but the two brothers also have weight as well. The danger is that we might also be susceptible to a good cop, bad cop routine of misleading ourselves if we think: if only the Crown Prince had power, things would be fundamentally different. I suspect that that is not true. How much do you allow political openness? Is it to the extent that your own role in that future political scenario becomes questioned? We might like a neat constitutional arrangement for the monarchies of that area, but that might not be how the politics goes. So, why does Bahrain matter in terms of those machinations, or just generally? It is an historic relationship—it used to house our naval forces. We effectively transferred it to the United States. Therefore, it is a useful apparatus, if you like, and part of the wider involvement of states in Gulf security, of which we are a part, so in that sense, it matters.

Q28 Mr Ainsworth: You hear in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain that the source of a lot of the difficulties is Iran—deliberate outreach by Iran. To what extent is that justified?

Neil Partrick: I think it is greatly exaggerated. It has a bit more plausibility in Bahrain perhaps, but in both the Bahraini case and the Saudi Eastern Province, the oil-rich Gulf province, where you have a significant Shi’a population, but by no means the majority, historically, in the context of being shunned and of being not allowed a way in politically, those communities looked to the then more influential post-revolutionary Iran. Some senior respectable figures in the mainstream Shi’a opposition of Saudi Arabia, for example, lived in Iran; some live in Syria and some, of course, lived in London. In that sense, things have moved on. In the past 10 years, Bahrain has revitalised the political process, which, until the last two years, appeared to be bringing on the mainstream Shi’a opposition. Nearly 20 years ago, Saudi Arabia initiated a dialogue which brought a number of those Saudi dissidents, some of whom were based in Iran, back. Many of them, in both countries, genuinely look to a new kind of nationalism, which is inclusive. That is the rhetoric, but I think it is genuine. If Iran were remotely having any residual influence on the Shi’a street in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia before the Arab Spring—and that’s a very big if—I think that has all but gone now. Its own response, just before the Arab Spring, to its own emergent opposition movement underscored that shift. The recent memory that many Bahraini Shi’a, under 45 years of age, and Saudi Shi’a have is of Iran and repression, in the same way that others may have looked at the Shah in previous times. Iran’s influence is greatly overstated. It has sleeper cells, it has capacity—it has that outside of the Gulf in certain scenarios—but I don’t think it is directing the politics among the Shi’a communities of those countries.

Q29 Mr Ainsworth: Do you think that the potential for a new nationalism is there, though? Surely the majority of people in Bahrain think it is a straightforward problem, and that’s why it’s as sharp as it is. There is a Sunni minority in power at the moment, and the alternative is that the Shi’a majority take power. You seem to think that it’s not as black and white as that, and that there are alternative routes forward.

Neil Partrick: No, I think, in broad terms, it is as black and white as that, although there are some Sunnis who are part of that opposition, and who would support majority politics in Bahrain. There is no question about that. In an emergent situation, which is very hard to conceive of, that was stripped of the rule of the al-Khalifa, you might then ask what that Bahraini Government would have to do to look for friends. Out of desperation, it might look to Shi’a-led Iraq and Iran. That is perhaps an unlikely scenario right now, but in broad terms, it is majority-minority politics. I would agree with that; therefore all the more reason, I think, to see it as a Bahraini problem necessarily, rather than one that Iran, very much an outsider in that situation, can interfere with.

It is more complex in Saudi Arabia, because the Shi’a are, at most, 10% of the national population, but they are articulating an inclusive nationalism. They look to such things as the atmosphere of the National
Dialogue to somehow embody those aspirations which Abdullah started, but they do not see concrete institutional reform. Similarly, there are many Sunnis, Islamists of a conservative hue, as I mentioned, and those of more liberal persuasion who also look to a more inclusive nationalism. They think that reform of the role of the royal family is part of that, but I think that is much less up the debating order in Saudi Arabia than it is in Bahrain.

Jane Kinninmont: There are a lot of options for power sharing. I think if you did have a full-scale revolution in Bahrain, you could get a worrying zero-sum outcome. Bahraini Sunnis supporters of the Government were very frightened that if there was a radical change of Government, they would not have a place. They look to post-Saddam Iraq with fear. In reality, the mainstream Opposition in Bahrain is calling for more elected representation under a constitutional monarchy. Unfortunately, Bahraini officials tend to see the idea of having an elected cabinet, let alone an elected Prime Minister, as profoundly radical, but some kind of power sharing would probably be the sustainable solution.

Chair: I was going to Mike Gapes and the last group of questions. I would be grateful, as we are running a bit behind schedule, if you kept the answers brief.

Q30 Mike Gapes: First, on Saudi Arabia, to what extent are the UK and Saudi foreign policy goals compatible and complementary?

Neil Partrick: In broad terms, they are compatible and complementary. One of the greatest concerns that the UK Government has in terms of its security and strategic interests in the region is the role of Iran and the prospect of a domestic uranium enrichment capacity related to a possible nuclear weapons aspiration. That is obviously shared in Saudi Arabia and, to a greater or lesser extent, up and down the Gulf. In fact, there are occasionally concerns that we are not strong enough in our commitment to preventing Iran from becoming a possible nuclear weapons state.

The two-state solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict is something that Saudi Arabia very much shares a desire for, and arguably has done some legwork going back 30 years in trying to advance.

I say “in broad terms” because one sees British diplomats actively involved in shaping international policy in Iran and trying to play a role to cajole the partners in terms of the Arab-Israeli conflict, but Saudi Arabia, in terms of foreign policy capacity, is a greatly overstated player. I mentioned that over 30 years the Saudis have taken initiatives, but they do not engage their diplomats in actively politicking, and they obviously cannot engage directly and publicly with Israel, and they have decided that Iran in many senses should be ring-fenced in terms of senior diplomatic engagement of the kind that was going on just five or six years ago. They won’t, as you know, substantively engage with Iraq either—a not unrelated issue.

Part of this is about judgment but it is also about capacity. They do not have a significant policy-making capacity, so even under a younger leadership there are still problems about willingness to advance policy and follow it up. “We are a country famous for our non-follow-ups,” was a statement made to me by a former adviser to a number of Saudi princes. We share a lot of broad aspirations—they are more conservative, certainly, on the Iran side—but it is very hard to look to Saudi Arabia as an active partner in dealing with some of those questions.

Jane Kinninmont: I largely share the view that there is a big overlap in interests but not always shared motivations. With Iran, there are ethnic and sectarian components of the Saudi policy that are not shared by Britain.

Q31 Mike Gapes: Can I follow up with a brief question on that? How is the Qatari diplomatic hyperactivity—you certainly could not say they are not active—viewed by the Saudis? Do they regard it as a threat or just an irritant?

Neil Partrick: I think it is more of an irritant, and of course they also recognise—perhaps with a degree of Schadenfreude—that the Arab Spring means that they have in a sense, as Saudi Arabia would see it, shown their cards and decided to side more actively with the Muslim Brotherhood, which makes them difficult as a perceived neutral player. They began this process in some ways in trying to mediate in Lebanon. It is hard to imagine that the Qatars could ever play a role like that again.

Q32 Mike Gapes: Can I turn, finally, to Bahrain? Has our Government got its position on what is happening in Bahrain correct, or should we be doing more either in public or in private to try to get a possible solution of the kind that you touched on earlier?

Jane Kinninmont: My view is that Britain has probably been too sensitive to the push-back that has come from the Bahraini Government, and probably too mild in what it has said, especially in public. An example is the recent stripping of citizenship from 31 dissidents—a practice that has been seen before in Bahrain. The British ambassador was quoted in a local newspaper as saying, “Britain also does this, and it is Bahrain’s sovereign right.” It seems they slightly spun what he said. Apparently, he had said that Britain will strip citizenship from people it regards as a security threat if they are dual nationals, but it has been the official position of the UK that Bahrain is within its rights arbitrarily to deprive people of citizenship even if those people become stateless. There seems to me a very strong argument that when that list includes people from the most popular Opposition group, this is not exactly what we could call a confidence-building measure with a political dialogue that Britain says it backs. Yet it seems we could not be outspoken even about that issue.

Q33 Mike Gapes: Does that mean that we are perceived by the majority of people in Bahrain, and therefore the political Opposition, as being too sympathetic to the regime? Yet at the same time the regime regards us as too critical?

Jane Kinninmont: Yes.

Neil Partrick: It is an almost impossible path to try to tread. My sense is that the mainstream Opposition in Bahrain still invests possibly too much hope in us.
The knock-back we have received in the past, though perhaps predictable, has even included criticism of a former ambassador, and has seen Foreign Office officials delayed, symbolically perhaps, at the airport for quite a considerable time. This perhaps has an impact on our influence when we want to be listened to. So it is a careful road we have to walk. The mainstay of the Bahraini Opposition is still interested in us playing a role, so perhaps we can somehow, awkwardly, navigate that middle way.

Jane Kinninmont: I think there is a generational change there; the younger generation of opposition gives far less credence to the idea that Britain might possibly be a force for upholding human rights, let alone the “d” word.

Q34 Mike Gapes: So what should we do?
Neil Partrick: Not overstate what we can do. We have to recognise that we are a middle-ranking power. We are not close to the heart of European decision making. We cannot be that transatlantic bridge. We are respected historically, but we also need to catch up with younger opinion. As I mentioned, as far as we can, we need to reach out to opposition voices because they come in all shapes and sizes throughout the Gulf, but somehow—and this is a very difficult exercise, particularly in a country such as Saudi Arabia—doing that without wholly alienating those making decisions. That is a very difficult process. I suspect that what it really means is more of the same of the kind we are doing already.

Jane Kinninmont: And we can work with others and work more closely with the US and European partners on Bahrain, rather than, for instance, not signing up to the Swiss-sponsored human rights resolution at the UN last summer. We can also work with other GCC countries. Britain is also an important interlocutor between the different GCC countries. Kuwait and Qatar offered to mediate in Bahrain in 2011, but were rebuffed. There certainly is a way to mediate or have a dialogue with the GCC countries about the simmering unrest there and we could help to facilitate a dialogue initiative that could have backing from the other important neighbours.

Chair: Thank you both very much indeed. The hour and 20 minutes has gone very quickly. Thanks for your very lucid and accurate answers.

Examination of Witnesses


Q35 Chair: We move to our second panel in today’s session. The panel will focus on the UK’s long and evolving bilateral relationship with Bahrain, as well as the UK Government’s response to the recent protests and instability in Bahrain. Our two witnesses are Sir Roger Tomkys, who is former ambassador to Bahrain, and Robin Lamb, also a former ambassador to Bahrain, whom I welcome back, having given evidence.

Sir Roger Tomkys: As I have said in my statement, my perspective is rather a long one. I left the Foreign Office 20 years ago.

Q36 Chair: But you have very much remained in touch over the years.

Sir Roger Tomkys: I remain in touch to a degree—in touch with the region, rather than with the Foreign Office. I do not see any sign that it has disregarded the Gulf. There have been changes over these years which have meant that the attention paid by Government, not just the Foreign Office, to the Middle East has declined in comparison with attention paid to Europe, for example. There were reorganisations in the Foreign Office which decided that functional issues should take priority and that the old geographical compartments were less important. Regional expertise was not important compared with technical skills in economic negotiation or the environment, or whatever. But no, I have no reason to suppose the Gulf has been downgraded unwisely.

Robin Lamb: Going back to the 1971 withdrawal, famously Sheikh Zayed did feel then that we had done wrong and that he was neglected in the following years. I think that perception survived into the next generation in the Emirates, at least. My own experience in the Gulf goes back quite a long way, but professionally it involved periods in Saudi Arabia in the 1980s twice and in Kuwait twice and in Oman once and, of course, in Bahrain latterly. I was also deputy head of the Middle East department.

We did not reduce our interest in the Gulf. Perhaps the appearance of people’s interest declined, and there was a perception from Sheikh Zayed that it had done so. However, a great deal of attention never wavered because of the importance of the Gulf as a source of most of the oil in international trade and investment. We have mentioned other investments in London by the Qatars recently. The Kuwait Investment Office has been situated in London for decades, so the question of personal relationships and so on was very important. The difficulty we have always had in persuading people in the region—in any region probably—of our interest, is finding Ministers who have time to go and visit, and also sometimes finding the time to receive people who come to London. It can be as simple as that, that they will feel there is a degree of neglect.

Chair: We have a Minister about to spend almost a week in Bahrain.

Robin Lamb: It can happen, and it’s great when it does.
Q37 Mr Roy: How do you characterise the relationship between the United Kingdom and Bahrain, and how do you think it is different since you were ambassadors?

Robin Lamb: First, I should say that I am very grateful for the invitation to give evidence here. I hope I made it clear that I am doing so with a historical perspective. I have not been a frequent visitor to Bahrain since I left at the end of my tour, so I do not want to sell myself up as an expert on exactly what is happening on the ground at the moment. If you look at our relationship with Bahrain, as has already been mentioned by Jane and by Dr Partrick, we were the influential or decisive power in the Gulf until 1971. Our relationship was very influential up until that time. Following our withdrawal, that has deeply changed and there was a period when the Gulf countries thought that we were neglecting them. From a slightly different perspective, when I arrived in Kuwait for the second time in 2001, it was very apparent to me from a business perspective that group CEOs and so on were flying over the Gulf on their way to the Far East. This was noticed, too, in Gulf companies, as well as in Governments: we were no longer paying as much attention to the Gulf as an economic partner, perhaps because, they felt, we had got too used to them or we were just chasing the new, shiny ball further away.

This changed: I was in Kuwait in 2001, then in 2003 moved to Bahrain, and from 2001 to 2006 I could see a return of the CEOs to the Gulf. They were coming to see Gulf states because they had rediscovered the advantages of doing business in the Gulf and what it had to offer. In recent times, again from a business perspective, there has clearly been a pivot towards the Far East. This was noticed, too, in Gulf Arab Spring, developments in the Middle East and the situation in Bahrain now in the light of the Arab Spring, developments in the Middle East and the situation in Bahrain now in the light of the Arab Spring, developments in the Middle East and the situation in Bahrain now in the light of the Arab Spring, developments in the Middle East and the situation in Bahrain now in the light of the Arab Spring, developments in the Middle East and the situation in Bahrain now in the light of the Arab Spring, developments in the Middle East and the situation in Bahrain now in the light of the Arab Spring, developments in the Middle East and the situation in Bahrain now in the light of the Arab Spring, developments in the Middle East and the situation in Bahrain now in the light of the Arab Spring, developments in the Middle East and the situation in Bahrain now in the light of the Arab Spring, developments in the Middle East and the situation in Bahrain now in the light of the Arab Spring, developments in the Middle East and the situation in Bahrain now in the light of the Arab Spring, developments in the Middle East and the situation in Bahrain now in the light of the Arab Spring, developments in the Middle East and the situation in Bahrain now in the light of the Arab Spring, developments in the Middle East and the situation in Bahrain now in the light of the Arab Spring, developments in the Middle East and the situation in Bahrain now in the light of the Arab Spring, developments in the Middle East and the situation in Bahrain now in the light of the Arab Spring, developments in the Middle East and the situation in Bahrain now in the light of the Arab Spring, developments in the Middle East and the situation in Bahrain now in the light of the Arab Spring, developments in the Middle East and the situation in Bahrain now in the light of the Arab...
important. The Gulf as a whole, not just Bahrain—Bahrain least of all in a sense, in terms of sovereign wealth funds—is hugely important in its ability to decide on investment flows. Oil money and such things have always been important in the Gulf, and of the Gulf to us in trade as an adjunct of that. I was there in a rather benign period of reform. I was fortunate in that respect, and that is reflected in my written evidence. There are things that we can and did do, which—looking at the questions you asked Dr Partrick and Jane Kinninmont—are to a degree a matter of encouraging those in the society, in a community, who want to make change, but not doing it in such a way as to destabilise the country as a whole.

When I was there, we provided training to people in Parliament, had parliamentary contacts and made that sort of effort, in addition to encouraging, and saying we were encouraging, the reform that was then under way. There was a lot of private discussion, of course, and that is something that I hope will return. One of the things that I noticed in the FCO evidence—and this may well be explained by the more unstable time we had been in since the Arab Spring, but it was called to my mind that it does not mention any such projects and programmes. Their impact may well be marginal. However, when you are doing a project that is focused on the individual, and that individual has a potential role, they can be more significant than they may appear at first.

**Q40 Mark Hendrick:** You mentioned Derek Fatchett, when he was over in Bahrain. How do you both think the UK is perceived nowadays by Bahrain? You mentioned earlier that pre-1971 we were seen as eminent in our influence. How are we perceived nowadays? How do you think things are moving? Are they moving away from us or in our favour? You mentioned many CEOs going through Bahrain. Has that had an influence on their perception of us? **Robin Lamb:** There is an issue of perceptions but also of responses. If you look at the way that the Bahrainis see us, clearly we are no longer the pre-eminent power, nor indeed is the States now perhaps the first guarantor of their sovereignty. That is Saudi Arabia, but also the United States. You can see this in the Arab Spring, which was called to my mind, and it is that it does not mention any such projects and programmes. Their impact may well be marginal. However, when you are doing a project that is focused on the individual, and that individual has a potential role, they can be more significant than they may appear at first.

**Sir Roger Tomkys:** Could I add a point? I am not quite sure whether the question was about the attitude to HMG or to Britain and the British. As far as Britain and the British are concerned, they are old friends, an awful lot of them have got property here or come here on holidays, and I think there is a good easy relationship.

As far as HMG is concerned, there is a clear bifurcation between the Opposition, who think that HMG should be lecturing publicly the Government on what it ought to be doing, and the Government, who think we should be more supportive of them. There was a question in the earlier session about attitudes to Mubarak and his departure, and how that was seen in the Gulf. I feel pretty sure that the Bahraini Government and the family, and perhaps quite a lot of ordinary Bahrainis, would have been quite shocked by the speed with which, having been on remarkably good terms with Mubarak, right or wrong, for about 20 years, as soon as mass, fairly violent demonstrations saw him off, we discovered that he had been a rotten thing for a very long time and we should have done something else about it. The Opposition will certainly have taken from that encouragement to think that that is the way to go. The Government will certainly think, as I rather do, that Cairo and Tahrir square are not the Pearl roundabout. What worked, and had good reason to work, in Cairo, is totally different from the situation in Bahrain, and we should make clear that that was not the outcome we were looking for.

**Q41 Mark Hendrick:** Sir Roger, you mentioned earlier that if some sort of Arab Spring scenario emerged in Bahrain, you felt that the Saudis would intervene. That would not necessarily be to protect Bahraini sovereignty, but because what was happening was perhaps against the interests of Saudi Arabia. **Sir Roger Tomkys:** It would be to prevent a knock-on effect, or a modelling for what ought to happen in similar circumstances in the eastern province, where the oil is. I have no doubt that they would come in to pre-empt for that reason.

**Q42 Mark Hendrick:** And would you therefore say that, given the fair-weather friend attitude that Britain and the United States showed to Egypt post the Arab
Spring, there is perhaps a worry in Saudi Arabia that a similar attitude would prevail should uprisings start in Bahrain?

Sir Roger Tomkys: I think the Saudis, whom I do not know as well as I know many other Arabs, are sufficiently inward-looking to believe what happens in Saudi Arabia will be determined by what they do. They don’t much care what we do or say in that respect.

Q43 Mark Hendrick: Do you want to come in on that, Robin?
Robin Lamb: I agree.

Q44 Mark Hendrick: In that respect, then, do you think that the UK’s relationship with Bahrain has any impact whatever on our relationship with not only Saudi Arabia but other Gulf states?

Sir Roger Tomkys: Potentially negatively, although again, I say that with my reservation that I am not a Saudi expert. At one stage a very senior member of the Saudi royal family approached me and tried to—let me say it: it was Prince Turki bin Faisal. He was concerned with what was happening in Iraq after our invasion, because, he said, “We accept that it is going to be a Shi’a-dominated Government, but it should be Arab Shi’a, not the creatures of Tehran”—their overall preoccupation. He asked whether he could get up a Saudi group to have access to the Prime Minister to explain this. I think he wanted that because we were likely to have influence with the American Government if anybody did. In that sort of way, I think that they attach importance to us.

Robin Lamb: I think that that has always been one aspect of the way they see our importance. It has been one of the arguments about the importance of our relationship with the EU, for example, as well, so it is absolutely so. Our relationship with the US does have a bearing on the extent of influence we can deploy elsewhere.

Q45 Mark Hendrick: Do you think that a possible British withdrawal from the European Union would further decrease our influence, then?

Robin Lamb: The point made by President Obama was that he feels that it would. Therefore, with the United States, I take it, there are various factors that could reduce our influence globally. That is one, but no doubt so is Scottish independence.

Chair: Both subjects that we are looking at.

Q46 Rory Stewart: Given the relationship with Saudi Arabia, could you help us to understand the extent to which it is sensible to see Bahrain as a fully independent sovereign state? What are the limits to Bahrain’s power? Is it not increasingly a satellite of Saudi Arabia?

Sir Roger Tomkys: Let us take “increasingly” first. Yes, I think it must be. The building of the causeway made it economically and socially more dependent upon Saudi Arabia. It also meant there was more social pressure on Bahrain to abandon the westernising and rather shockingly liberal—in relation to women and drink and everything else—practices that went on there and the agreeable lifestyle that was possible. So that has been eroded and is under pressure. The difficulties of the Bahraini regime in the face of the Arab Spring brought the dangers of upheaval much more closely to Saudi notice, and I believe that the Saudis have made it quite clear that they do not intend to let radical change take place. Also, the GCC undertook to put in an awful lot of money—$1 billion a year for 10 years—to each of Bahrain and Oman to help economic development. It has not come yet, but that would increase dependence again.

One of my concerns about the disturbances in Bahrain over the last two years is that already it has had a pretty strong negative impact on Bahrain’s key economic role and how it earns its money as a relatively agreeable place in which Arab and western expatriates can live and operate through the Gulf in an uncontentious way. That has been eroded, because you do not like burning tyres or the sense of security force oppression. So Bahrain has become weaker and less able to provide jobs for its working class, because, as we have heard earlier, it is the one Gulf state that has a working class made up of its own nationals, and because they are predominantly the “disadvantaged” Shi’a majority, this matters. This is what stability is about. It is about ensuring that there is economic activity of a viable kind. That has been eroded, and that makes Bahrain all the more dependent upon Saudi support.

Robin Lamb: May I interject? Before the Arab Spring and during the years that I was there, I had an opportunity to see how that relationship was conducted. To a degree there were similarities in the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, too. The Kuwaitis explained it to me directly. They said that they know what the Saudis want. The Saudis do not tell them. They want to follow an independent policy, but they will need to take account of what Saudi preferences are. Certainly that was true in Bahrain as well. I never felt that the Saudis were sending day-by-day instructions on what the Bahrainis should or should not do.

Having said that, the Saudi ambassador, who was the most senior ambassador—well, perhaps he rivalled the American ambassador in Bahrain, but I should say the Saudi was the more important—and I used to meet regularly over lunch at least once a month and observe quite a few of the other Saudi visitors coming to Bahrain.

In terms of the power thing, there was an example where Bahrain got it wrong, which was in 2004 when they signed an FTA with the United States. The Saudis had been making it clear in statements beforehand that they did not want them to do that. They went ahead and did it anyway. There was a penalty and the Saudis cut off some additional oil income that they had been providing. They said that it was no longer required by Bahrain. So there was a penalty and Bahrain will have learnt from that experience. In terms of what has happened since, their sensitivity to Saudi wishes at least would have become stronger, put it that way. I have no evidence for this, but I also assume that those in the royal family who are arguing for a stronger, less amenable internal domestic policy may well have felt
that their arm was strengthened by Saudi attitudes and, perhaps, by the arrival of the peninsula shield force.

**Q47 Mr Roy:** You spoke earlier about the “excellent reforms” in Bahrain, but do you accept that those reforms do not satisfy the Shi’a majority at this point in time?

**Robin Lamb:** There is more than a forum in Bahrain; there is a Parliament. That is one of the reforms that the King brought in. What it was was that it did not have as much power.

**Mr Roy:** I said “excellent reforms”.

**Robin Lamb:** I beg your pardon. When you said reforms, I thought that you said forums. I am sorry.

**Q48 Mr Roy:** You said there were “excellent reforms”; but would you accept that they do not go far enough to answer the problems of the majority of the population?

**Robin Lamb:** Yes. When they were raised, pre-11 April, we were always assured that there was a process, there was no going back and so on and so forth. That was certainly the line that the King took privately with me as well, that this is a process. As I have said, in introducing these reforms he has always had to take the views of others around him into account: within the family, in Saudi Arabia and in the other Gulf states. The Kuwait example is not seen in the Gulf as a very encouraging example to follow: a unicameral Parliament, and one that is constantly frustrated, on the very sound developmental objectives of Government decision makers in the economic field, for example. Many Gulf Governments have looked at that over a long time and said that they did not want to go down that path, so the King introduced a bicameral Parliament with an elected lower House and an appointed upper House—that sounds a bit familiar.

A question was the balance of authority between the two Houses of Parliament: before 2011, the balance of power was with the upper House, in that, when they came together, the casting vote was by the Speaker of the upper House. They have now reversed that so that it is now in the hands of the Speaker of the lower House. The question is whether the Speaker is an entirely independent operator or not, but that is the detail. There are certainly higher expectations from the Opposition that that process should have travelled more quickly. They would like to have seen it delivered immediately, of course, but they are one of the forces at play here.

May I quickly correct one statement I made in my written evidence in paragraph 11?

**Q49 Chair:** Please do.

**Robin Lamb:** I think that I over-dramatised it. I said: “Political dissent has been criminalized and opposition has been expressed through escalating and indiscriminate street violence”. There are honourable exceptions to that: Al-Wefaq had a lot of peaceful demonstrations, so it is not all violent. At the same time, I do not think that any of the Al-Wefaq leaders are in prison, so it is not quite so stark. Perhaps I over-dramatised it when writing my written evidence, and I apologise for that.

**Sir Roger Tomkys:** Could I just add, on reform, that I do not think that even on the Government side anyone has suggested that reform is accomplished, or should be enough to satisfy. I do not think that anyone is holding that position.

**Q50 Mr Roy:** Can I take us on slightly and ask how much credence you give to claims that Iran is having a malign influence in Bahrain?

**Sir Roger Tomkys:** My experience over the years is that Iran always gets blamed for starting any trouble that occurs in Bahrain. I think that that is very rarely true. On the other hand, whenever trouble has started in Bahrain, I think that Iran always makes the most of it and does everything that it can to stir it up; I have no reason to suppose that that is not the case. There are stories going around about a negotiating process, when the Crown Prince was leading it: the Opposition were more or less content that they had got a deal, but they went out of the room to make a telephone call, which was of course traced to Tehran, and they came back in and said, “No deal.” I have no idea whether that is true, any more than I know whether all the various stories about the arms in the Salmaniya hospital and so forth are true. It is not possible to judge the accuracy of all the stories one hears, but Tehran makes the most of any opportunity, if only because they must see the whole region as a conflict between themselves and Saudi Arabia, almost to the same degree that Saudi Arabia sees everything there through the perspective of their struggle with Iran.

**Robin Lamb:** I would agree with that. The basic problem in Bahrain is indigenous, but the extent to which the Iranians are complicit is hard to tell. I think Dr Partrick referred to the Shi’a relationship with Iran, but most Bahraini Shi’a, to my understanding, regard Ayatollah Sistani in Iraq as their marja—their ultimate authority. Rather like a lot of the Iraqi Shi’a, they are Arab first and Shi’a second.

I, too, am never surprised when the Iranians exploit advantages. Senior mullahs and others have occasionally in speeches spoken as if they still have territorial claims to Bahrain, which of course upsets the Bahrainis, but I think it is very much more likely to be in terms of Iran’s public projection than in terms of any real support for the Opposition. I will read from a secret US cable, courtesy of WikiLeaks, which says, “Bahraini government officials sometimes privately tell U.S. official visitors that some Shi’a oppositionists are backed by Iran. Each time this claim is raised, we ask the GoB”—the Government of Bahrain—“to share its evidence. To date, we have seen no convincing evidence of Iranian weapons or government money here since at least the mid-1990s.”

**Q51 Chair:** What is the date of that?

**Robin Lamb:** It is 2008. It is secret, because any evidence would have been intelligence, rather than anything else. I do not remember being shown anything to support those allegations.

**Q52 Chair:** That is on WikiLeaks?

**Robin Lamb:** It is on WikiLeaks, yes.
Q53 Mr Ainsworth: Looking at the prospects for peaceful progress in Bahrain, first, from your perspectives, how do you weight it? Secondly, how much of the potential for that is contained within Bahrain, and how much is externalised and part of this regional struggle? You have both indicated how, even if Iran is not involved or there is no evidence of Iranian involvement, then it is often the cheerleader if Iran is not involved or there is no evidence of peaceful progress in Bahrain, first, from your
Q54 Mr Ainsworth: How should we exercise that small amount of influence? Mr Lamb, you talked about the need in the whole region for private dialogue and public courtesy. Is that still the rule of the day?
Robin Lamb: I think it still works. You can use rational argument.—Excuse me for saying so, but politics is not always entirely about rational decision making—
Q55 Mr Ainsworth: You are talking to politicians, you know.
Robin Lamb: I wouldn’t care to be personal. Let’s depersonalise this. Even those sorts of politicians are susceptible to a degree of logic and rational debate and argument. After all, that is what we try to do in our society, except we are in a position where we are more tolerant of that being in public and are less likely to take offence when it is in public. In private, yes, I think we need to keep talking, keep explaining and keep arguing in favour of a particular course, because that is consistent with not only our values but how we see the best outcome.
Q56 Mr Ainsworth: Maybe sometimes we go too far, but it is enormously difficult when you see things happening not to respond, and not to do so publicly. Sir Roger Tomkys: Of course, in this context, I would like to respond publicly and I would like the Government to say, “We believe that the Al-Khalifa are necessary in Bahrain, and we look to them and the Opposition to negotiate for decent government that is properly representative of all the people of Bahrain under the Al-Khalifa.”
Q57 Mr Ainsworth: You see no other route to a peaceful future?
Sir Roger Tomkys: Not given the place Bahrain finds itself, between Saudi Arabia and Iran.
Robin Lamb: Roger has already made the point. I do think that discussions with Saudis about what is happening in Bahrain are just as important. If they can accept a sort of middle ground as well, their ability to influence that would be greater than ours. There is room for discussion there, too.

Q58 Mr Ainsworth: Before the present round of difficulties, you were both, at different periods, representing Her Majesty’s Government there. Were you allowed and encouraged, and did you in your roles then, talk to all streams of opinion within Bahrain? Was that impossible?
Sir Roger Tomkys: In my time, in the early ’80s, no it was not, because anyone who had declared himself in opposition was outside the country and not able to live there; they were in London and elsewhere. Over the next two decades, things changed a great deal, particularly after King Hamad took over, in the direction of a society in which organised opposition and political parties became possible for the first time.
Robin Lamb: Indeed. I regarded it as necessary to talk to everybody. When I presented my credentials to King Hamad, he said, slightly delphically, “You can speak to anybody you like in Bahrain.” I took that as his word, and it only went wrong once. It must have been bound up with a particular political issue at the time, I suspect, but there was one time when there was a campaign against me for speaking to Al-Wefaq, and the parliament went so far as to pass a resolution criticising me for violating the Geneva convention, but as I was holding no prisoners of war, and I felt fairly comfortable.

Q59 Rory Stewart: I am going to be very disciplined and stop in exactly five minutes, but I am going to fire a lot of questions at you in five minutes.
First, Sir Roger, how many UK-based staff did you have in your political section?
Sir Roger Tomkys: Myself and two others, supported by two secretaries. Pre-computer age, we had secretaries.
Robin Lamb: Ditto, really: DHM, first secretary, second secretary, plus support staff, plus local staff.

Q60 Rory Stewart: So there was an HMA and a DHM and then there were essentially two second secretaries political, or second and third secretaries political?
Sir Roger Tomkys: A first secretary and a second secretary.

Q61 Rory Stewart: Okay, very good. Robin?
Robin Lamb: Ditto, really: DHM, first secretary, second secretary, plus support staff, plus local staff.

Q62 Rory Stewart: Sir Roger, any idea of what the situation would have been pre-1971 in terms of political offices on the ground?
Sir Roger Tomkys: Pre-1971, there would have been a political residency, which ran all our affairs in the Gulf from Bahrain, and then a separate office which was the agency. I guess that the agency staff would have been pretty much the same size as the embassy staff that I took over. The residency would have been much bigger, quite apart from the frigate that used to go up and down the Gulf.

Q63 Rory Stewart: During your time, how many UK ambassadors in Middle Eastern posts do you think spoke fluent Arabic, or the equivalent of extensive Arabic?
Sir Roger Tomkys: With the reservation that no Arabist is completely fluent—there are gradations of all these things—it was at that time very much the exception that there should be an ambassador in an Arab-speaking post who had not been through the MECAS process of 18 months. When I was ambassador in Syria, the Lebanon could be an exception: it could be treated as Francophone, and sometimes was.
Robin Lamb: I think, again, there may be some erosion, but most of us spoke Arabic in the Gulf. I think that may have diminished since.

Q64 Rory Stewart: Do you feel that the core competency framework of management systems, which determines promotion on the basis of management competency, and no longer is allowed to take into account for promotion to SMS language ability or deep country expertise, is an improvement in the Foreign Office personnel system?
Sir Roger Tomkys: There are two answers. First, I think that downgrading linguistic competence is a terrible mistake. There is still a lot of the world which is only partially accessible if you do not speak the language. Secondly, when Robin’s father was in the Gulf, and when I first emerged from MECAS myself and did not go to the Gulf, you had to do all your business in Arabic—I did, in Benghazi in the ’60s—because the people you were dealing with did not have a second language; hardly anywhere in the Arab world did. Incidentally, we had quasi-colonial and military responsibilities as well, which put you in at the deep end whether you liked it or not. Now, however, they all have doctorates in engineering from Birmingham university, and the chances are that most British ambassadors rarely conduct hard business in Arabic. They do know what is going on around them, they read the press, they hear what people say, and they know what is being chatted, but they do not do any business in Arabic.
Robin Lamb: The only time I had to do business consistently in Arabic was in Basra, when the only person who spoke English was the head of the Southern Oil Company, whom I dealt with. Otherwise, yes, you can do a lot of business in English, but that diminishes, so in a country like Egypt, for example, if I went away from the capital to look at other, southern provinces, as I did, then I had to speak Arabic. Apart from the ability to do business, there are other issues as well. If you do speak Arabic, even those who speak English warm to you. It is not just because of communication; that may be an element, but I think it is mainly that you have shown enough interest in them to study their language. Also, I do think that when you study a language, you begin to understand a bit more about how people think and operate—to a
degree, they reflect on each other. So I am a great fan of including linguistic ability in the criteria.

Rory Stewart: I promised five minutes: five minutes is up. Back to you, Chair.

Chair: And it is exactly five minutes. Sir Roger, Robin, thank you very much indeed. It has been a really helpful session and has left us much better informed.
Tuesday 29 January 2013

Members present:
Richard Ottaway (Chair)
Mr Bob Ainsworth
Mr John Baron
Sir Menzies Campbell
Ann Clwyd
Mike Gapes
Mark Hendrick
Andrew Rosindell
Sir John Stanley
Rory Stewart

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Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Rosemary Hollis, Professor of Middle East Policy Studies, City University, London, and Chris Doyle, Director of the Council for the Advancement of Arab British Understanding (Caabu), gave evidence.

Chair: May I welcome members of the public to this second evidence session of the Committee’s inquiry into UK relations with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain? We are going to start with two experts on the UK and the Gulf who can provide the Committee with the wider regional and historical context of the UK’s relations with the Gulf as a whole, as well as British interests across the region. They will be followed by a former British ambassador to Saudi Arabia, to allow the Committee to focus on the UK’s long and evolving relationship with Saudi Arabia.

Our first two witnesses are Professor Rosemary Hollis, professor of Middle East Policy Studies at City University, London, and Chris Doyle, the Director of the Council for the Advancement of Arab-British Understanding. A warm welcome to both of you. Professor Hollis, we will do our best to get you away in order for you to return to the important task of lecturing your students.

Rosemary Hollis: Thank you.

Q65 Chair: May I start by asking how the UK has positioned itself with regard to the Gulf countries since its withdrawal from there in 1971? Has it maintained its role as an important player in the Gulf?

Rosemary Hollis: Actually, the subject of my research over many years, including my PhD, was about how Britain adapted to decline, as played out in the Arab Gulf states. One thing I found was that you really could not talk about the national interest. There are lots of sectoral interests. What is in the interests of big oil or finance or the British armed forces, or indeed the British defence industry, is different from what may be in the interests of the politicians or the diplomats. Consequently, they are not all pulling in the same direction at the same time. I would also say that it is important to understand the complexity of the ties that bind Britain to the Gulf Governments, the Gulf regimes. That is partly the product of history. Easa al-Gurg, who was UAE ambassador to the UK, wrote his memoirs. He had worked as a lad for the British Bank of the Middle East in Dubai and knew the British, and mediated between his Government and the British over many years. He said that when the British left in 1971, they went out the door and came back in through the window. He said, “We have more Brits in the area post the empire than we had during the empire.” You have hundreds of thousands in the UAE. You have a few thousand in Bahrain. I know that today’s subject is particularly British-Bahraini relations and British-Saudi relations, and the two are linked. In the case of Bahrain, when the British pulled out in ’71, they left behind a senior security officer, Ian Henderson, who had a reputation for being particularly nasty in the handling of detainees. Political dissent was not something that he encouraged the Bahrainis to tolerate.

Of course, the British were not the colonial power when it came to Saudi Arabia. They came to various deals with the Saudis, as the Saudis came to power in the centre of the peninsula, about protecting the small Arab Gulf states and Jordan and where the line should be drawn between the Saudi kingdom and its immediate neighbours. The Saudis were very much in the American camp from the start. The Americans were instrumental in the development of Saudi oil, whereas the British were the ones who controlled the development of the Arab Gulf states’ oil, Bahrain’s having gone by now.

The Gulf sheikdoms, Bahrain included, were encouraged to sign treaties of friendship with the British during the course of the 19th century, by which, progressively, Britain took control of all their foreign relations. They were not allowed to sign any oil contracts without British permission. The oil companies were beholden to the British Government for permission to do business in those states. As of 1971, that technically ended, but for the oil companies and the banks, this was an oil boom time. By 1973, the price of oil, now nationalised by all these countries, had rocketed, and they had a lot of money to spend. I know from interviewing them back in the 1980s that British banks made it their mission to go and ensure that the Gulf states’ petrodollars would be invested in the British or western banking system, and—the Soviets were not really an alternative—not go to develop a separate, possibly Islamic, banking system. So in the 1970s, the priority was absorbing the capital. After that, selling consumer goods, manufactured goods and, indeed, arms was the name of the game, in order to maintain a trade balance that was essentially in the British favour. However, small British business men did not really figure in this relationship; it was the big guys who monopolised it. I could say even more about nature of the relationships between the Ministry of Defence, BAE Systems, and
Saudi Arabia as a result of all that, but perhaps I will keep it for later.

Q66 Chair: We will get into that detail in subsequent questions. Mr Doyle, what does the UK bring to the table out there as a strategic partner?

Chris Doyle: The UK has immense importance to the Gulf. Rosemary Hollis has outlined the importance of the historical links, but we still have a reputation in much of the Gulf as a friend and a party that they believe still knows the Gulf very well through that historical relationship. That is perhaps in contrast to the Americans, who are still largely viewed as not knowing the region very well, and who might have a reputation for a slightly cowboy sort of image.

There is an expectation that Britain should understand the Gulf. That is not always met; there have been times where there have been strong feelings that we have gone against their advice and not really worked with them. But we can also bring all sorts of services—a lot of our business is done in the services industry, through banking. We are now increasingly seeing exchange in education, health and other issues. For all the Gulf states, the Americans are there to provide security. For them, particularly the smaller ones, which are acutely aware of the issue after 1990–91, it will not be Britain or France who rides to their rescue, it will be the Americans. But they do see Britain, when it has access to— hopefully sometimes influence on—the United States, as playing that useful role. They also see Britain as useful in the context of the European Union if it is playing a leading part within it.

Q67 Chair: Thank you very much. This is a question to both of you: how does the Gulf perceive us and what do they think of Britain?

Rosemary Hollis: I think in conversation lots of nice, charming, polite things are said.

Q68 Chair: But?

Rosemary Hollis: But I think all the Gulf rulers are pretty hard-nosed. They have worked out that Britain needs them as much as they need Britain, if not more so. The sales to the Gulf in terms of aerospace and all the follow-on contracts that go with that in terms of building airfields, training support teams, maintenance and so on, have kept the British independent defence industry alive. BAE Systems would have ground to a halt waiting for the Typhoon to come online had the Saudis not been buying the Tornadoes. Conscious of this and the fact that they insist in the Gulf that all defence deals be done Government to Government—so Margaret Thatcher started the al-Yamamah contract with King Fahd in 1985—and thereafter this is effectively a Government-to-Government deal with the guarantee of the Government. The Ministry of Defence has, in a way, more responsibility for massaging the relationship than the Foreign Office in the case of the Gulf states because of the importance of both the defence sales and the follow-up training exercises and co-operation.

Now when these Gulf Governments are upset with the British, as in when the British or the MOD police and then the Serious Fraud Office saw fit to investigate whether all the defence deals had been entirely free of backhander, the Saudis let it be known the relationship would suffer—similarly conversations between the Qatars and the British over a defence deal when their history was about to be investigated were suddenly called off. The message comes out, “We don’t actually have to buy your Typhoons. We can always buy from somebody else.” And the British know that. The Saudis do a little bit of the same arm twisting over intelligence gathering. When they look at the British they say, “You are preaching to us this idea that we would be better off being more democratic. Well, the logic doesn’t compute. Those countries that you were telling to reform and which took some tentative steps in that direction—Tunisia, Egypt—look at what has happened to their rulers, and you did nothing to save them. So please spare us your preaching about democracy and human rights.”

Chris Doyle: In terms of how the Gulf sees Britain, it depends who you are asking. At a ruling level, Rosemary Hollis has outlined it very well. They also see a reputation for British fairness. Increasingly, particularly in the Emirates, they are seeing the British Government and they are pretty distant to the Emirates do not see the US see the Muslim Brotherhood and its increasing political success in the region. There is a lot of nervousness in the Emirates about that. But if you ask young Saudis, young Emiratis, young Qataris, how they view Britain, it is going to be a very different view from that of an older generation, who remember when we were very strong and all powerful in the Gulf. They are now far more familiar with many other countries. Many of them still like to come here but are going to other universities, not British ones as in the past. That is partially a result of visa issues as well, which many complain about.

So, yes, we have a fairly positive reputation. People like coming here, but that is at risk among some who are increasingly politically active if Britain is seen to be an obstacle or supporting existing regimes which they may wish to see reformed. I think it is very difficult for us sitting in London, and for Foreign Office officials, actually to tap into the huge, large young population in all these countries, which is increasingly connected to the rest of the world through media, with new access to information and inspired by what has gone on in other countries to exactly what they want for their futures and how they see us. I think it is very fluid and very changing. And on top of that increasing signs of radicalisation and extremism in the region, which has its impact if they feel frustrated and angered at the slow progress of change, plus a very worrying sectarian narrative that is going on, exacerbated by events in Iraq and Syria, and it means that, underneath the relationship, there are some great uncertainties about where it is heading. A lot of Foreign Office officials, in my experience, have always wondered what happens when, for example, the existing Saudi leadership, in its 80s, and the existing Omani leadership, move on. What will the next generations of rulers from these families do? How will they change the relationships? We are quite dependent on those historical links. I think the Foreign Office is aware of this. How effective they have been in establishing links down to that younger
Q69 Andrew Rosindell: Leading on from that question, how does the British monarchy—the British royal family—impact on how the Gulf monarchies see the UK? The historical links and friendships that have been there so long—how is that impacting on today’s relations and is it a significant factor in terms of our future relationship?

Chris Doyle: It is of huge benefit for Britain. Most of the rulers of the Gulf states view our royal family very positively. There have been many visits, and I have heard many of them comment very favourably, particularly about Her Majesty the Queen. They like the fact that it is a relationship between countries ruled by royal families.

Against that somewhat, however, in some of the Gulf states there is a feeling that, on occasions, less senior members of the royal family have gone out to the region almost as substitutes for high-level ministerial visits. I have heard that before. Increasingly, they are aware of that, and they will see it, in a sense, as being fobbed off. I would say that, in the past couple of years under the Gulf initiative, there have been more high-level visits from Ministers. That does matter, building that relationship. They want to see top-level royals and top-level Ministers coming to see them, nurturing that relationship. It is a time when they feel they need reassurance. After what happened in Egypt, the feeling in many Gulf states is, “You and the United States abandoned Mubarak very swiftly. We do not want that to happen to us.” The only exception in the Gulf is Kuwait, where perhaps we passed the test in 1990–91 when we were there for them. I think that relationship with the royals is helpful, but we cannot count on it being the same way with the next generation.

Rosemary Hollis: I would say it is an asset, but there are consequences in that, if you have a relationship between two royal families, it is all very satisfactory up to a point but if you remember that the British royal family is not allowed to be political, they cannot exactly have a quiet word with their Gulf counterparts and advocate constitutional monarchy. That falls to the Ministers and the diplomats. I do not think that the British monarchy is exactly an advertisement for how the rulers in the Gulf would wish to be, in so far as they can go and promote trade, and they can go and request donations to their charities, but they cannot say that they are in charge any more.

Q70 Andrew Rosindell: As time moves on and as the Gulf countries themselves have to embrace more democratic methods, do you feel that the example of the Gulf countries themselves have to embrace more democratic methods, do you feel that the example of the British monarchy is exactly an advertisement for how far they could go and how power would be shared. The whole potential for that relationship is broken when you have a rentier system, with oil money coming in at the top, as opposed to from taxpayers at the bottom.

Chris Doyle: I share Rosemary’s views. I do not think that change is really going to be brought about by highlighting the example in Britain. It is a very different area of the world and a different time.

Q71 Sir Menzies Campbell: I was going to ask you some questions about defence sales, but you have very substantially answered those already from a commercial point of view. I wonder, however, if we could look at them through the prism of security and ask whether you think that the existence of these sales, of equipment with which our own armed services are familiar and which they use, makes any additionality to Britain’s own security. I am thinking about the fact that interoperability is much easier and that there would be common doctrines on the approach to be taken in certain military circumstances. I sum that up, do you see any substantial exchange in security information and understanding as a result of the arms sales, or do they stand discretely to one side?

Rosemary Hollis: You point to a very interesting nexus of issues here. During the 1990s, I participated a number of times in meetings organised by US Central Command in Tampa, Florida. There would be a few Brits from the MOD, a few French and a few favoured Arabs. What was notable was the American irritation with the British, that they should presume to convey their military doctrines along with their military sales. At the time—someone like Rory Stewart might know about now—the British doctrine was not a subset of the American one.

Sir Menzies Campbell: Anything but.

Rosemary Hollis: Now, I do think that what the British very effectively did in acknowledgement of the overwhelming American monopoly of the market was get a niche within that—with the acceptance of the Americans. It was sometimes easier for the British to sell the kind of weaponry that the Saudis wanted than it was for the Americans because of the pressure that would be brought to bear in Congress against such sales.

Q72 Sir Menzies Campbell: There is a very interesting illustration of that, isn’t there? The fact that the Israelis wanted the F15E, and at the same time there was an effort to sell aircraft to—I beg your pardon, it was the other way around; the Saudi Arabians wanted the F15E and in the end they were given a slightly modified version, which was less capable, not by very much, but notably less capable than the one that the Americans were willing to supply to Israel. So does that political commitment get in the way of the Americans in, at the same time, not doing the same in relation to the relationship between the Brits and the Saudi Arabians?

Rosemary Hollis: The British connection to Saudi Arabia is not unrelated to the British connection to the US, and the US connection to Saudi Arabia. They are
Q73 Mike Gapes: You talked about defence co-operation. Can I take you on to intelligence and counter-terrorism co-operation? How important is the co-operation with the UK for the Gulf states?
Rosemary Hollis: I believe you are going to hear from Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles?
Chair: Not on the record.
Rosemary Hollis: Oh. Well, my understanding is that it was on the record that he warned—
Chair: He is very welcome to speak on the record if he wants to.
Sir Menzies Campbell: If we can persuade him.
Chair: If you have any influence with him to persuade him to speak on the record, we would be grateful.
Rosemary Hollis: I dare say it is one of those things where you might learn a little more if he doesn't.
Chair: Yes, but we can't publish it.
Rosemary Hollis: I see. What he did say on the record was that it would be damaging to British interests to lose the intelligence co-operation of the Saudis and that was on the cards during the Serious Fraud Office investigation, which was subsequently called off in the name of protecting British security interests. All I know from that kind of episode is that those who deal in intelligence feel that they cannot do without that Saudi co-operation without exposing the British in some way.
I would assume that, again, the Americans are in that loop, too. It seems to me that the British prize very highly the intelligence that they get, thanks to the Americans. They would therefore not want to be excluded from something that the Saudis would remain in with the Americans. Maybe in the old days, it was all to do with would-be communists in Yemen, but latterly I think it is more about Islamist radicals who are anti-western and anti the al-Saud ruling family.

I share the view that Rosemary has stated. It is very difficult, not being within the intelligence circles, to define this. Saudi Arabia has an involvement in many of the key areas where we need intelligence, particularly in Yemen, for example. We need their help and assistance. There was the bomb attempt through East Midlands airport. It was purportedly because of Saudi intelligence that that terrorist operation was stopped.
Can we survive without it? I think it would be difficult at the moment, but even with that co-operation we can never take it for granted. There are so many threats coming from other avenues as well. We cannot depend solely on that. We could do a lot more to work up other sources of intelligence and not just be dependent on Saudi.

Q74 Mike Gapes: Professor Hollis, you said in an earlier answer that there had been arm twisting of the British Government by Saudi Arabia, because of the way in which things were being pursued with the SFO. How real is this threat to cut off intelligence co-operation, given that Saudi Arabia's Government presumably benefits from it as well? Isn't there a danger that we are exaggerating the threat of their withdrawing co-operation, rather than recognising that it is also in their interests to have that co-operation?
Rosemary Hollis: I take your point, but I don't think in this case, one can separate different strands of the relationship, and test it. They are too intricately related, and have been built up over time. The Saudis don't just threaten to withdraw intelligence co-operation. The defence deals would be at stake, too. I don't envy British politicians who have got to explain to the British public that they blew it when it came to a relationship that has so many facets that benefit the British, in a way that they don't really want to own up to.

Q75 Mike Gapes: You also touched on the American relationship. Do the Saudis play the British and Americans off against each other in these areas?
Rosemary Hollis: Well, if there is room for it—if they spy an opportunity. This business of telling the British that they know us better—"You know us so well. You've been here a long time." You could argue, "And look what a mess you made." Instead of which, they flatter the British that they know what they are doing in the Middle East.

Q76 Sir John Stanley: Right up to the start of the Arab Spring, the British Government gave arms export licence approvals to all the Arab Spring countries. Once the Arab Spring broke out, the British Government put their policy not on to brake, but on to reverse gear, and made a totally unprecedented number of revocations of existing arms export licences. A significant number of those revocations were for approved licences to Bahrain. In striking contrast, when it came to Saudi Arabia—notwithstanding the fact that partly British-made armoured cars rolled across the causeway from Saudi Arabia into Bahrain, and helped to protect Bahraini infrastructure at a time when there were significant, broadly peaceful demonstrations taking place in Bahrain—the British Government did not revoke one single arms export licence to Saudi Arabia. What is your interpretation of the reasons for the striking contrasts in the revocations between Saudi Arabia and Bahrain?
Rosemary Hollis:
I don’t think I have a straightforward response, in the sense that the relationship with Saudi Arabia is too important and the one with Bahrain is not as important, so you can afford to mess with it a bit. I note, from the most recent iterations of what British interests, and therefore British policy priorities, are, that you have a combination of security, trade and values—projection of values. The advocacy of what the British like to believe are their values at home—the advocacy that they be exported abroad—is the poor relation of the other two. Therefore, you get demonstrations of how the British want to stand for democracy and human rights. You get speeches, such as we had from the Foreign Secretary, explaining near the beginning of the Arab Spring that of course we have to differentiate from place to place because the issues at stake, and the challenge to the rulers, varies from place to place. Now, the Bahrainis could not survive without the Saudis, so it makes absolutely no difference whether the British withdraw these licences or not. The British have said, in the case of Bahrain—not unlike what they have said, historically, in many contexts—that it is easier to apply pressure quietly behind the scenes. But it would not be in Britain’s interests for the monarchy in Bahrain to fall and for the whole thing to come down. I think, in retrospect, the British do not want to be seen—in front of the British public, Human Rights Watch and all those other NGOs that are monitoring this—to be aiding and abetting oppression of civilian population. But it is about not being seen to be doing these things as opposed to expecting to change the nature of the polity in these places fundamentally.

Chris Doyle:
I largely agree with that. We have had a different relationship with Bahrain in terms of the levels of criticism, even before the Arab Spring. I simply do not believe that we have that level of critical dialogue with the Saudis. Indeed, if you look at the region and how we will be judged, people will take these protestations of support for democracy and human rights seriously if we are seen to do it with Saudi Arabia. That, for many people, is the litmus test. They see, for example, a Sri Lankan maid being executed in Saudi Arabia; they see other egregious abuses of human rights; they see pro forma demonstrations, perhaps, but essentially the relationship goes on as usual. While that is the case, I do not think that our credibility will be very high across the rest of the region; countries in transition where we are particularly serious about these sorts of changes. The Prime Minister said, when visiting the Gulf in November, that there were no no-go areas. I have spoken to diplomats and former diplomats, and I do not think that they would necessarily share the belief that, when it really comes down to, say, a British Prime Minister meeting with one of these major rulers, there are no no-go areas; I simply do not believe that that is true.

Rosemary Hollis:
I think there are a number of differences as well in terms of North Africa, with the role of the army that was played in Egypt and Tunisia, the state of civil society and the very important role that trade unions played. If you contrast that with the Gulf states, there is civil society, but it is certainly not as developed. The military is not as independent-minded as perhaps it is or was in Egypt and Tunisia. Certainly in Egypt and Tunisia, you saw some of the troubles arising particularly through food riots and industrial disputes. Some of the signs were there. What has happened in North Africa has triggered a sense of confidence and belief in the Gulf that, somewhere down the line, they can bring about some change, but it will take some time to generate the sorts of organisations. Clearly, the regimes will be doing their best to ensure that that does not happen. However, they have huge issues to face in the Gulf. There are huge levels of youth, high unemployment. They are not getting jobs. They have large migrant work forces. Plus, there is a very delicate regional neighbourhood, with potential conflict with Iran and still huge issues going on in Iraq. It looks stable on a day-to-day basis when you go there, but if you
actually dig down a little bit deeper, I am not so sure that it is anymore.

Q78 Mr Ainsworth: That brings me on to the second question. What are the prospects for peaceful reform, improvement of human rights and social development? You, Rosemary Hollis, said to us that it was not in our interests that the monarchy should fall in Bahrain. You said that it was not in Britain’s interests. How do you foresee the future? What role should we seek to play in the developments that will take place over the next couple of years?

Rosemary Hollis: So you don’t want me to reinforce the idea that it might not be in our best interests to see these regimes fall?

Mr Ainsworth: Well, you said that.

Rosemary Hollis: That being said, what do I advocate we do?

Mr Ainsworth: Yes.

Rosemary Hollis: I actually conducted some research, commissioned by the European Union, to find out how its efforts to try to get that kind of reform going in Egypt—I was doing the research back in 2006. I interviewed many Egyptians, and they said that everything in Egypt is forbidden except what is permitted and that you therefore cannot exist in Egypt without breaking the law, but a blind eye is turned until you do something that upsets the regime and then they’ve got you and you know they’ve got you. In those circumstances, you simply explore how you might promote small changes such as introducing more decency into the system and, at the same time, more efficiency. The Egyptians, brainstorming this with me and a colleague, came up with one thing that could be done, which was teaching police interrogation that does not involve torture. It is not actually necessary to torture people to uncover who did what to whom. In this case, I was told that the Egyptian police think you just beat someone up until you get a confession.

Q79 Mr Ainsworth: I was thinking more about Bahrain and Saudi Arabia than Egypt.

Rosemary Hollis: Well, then you come to the political prisoner issue. I know from some other research that I have done that British people, including British intelligence officers, attempted to tell members of the Mubarak regime, with whom they had intelligence cooperation, that they did not like the way that they dealt with their political dissidents. They were told to mind their own business and that the British did not have a terribly good track record themselves in managing extremists. I anticipate that that kind of thing would be said in the Gulf too. They might say that the British are hypocritical when they talk about how best to handle extremism, or incompetent, or not minding their own business. They will say, “We do not tell you how to run your country, so why are you telling us how to run ours?” That is the kind of conversation that will happen. I am advocating demonstrating some value in doing what you are proposing. However Nobody claims that it is within Islam to exercise cruelty. It is not in the tenets of Islam to detain without trial. Arbitrary arrest is not there either. Within the system, there is a lot of room for discussion about what makes for a healthier society.

Chris Doyle: I think we need to go in with a constructive approach. I do not think that there is any other point, and they will not listen to us unless that is the case. It should be some form of evolution, not revolution, that is necessary. The point is that it should be portrayed as being very much in their interests. If they want to, they can try to lock down their countries and pretend that they still live in the 19th century, isolated from the rest of the world, but that is simply not the case. There are areas in which others can constructively help in setting up the sorts of institutions that will allow that reform to take effect, or else they will perhaps face serious threats further down the line.

There is another issue here: there is a crisis in opposition across the region, because of the lack of political experience and participation. People are getting opportunities to voice their concerns, but they have not had much experience of building consensus, working together and forming coalitions. The most organised groups tend to be the Islamists, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, but the people who form large segments of the population, including in Bahrain, are liberal with a small ‘l’ and do not have any organised mechanism for how to put across their views or what they want for Bahrain. They get trapped between a regime whose recent behaviour they are not that fond of and an opposition that they sometimes see as too extreme. Can we help to have more effective communications?

Another issue is that rulers and others in the region—it goes against the culture—will increasingly have to put up with a lot more criticism. That is a result of social media and opening up. We have seen people arrested for what they put out on Twitter. The reality is that that will be there, and if they lock up each and every person who criticises a ruler, they will be locking up a lot of people, which will not play well overseas. Almost by definition, these people may be using Twitter—they do it enough here—to criticise individuals are probably quite linked up with the outside world. In some ways that issue needs to be changed.

Q80 Chair: Professor Hollis has to go in a second, and I know that Rory Stewart wants to put a question to her. It is eight minutes past 3 at the moment, so do you have another five minutes?

Rosemary Hollis: Yes.

Q81 Rory Stewart: Given that you are running out of the door, Professor Hollis, and Chris is staying, can you give us your response to that? You seem to suggest that the idea of a very gradual process of reform and British diplomats gently whispering in ears is not a realistic description of how change has happened recently in the Middle East, at least in your version. It has tended to be more extreme and catastrophic—more revolutionary. There is this model, with this lovely gentle thing where you do seminars, workshops and civil society engagement, and somehow that transforms the state. I wanted your final view on that before you left.
Rosemary Hollis: I see the logic that a society that does treat its citizens with respect and dignity, and does involve them in decision making that affects them—the very things that the revolutionaries were calling for in the countries which had the uprisings—is a recipe for stability. However, the lesson of the recent past, and actually I think the lesson of—

Mr Ainsworth: Most revolutions—

Rosemary Hollis: Yes, most revolutions, is that first, you do not remove a dictatorship by gradual reform; secondly, dictators do not generally happily release one power after another; and thirdly, when they look at their region they know that all the guys who felt oppressed cannot wait for revenge. So more democracy means the end of the particular individuals to whom the British are attempting to advocate this gradual change. It is not a message that is going to be received. It is just not in the nature of the beast. There is nothing wrong with the logic long term. Long term it would serve British interests if they were nicer, more participatory, less abusive societies, but in the near term it is simply not engaging with reality.

Q82 Rory Stewart: The Prime Minister made a speech in Abu Dhabi in November. He said, “My country very strongly believes that giving people both a job and a voice is vital for creating stable, prosperous societies, and we have a history of supporting human rights around the world... I do think that standing up for human rights and standing up for the right of people to have a job and a voice around the world is important, and I think this is a discussion that our countries can have. Nothing is off-limits in the relationship that we have. When you are close friends, close partners, it is quite like a family; you have to be able to discuss the difficult things as well as the easy things. And that is the sort of relationship that we have.” What is your view on that speech? How do you think it will be received in the Gulf states?

Rosemary Hollis: Who was it who gave that speech?

Q83 Rory Stewart: The British Prime Minister, David Cameron. How did they take that kind of speech?

Rosemary Hollis: I am reminded of another speech that Tony Blair made in the Gulf, about how “we understand each other so well because our histories are combined, and we got here together and we share values.” What? It is basically spinning a narrative.

Q84 Rory Stewart: How would it be received in the Gulf? What would someone listening to it make of it?

Rosemary Hollis: They understand that that is what you do.

Rory Stewart: Thank you very much.

Chair: Mr Doyle has still to answer, but Professor Hollis, if you wish to leave, thank you very much indeed for coming in today.

Q85 Rory Stewart: Mr Doyle, what are your views on any of those questions? Either on what you think of Britain’s response to the Arab Spring and the potential for reform, or comebacks or disagreements with Rosemary.

Chris Doyle: As I said earlier, the relationship is simply not like that. I do not believe that there is a “nothing is off limits” conversation. Simply, as Rosemary said, it is spin, particularly with Saudi Arabia. I think that is understood in the entire region. I think there are times when that is an issue, when we are not able to speak more candidly to the Saudis. It is also somewhat difficult of course with a leadership in Saudi Arabia which is octogenarian. Their health is not always good, so the people really making the decisions have a limited time span to deal with some of these issues. And increasingly, I have to say, they are probably disconnected from some of the events that are going on. I think that is an issue.

In terms of the Arab Spring and issues around it, this is still very much a process whose ultimate destination we do not know. Much will depend on huge amounts of variables. It will depend to some extent on our ability to resolve some of the outstanding conflicts that are having an influence on it. Syria, Iran, also what is going on in Iraq, and the failure to get anywhere on the issue of Israel-Palestine; that has an impact. Will there be any sort of response in terms of trying to improve the way that these countries deal with their own populations? I am not sure, but I genuinely think that is where the threat to them will come from unless they are careful. I am thinking here not in terms of next year; I am trying to think, in a sense, like they do—five, 10 or 15 years down the line. You do notice this with the Gulf: these are countries that have Governments that are in power for a long time and in position for a long time, so they have the ability to think and plan for a 15 or 20 years. Qatar has a 20 or 30-year plan in operation. Where will the Gulf be in 10 to 15 years? Given the changes in the region, it is difficult to say whether we will have the same ruling families in power or the same systems of government; that would be a 50:50 bet.

Q86 Rory Stewart: One of the increasing tendencies has been to defer to Gulf states in terms of guiding our general response to foreign policy in the region: we might defer to them about Darfur, or take their advice on what to do in Egypt, or consult them on how we should respond to Syria. To what extent do you think the UK overestimates the Gulf states’ interest and, in fact, power in solving those kinds of regional issues?

Chris Doyle: I think Gulf states are helpful on certain issues. They are being very helpful on the issue of Yemen. With the GCC transition in Yemen, there was obviously a Gulf initiative for that, and for all the faults of that transition I am not sure it would have come about without the involvement of the Gulf. On the issue of Syria, despite the rhetoric, there are some quite significant differences between our position and that of many of the Gulf states. Essentially, for some time, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and others have wanted a far more forceful response to what is going on in Syria than we have; the British Government still seeks a political solution to events in Syria, yet we are trying to work together. There is not actually a common view on that.
On the issue of Iran, that is of course another area of co-operation. The Gulf states are in a very tricky position, because Iran will always be their neighbour; it is the big brother across the waters, and any conflict in Iran will hit them massively. Already the sanctions are hitting the Emirates, in particular, very hard; that will matter. It is important that we have discussions about these relations and these other regional conflicts, but that we also have input from other areas and do not overly rely on what they are saying.

Chair: Thank you very much. Apologies to colleagues who have caught my eye, but I have to draw this session to an end. Thank you very much, Mr Doyle. Your evidence is very much appreciated; it is very helpful to get the context that you have provided this afternoon.

Examination of Witness

Witness: Sir Alan Munro, Honorary Vice-President of the Saudi-British Society and board member of the Arab British Chamber of Commerce, former Under-Secretary of State for the Middle East and Africa, and British Ambassador in Saudi Arabia (1989 to 1993), gave evidence.

Q87 Chair: As colleagues know, there is an important vote at two minutes past 4, so we aim to end this session at 4 o’clock. I welcome our next witness Sir Alan Munro, who is the honorary vice-president of the Saudi-British Society and board member of the Arab British Chamber of Commerce, former Under-Secretary of State for the Middle East, and British ambassador in Saudi Arabia. Is there anything you would particularly like to say in opening remarks?

Sir Alan Munro: Yes, if I might. I have, for better or worse, been involved quite closely with Saudi Arabia for 35 years, with one brief intermission in a socialist and military Algeria. I have known the kingdom in peace and war. Out of that comes a conviction that our relationship with Saudi Arabia remains and has long been of the first order.

There was an interval that many may not recall of 12 years of no diplomatic relations at all, between 1953 and 1965 over the Bahraini episode in the Empty Quarter, the boundary dispute and the initial search for oil and so on, where Britain undertook to support its protected regimes in the form of Abu Dhabi and Oman and aroused the intense irritation of the al-Saud. There was also a certain glitch in the mid-1970s in our relationship. For all that, it remains for this country a relationship of the first order in diplomatic, political, economic and cultural terms, and at the public level, with all the interchange that I am glad to say goes on.

Sir Alan Munro: You must remember that Saudi Arabia is increasingly becoming, in society terms, a somewhat polarised country. This to me is a sign of change. It is not generally accepted or recognised, least of all by parts of our media, that the regime remains in the vanguard of reform, albeit very cautious reform. As a former Chair of this Committee once said to me, “Saudi Arabia is not a monarchy, it is a diarchy.” It has a clerical establishment which is powerful and represents the opinion of—goodness knows—50% or more of its population, male and female, and which has to be taken into account in any attempt to put across—to sell, if you like—the process of change on which the regime is launched.

The regime has many members, including some of the younger ones now coming through the ranks, who enjoy close contact with this country and who have, in many cases, received various stages of education here, from which they claim to have benefited. So I believe that in many respects we are regarded not only as a long-established and historical friend, which goes back to the first world war, but also by the younger generation as a source of partnership and as a society whose standards are regarded as respectable and in which they place a certain amount of trust and seek to emulate.

At the senior level of al-Saud governance and the senior ministers involved, we are held in respect, and there is undoubtedly a wish to see us as major and ongoing partners. At the more public level there is a mixture of what I call ignorance and attraction. The attraction comes increasingly through the social media, which are going to play a greater and greater part in the momentum of change coming from below as well top down in Saudi Arabia today.

Q89 Andrew Rosindell: Following on from your comment about Britain being a historical friend and that they look to us for so many things, does it strike you as strange that Britain has not encouraged either Saudi Arabia or any of the Gulf States to join the Commonwealth? Do you think that would be a positive way of bringing the Gulf States into a framework where countries have developed into democracies?

Sir Alan Munro: The only Arab state that we might at one time have thought would qualify and, indeed, was interested in becoming a member of the
Commonwealth was Aden—and we know where that one got us. Britain’s historic relationship, not so much with Saudi Arabia but with the smaller Gulf States in the days of the Protectorates, was never as intense as that which prevailed in former colonial territories or in the dominions. Egypt is another case in point where viceroyalty was only superficial. I do not believe that it has ever been seen by successive British Governments as appropriate to try and incorporate the states of the Arab community within the British system of standards of justice, language, exchange and so forth.

On the other hand, as previous speakers were saying, we have an historic image which is, by and large, a positive one. I have sometimes been surprised—this came up again in what I regard as the ill-fated Iraq adventure in 2003—that the opinion of Saudis who wish us well, and some Algerians who had less in common with us, was: “Well, this has been a wrong thing to do. It doesn’t make sense. It’s not going to get anywhere, but thank goodness you are there”, because—here we go again—“you understand us.” “Yes,” I say, “and look at the mess we made.” Look at Iraq, and here we are back again in Iraq. That was one of the reasons why many of us advised not going through to Baghdad, if I may say so, in 1991.

Q90 Chair: I think that we had better concentrate on Saudi Arabia.

Sir Alan Munro: They take the view that we do have a stake in their societies, and they wish to see us exert that familiarity with their own objectives and systems of governance.

Q91 Mark Hendrick: Sir Alan, could you perhaps compare and contrast the UK’s current relationship with Saudi Arabia to when you were an ambassador there in the late ‘80s and early ‘90s during the first Gulf war?

Sir Alan Munro: We are talking 20 years of interval, when I have been returning in one capacity or another. The pace of change in the social picture, in the extent of freedom of speech and journalistic independence and in the spread of education, particularly within the female community, are now more than male students at undergraduate level in Saudi Arabian universities than there are male—illustrate the degree of change that has been taking place. It has been at the political level, too, ever since King Fahd established the national council in 1993. The whole picture now is one of greater confidence and self-confidence and more outward looking than it was in 1993, although it was already perceptible.

Q92 Mark Hendrick: Is the relationship stronger or weaker than it was then? Do the Saudis see more dependence on us, or do we see more dependence of them with us? What has been the impact of the military and civilian—certainly so far as their naval forces are concerned, but not necessarily elsewhere—as a part of our broader relationship, it would have a major impact on the military competence of certain elements of the Saudi armed forces, notably their air force. Remember that it is also the training—engineering training, pilot training and so on—that comes, and has done ever since the late 1960s. This goes way previous to al-Yamamah, may I say. It is a treasured element in the minds of the Saudi military establishment. We are very important to them, and they are very important to us.

Q93 Mark Hendrick: I was chatting with one of the previous witnesses who said that when students come from Saudi Arabia to this country, on the one hand we can see our culture and democracy, but they also see adverse aspects of our culture, such as drunkenness on the streets, fights and crime. Do you think that British culture and the British people are a good advert for democracy and the British way of life?

Sir Alan Munro: By and large, yes. But there have been instances where, in particular the more conservative among Saudi youth—they do exist—have been shocked at what they find here. They probably go back with a negative opinion. There are other elements of that, but for the great majority, it is a stimulating experience, as I understand that from continuing to talk to them through the Saudi-British Society and others. We have a Saudi youth element within the Saudi-British society and they are a very positive group indeed.

Q94 Mr Baron: Sir Alan, how important are defence sales and the defence relationship between our two countries to the bilateral relationship? For example, if we stopped, or severely restricted, sales, would that have a meaningful impact? What factors are at play?

Sir Alan Munro: It would have a major impact on our broader relationship, it would have a major impact on our own defence manufacturing sector and it would have a major impact on the military competence of certain elements of the Saudi armed forces, notably their air force. Remember that it is also the training—engineering training, pilot training and so on—that comes, and has done ever since the late 1960s. This goes way previous to al-Yamamah, may I say. It is a treasured element in the minds of the Saudi military establishment. We are very important to them, and they are very important to us.

Q95 Mr Baron: In your view, it is the biggest bit of the relationship, although there are other bits as well.

Sir Alan Munro: No, I do not think it is the biggest bit, and I think it is becoming a lesser and lesser element in our relationship, but it is important. This was touched on earlier, and goes back perhaps partly to my time in the Ministry of Defence, when I looked after defence co-operation with Saudi Arabia. At strategic level, the Saudis like to see us and treat us, with the French—certainly so far as their naval forces are concerned, but not necessarily elsewhere—as a kind of second row player to the Americans. They know, and they have that experience, of occasions when they have been about to go overboard in some American deal and, as somebody mentioned, Congress has tripped them up or threatened to trip them up, in which case they have turned to us. That is indeed how the Lightning deal in the 1960s came
You referred to the closed and Q98 Mike Gapes: May I ask you about the internal politics in Saudi Arabia? The level of public protest, civil society and political movements is very different in Saudi Arabia from that in some of its neighbouring Gulf states, and certainly in other parts of the Arab world. How do you explain that?

Sir Alan Munro: Saudi Arabia is not, as yet, a politically conscious society, partly because it has always been—although it is less so now—a cocooned society, cocooned from hardship and living within, as other oil-producing Gulf states have, a mega welfare state. With the growth of social media and the spread of education there has come a greater querulousness or questioning of the norms of Saudi society, particularly among younger elements. That is buttressed on the other side by a hard-line conservative element—the ultra pious, as it were—some would say the more fanatical side. That being said, the regime itself and its present leadership, notably King Abdullah, are popular. The change that people press for is change within the system, not outwith it.

Q97 Mike Gapes: Does that apply also to the regional issues and the Shi‘a populated areas?

Sir Alan Munro: The Shi‘a minority in the eastern provinces has been until recent years a quiescent element, and the nearest thing to a national labour force that Saudi Arabia ever had. This is a society with a deep and somewhat bigoted religious culture, although not a violent one. The Shi‘a are regarded with suspicion by the Sunni establishment and by Sunni teaching. The King has taken considerable steps to break that barrier down in recent years, and has had some success domestically in bringing more and more Shi‘a into more senior and responsible roles. The new list for the Majlis al-Shura has Shi‘a members, including one Shi‘a woman, for example. The governor of the eastern province, who actually just resigned the other day after many years, Mohammed bin Fahd, son of King Fahd, has done a great deal, as I have seen at first hand, in his—gracious—25 years as governor of the eastern province to break the glass ceiling for the Shi‘a. As for the Shi‘a element, there is still a dissatisfaction—in a sense, that goes with the conservative nature of the leadership. What is going to happen with the transition to the next generation? Is that going to go with the transition to a new generation? Is that going to go smoothly? Is it going to be done?

Sir Alan Munro: This is the sort of speculation that we keep in business. Senior Saudis with whom I have had recent contact admit that the drop of a generation is not going to be a straightforward affair. This is a family that is not a divided one—there are one or two mavericks on the side—and they know that, if you like, they hang together or they hang together. They are an intelligent community. They see themselves as and are accepted as, continuing to rule, and they will be putting a lot of thought into deciding which branch of the present range of the Abdul Aziz sons should eventually inherit the succession. But I have noticed, and Saudis have pointed out to me in the last couple of weeks, the decision only two weeks ago by the King to appoint two of the younger generation—two bright young sparks, one the son of Nayef, one the son of Salman, the current Crown Prince—to be governors of two of the key provinces. The eastern province has gone to Saud bin Nayef and the Medina province—the alternative holy city province—has gone to Faisal bin Salman, newspaper owner and a recent graduate with a doctorate from St Antony’s College Oxford in Gulf politics. That is a step towards identifying and bringing forward the idea of the younger generation, plus there is the very important fact that Prince Mohammad bin Nayef, who was deputy Minister of Interior, was appointed to that key position, succeeding his father as Minister of Interior some eight or nine months ago.

Q99 Ann Clwyd: Sir Alan, some people have argued that the FCO should be pressing more assertively for international human rights standards, such as, obviously, the rights of women, and the rights of ethnic and religious minorities. Do you agree with that, and what do you think of the speed of political reform? What should we expect within a certain time scale?

Sir Alan Munro: Two things. Political reform, as being orchestrated under an ailing—long may he reign, as I see it—King Abdullah, has moved to a pitch that has never been seen before. But at every stage, given this deeply entrenched religious conservatism in what is a society, they have been setting the pace that will carry the clerical establishment and the conservative constituency with it. That is a constant preoccupation. It is why the King, and indeed King Fahd before him, flew kites, and then nothing would happen. But in their system, this kite flying is very important. It starts to introduce some of those who would be resistant to change, or would like to go in another direction, to starting to think more seriously about the way the leadership wants to take things. Within those constraints, we are now seeing the regime, frankly, pushing at the doors of change with a force that I have not seen before. That is a welcome thing, but there are constraints.

If we look at the whole range of it all, where might change most readily come? The area of women’s rights has rightly now been put by the King near the top of the agenda. That can only be seen as a positive step. A gain, personalities come into it. One of the personalities involved here—this is where you have to trace the family a bit, because it is a family country—is one of King Abdullah’s daughters, Princess Adelah, who is a leading reformer on women’s rights. She plays a large part now in developments and is responsible for women’s education. Her husband, from another branch of the al-Saud, is the Minister for higher education.
There is one of the daughters of King Faisal—a very reforming King, whom you may remember was eventually assassinated by a younger cousin who was steamed up, frankly, about the introduction of television. I will digress for a moment. I remember the late Crown Prince Sultan once talking to me about some of these episodes, and King Faisal’s move for change against a much more intensely conservative society. He said, “I was waiting to go in to see King Faisal on one occasion, and the Mufti”—the head of the clerical establishment—“was in there and I could hear all sorts of raised voices. Then he came out looking storm-faced. I went in to see the King, and said, ‘Pretty rough session, wasn’t it?’ And he said, ‘Yes, I’m afraid it was all about the iniquities of television, and so on.’ And I said, ‘Yes, and it also gives you square eyes.’” So you can see where their hearts beat, really.

Q100 Ann Clwyd: Do you think that western pressure is having any effect on the speed of change? How strong is western pressure?  
Sir Alan Munro: Take the women’s case. Only last week, one of the women, whom I know well—her father used to be ambassador here for years—and who has now been elected, or chosen, to the Majlis al-Shura, took the line that I have heard other Saudi women take in conferences and public statements in this country and elsewhere. She said, “Look, we need your support, but don’t rush us and don’t make too much noise about it. You see, there is always the backlash factor. We are getting there. We are getting there in our own way. We want to know of your support, but don’t proclaim it too loudly or you may make our own role more complicated. We do have allies, but we have to move at the pace this society of ours can take. It is happening. Thank you for your support.” I would go along with that.

Q101 Ann Clwyd: When you were ambassador, how often did you meet with human rights organisations, for example?  
Sir Alan Munro: In Saudi Arabia, there weren’t formally established human rights organisations at that particular time. They have become more numerous now. But numerous Saudis, male and female, including the younger lawyers—perhaps particularly in that area—undertook their own campaigns in this area, and nowadays publish openly in the newspapers. That is something that 20 years ago they would not have been able to do. I have here an article from one of the main English-language papers by the notable editor, Khaled al-Maeena, from just four or five days ago. His leader is headed, “There is no going back in Saudi Arabia.” That is one of the main national papers—in Arabic and English—in Saudi Arabia. That couldn’t have been the case 20 years ago.

Chair: Sir Alan, perhaps we could have a copy of that afterwards.

Q102 Sir Menzies Campbell: During your extensive engagement—if I can use that word—with Saudi Arabia, in your judgment how complementary have the foreign policies of Saudi Arabia and the United Kingdom been? Kuwait is a very obvious illustration, of course. Outside that kind of cataclysmic event, in normal exchange, how complementary have the policies been?  
Sir Alan Munro: Considerably. Indeed, you and I last met on the occasion of that war, or its aftermath. That was an occasion when we both found a commonality of interest, and the earlier bonds we had, including the military bonds, brought them effectively together in an unprecedented way. Today, let us look around the region. Saudis have, in the past, and certainly with increasing strength, played a role that tends towards the encouragement of moderation. They use this influence. I had first-hand experience of it in 1993 over the Bosnia affair when the Saudis saw that certain led-by-Iran elements within the Islamic community were producing some troubles. And, of course, there were elements who had been in Afghanistan at the time and had come back and were forming their own rather tiresome brigade in Bosnia and so on. The Saudis called a conference of an organisation that is underrated but is increasingly important, and we ought to note it. It lives in Saudi Arabia and the Saudis created it. It is called the OIC—the Organisation of the Islamic Conference. That is a recognised and very respectable international body, a sort of non-aligned movement of Islam, if you like. The Saudis are its hosts and the Saudis have on various occasions called it together in order to mediate and moderate Islamic fervour in international affairs. They did it—I remember because I was under-secretary at the time—over the Rushdie affair here. They did it at the time of Bosnia, and they have brought it together on recent occasions as well. So it is in these areas where the Saudis can play a moderating role that we have a common interest that is worth cultivating. On top of that there are specific instances where the present Saudi approach and activity run very closely to our own—Yemen, which was quoted earlier, is a case in point here. There are other elements. The Saudis played a supportive part, shall we say, in the overthrow of Gaddafi, a man for whom they had no reason to have sympathy at all. They continue to play, as I see it, a useful engagement with us over Syria and the approach to the opposition there, rather more useful perhaps than the Qataris. In counter-terror areas, their role is important for us and the liaison we have, the co-operation is very important, and of course they took a lead in setting up this international counter-terrorism organisation, which is based in Bahrain, but is a Saudi brainchild.

Q103 Sir Menzies Campbell: We are faced with the tyranny of the Division bell, Sir Alan, but might I ask you this question? Saudi is clearly the largest, most influential member of the Gulf Co-operation Council. Does it take it seriously and do you think the GCC has fulfilled any of the hopes that attached to it, particularly in the period after the expulsion of Iraq from Kuwait?  
Sir Alan Munro: In the defence field, for all the brave words, it has been an uneven record, partly because there are rivalries here and so on. I think that perhaps the Peninsula Shield Force, which was sent in to Bahrain to uphold the regime, as it were, as part of the GCC’s raison d’être, as it were, is not one of the
more successful areas, but, against that, in the social field, in the areas of industrial standardisation, particularly in a long-versed and now negotiated free trade agreement with the European Community area, the GCC plays a significant and growing part. It now looks towards establishing more of a federal system. That, I believe, is a long way off. It is a lip-service exercise at the moment. But it is an important bonding affair. Remember, it was brought into being when they saw themselves in the 1970s and early ‘80s, following the Iranian revolution, faced with a threat from Iran. That they still perceive.

Q104 Sir Menzies Campbell: In a sentence, do I take it from what you say that Saudi Arabia takes it seriously, although by virtue of its size and its own other relationships, it is not exclusively focused on these things?

Sir Alan Munro: I once heard King Fahd say on this very subject, “Well, you know, we are the biggest. We can’t tell the others what to do.”

Q105 Sir Menzies Campbell: I wonder whether you agree with the expression I heard, which is that the GCC was to try to achieve military capability. It was expected that the Omanis would run it and the Saudis would pay for it.

Sir Alan Munro: Yes, that was in that very disjointed era after the first Gulf war, when even the Egyptians said “Please can we protect you,” and they all ran a mile.

Q106 Rory Stewart: Do you think the Foreign Office today has put the right emphasis on language skills and area expertise? Are we as well served as we might be in terms of having the skills necessary to do our job well in the Gulf?

Sir Alan Munro: Mr Stewart, you put that question, I note, to my former colleague, Roger Tomkys. I read his evidence and I said, “Hear, hear.” I speak as a former head of personnel of the Foreign Office.

Q107 Rory Stewart: I think we have another couple of minutes, so could you just expand a little bit on that? “Hear, hear,” is very useful, but one of our jobs is obviously to monitor the Foreign Office’s personnel procedures. Do you have particular advice or views on what could be changed or what might have gone wrong?

Sir Alan Munro: I’m sorry. I may be unreformed here, but I believe that a composite outfit of the scale and significance of the Foreign Office benefits from a measure of centralised, albeit consultative, career management. That has effectively been abolished. On the language point, a few months ago somebody said that there isn’t a single ambassador in the Gulf who speaks Arabic.

Q108 Rory Stewart: Finally, can you remember roughly how large was your UK-based staff in Riyadh when you were there?

Sir Alan Munro: Including the elements coming from all the other Departments? May I have a little time to count them? UK-based? I must have had about 20 and then there was the two in al-Khobar in the east, who were mostly looking after the very important trade element there and the oil side, which of course is another element in our relationship where we have coherent interest. There were another five in Jeddah.

Q109 Rory Stewart: So the FCO said that; including local staff, they reckon they now have about 110 staff, but that is including—

Sir Alan Munro: If you are referring to local staff, yes.

Q110 Rory Stewart: Is your sense that the political section is smaller or larger than it was when you were there?

Sir Alan Munro: I think it is slightly smaller, and that may be the case on a broader front now, too, in some of our most significant embassies.

Q111 Chair: Sir Alan, this has been very helpful. I thank you very much indeed. Getting your words of wisdom is very much appreciated.

Sir Alan Munro: You did not come up with it, but I want to say something about the important of our shared interest in Islam.

Q112 Chair: You have one minute.

Sir Alan Munro: The King of Saudi Arabia once said, “We are the Vatican of Islam.” This country is regarded by the Saudi leadership, in its role as the religious leaders of Islam and the protectors of the two Holy Mosques, as the major western Islamic partner. We have the largest contingent by far that goes to the Hajj, and we are seen, again, as a very important partner in broader Islamic affairs.

Q113 Chair: Did you say that we were the largest contingent?

Sir Alan Munro: The largest western contingent. The largest “Christian” contingent.

Q114 Mike Gapes: There was that excellent exhibition and display at the British Museum last year. Sir Alan Munro: Wasn’t there, yes? And the book and so on.

Chair: Sir Alan, thank you. If you have any further thoughts, please do not hesitate to let us know.
Tuesday 12 February 2013

Members present:

Richard Ottaway (Chair)
Mr Bob Ainsworth
Mr John Baron
Sir Menzies Campbell
Ann Clwyd
Mike Gapes
Mark Hendrick
Sir John Stanley
Rory Stewart

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Sir David Wootton, former Lord Mayor of the City of London (2011–12), and David Lloyd OBE, Senior Consultant, Middle East Association, gave evidence.

Q115 Chair: I welcome members of the public to this sitting of the Foreign Affairs Committee. This is the third evidence session of the Committee’s inquiry into UK relations with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. The Committee will hear from witnesses who have promoted bilateral trade relations, including by conducting trade delegations to Saudi Arabia and elsewhere in the Gulf.

We have Sir David Wootton, former lord mayor of the City of London, whose term of office ended last November. He is a partner in the firm of solicitors Allen and Overy, and he led a trade delegation in February last year to Kuwait, Qatar, the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. Sir David, welcome. We are also pleased to welcome David Lloyd, who is a senior consultant with the Middle East Association, former Foreign Office diplomat and head of the British trade office in Saudi Arabia from 1980 to 1993. Mr Lloyd, welcome.

I have got a fairly general question to kick-start things, but would either of you wish to make an opening statement? My first question, Mr Lloyd, is what would you say are the UK’s main commercial interests in the Gulf as a whole, and in Saudi Arabia in particular?

David Lloyd: I would say across the board, Chairman. My particular market is Saudi Arabia, as you know. You are looking at a country that is spending huge amounts of money on infrastructure. It has the largest population of all the GCC states. That population has increased very, very rapidly over the last 30 years. We have what has been described as a golden generation. That population has huge amounts of money on infrastructure. It has the largest economy in the Middle East. The population has built that country. It has the largest economy in the Middle East.

Sir David Wootton: Infrastructure, on which the UK is particularly good. Technology, advanced manufacturing, education and training, as well as financial and professional services. The UK is very good at the specialist parts of things in relation to infrastructure such as design, architecture, engineering, project management and risk management. What it sometimes lacks are the big centrepieces—the big construction companies, for example. All the specialist expertise, such as insurance, law and shipping, it has in abundance. The primary interest of the UK in the region is to pursue business opportunities for those aspects of what Saudi Arabia and the region want at which the UK is particularly good.

Q116 Chair: Is the UK a good trading partner with Saudi Arabia?

Sir David Wootton: Yes, I would say it was. My overwhelming impression, from what was said to me on my visit last February and on other visits and contacts, was that the Saudis, businesses and Government in the Gulf have a very high degree of trust in both the British people and the British commercial business product—greatly assisted, I would add, by UK Government and UKTI effort here and in the countries in question.

Q117 Chair: Mr Lloyd, do you agree with that?

David Lloyd: I would agree wholeheartedly with that. I would add that there is a visible British presence in Saudi Arabia. We lack big hitters at the top in the infrastructure sector, but we are there in banking and aerospace. Latterly, in the luxury car market, it has become a major success story for Rolls-Royce, Jaguar and Bentley. We have a growing number of engineering consultants in the mining and rail sectors, both of which are major growth sectors in the Saudi market. We have an increasing presence in the retail sector, so most of the names that you recognise over here—Marks and Spencer, Debenhams, Harvey Nichols, Arcadia—are all seen in Saudi shopping malls now, and are very, very popular.

Q118 Chair: You set out a profile there of UK involvement in these countries. How does that compare with other countries? How does our profile differ from other countries’ profiles?

David Lloyd: Difficult to say. If you read through something like MEED (Middle East Economic Digest) magazine and you are looking, for instance, at the big contracts—oil and gas contracts—being awarded, you will tend to find that the UK is not very visible sometimes, but the Koreans and the Chinese are highly visible. They really are the new big players in Saudi Arabia and in the GCC states.

Sir David Wootton: Other countries are more visible at the primary level of projects, because they have bigger construction companies—for example, America, Korea and China, as Mr Lloyd says. We will, in fact, be there more than we appear to be, because we are mainly there in the specialist roles, and therefore in the supply chain of project leaders and big companies that are not British.
Q119 Chair: The delegation that you took, was it primarily City finance-orientated, or did it have a wider—

Sir David Wootton: It was a combination of City finance and professional on the one hand and specialist infrastructure design, engineering and consultancy companies on the other. It was a combination of the two—about 50:50.

Q120 Sir Menzies Campbell: Do I deduce from that that you feel we are missing an opportunity?

Sir David Wootton: Yes, in short. UK governmental effort in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf is throwing up more opportunities than business is picking up. It will vary from sector to sector. I would say that I think the UK Government effort is very good. I think the people in post are working very hard and are very well connected, and, as I say, are throwing up more opportunities than we are taking up at the moment.

Q121 Sir Menzies Campbell: As you know, the widely held perception is that all we are really interested in is selling arms. I notice that in both your contributions neither of you mentioned defence. Do you think that we place—for various reasons and no doubt for various motives—too much emphasis on defence sales in the Middle East compared with the other activities you have described?

Sir David Wootton: Obviously the lord mayor does not get involved in defence sales at all.

Sir Menzies Campbell: There was a time, I think.

Sir David Wootton: I am sure that they are extremely important. It would not be a matter of altering the balance by reducing them.

Sir Menzies Campbell: No, I am not suggesting that.

Sir David Wootton: However, much more emphasis should be given to other activities. As Mr Lloyd said earlier, the sheer scale of economic activity, particularly in Saudi Arabia, is huge, and there is much more that we could do.

Q122 Mr Baron: May I turn to Bahrain? Sir David, from your visit to that country last year, what impact did you think that the unrest had on bilateral trade and investment? Perhaps just as importantly, do you think that our Government—either here or in the embassy there—actually did enough to respond to that and to promote our interests?

Sir David Wootton: So far as I could tell—and this was in February last year—events in Bahrain had really brought investment from here to a stop. Businesses were continuing and I do not think that anybody had actually withdrawn, although they might have reduced activity a little bit. The policy adopted by the embassy—I played a role in delivering that, although in fact I was there for only one evening, but that evening was spent with prominent Bahraini business people, not with representatives of the Bahraini Government—was to stay in touch, to try to encourage the direction of travel and to await better days. The overall attitude on the Bahraini business side was, in a sense, resignation: disappointment at what was happening internally; disappointment yet understanding about the reaction of Bahrain’s long-standing allies and trading partners; and a strong wish that we stay in touch, against the direction of travel, with a view to producing better days.

Q123 Mr Baron: You briefly touched on the potential, as you saw it, being thrown up by the region. What more could Britain—the Government, the City or, indeed, business generally—do to benefit from that potential to the mutual benefit of all?

Sir David Wootton: Business generally would benefit by looking more positively at the opportunities that are there. There is always a reason for not doing something, and there is a general perception that it is a risky place but, on the other hand, those that are there are doing well—they are doing good business and the individuals who are there are enjoying the life there. So it is a combination of the Government, the companies that are doing well and enjoying their activities there, and indeed the City promoting involvement in the region to other British companies and trying to induce those other British companies to see things more positively.

Q124 Mark Hendrick: Thank you both for giving your time to be with us today. What kinds of trade and investment are the UK Government encouraging in the Saudi-Bahrain region at the moment?

Sir David Wootton: In the eastern province of Saudi Arabia, it is oil and gas development. I had a very good meeting with Saudi Aramco, which controls the oil and gas development on that side of Saudi Arabia. It is very keen on British companies becoming involved in its supply chain, as it is very keen on using the City of London for finance. It is also keen on our education system, as it sends lots of scholars—its staff—to train in the UK. So oil and gas is one sector.

The second sector is infrastructure, be it water, desalination, railways or airports. The Saudi airports authority controls all 25 airports in Saudi Arabia, and it is going to refurbish and redevelop them all. British companies are very good at redeveloping airports and railways, as I have said. Health care has had a large investment from the Saudi Government. Renewable energy is another sector. There is quite a wide range, but it is mainly infrastructure.

David Lloyd: I would endorse everything that Sir David has said. There is also the mining sector in Saudi Arabia, which is growing apace. The projections are that it will account for 18% of GDP by 2020, which is a significant development and a significant departure from dependency on the oil and gas sector. I am happy to say that we have some British companies that are involved in the mining sector, but it is big, and I think that it needs more attention and attraction from this end.

Q125 Mark Hendrick: How would you both characterise the receptions for the trade delegations?

Sir David Wootton: Very warm. Could I add one sector to the list before I try to answer your question? There is large housing development in Saudi Arabia. I had a meeting with the Housing Minister in Riyadh, who wanted to show us all the models of the urban housing development that they are undertaking. I was sitting, as is usual, next to him. At the end of the
meeting, he stood up, ignored me, went over to the delegation and said, “I want all your business cards.” They were from British specialist companies, all of which were active in housing, so housing is an important sector.

David Lloyd: Could I just add to Sir David’s comment? I obviously operate at a rather lower level, and I see Sir William Patey [in the room] over there, who on many occasions, as British Ambassador at Riyadh, has welcomed Middle East Association trade delegations to the Kingdom. Our membership is historically SME, tending from the middle level of SME to the much smaller levels—some of them may simply be single people. However, in my experience—I have been taking missions to the Kingdom since 2004—we have always been well received by the Saudis.

Missions who are new to the Saudi market tend to have perceptions largely fed by the British press, which tends to be a little bit on the disabusing side when reporting on Saudi Arabia. However, they are always agreeably surprised when they arrive in a nice hotel and the sun is shining the next morning, and they see people going about their business, smiling and shaking hands. They suddenly realise, “Oh, this is actually quite a civilised country.”

The interest sparked by visiting trade delegations from the UK is very real—there is no question. Every time we go to Saudi Arabia, we spend 10 days and go to three provinces—eastern province, Riyadh and western province. The more time we spend, the more our notoriety, for want of a better word, spreads in front of us. The welcome increases as we go along. I think that the amount of business done over the years is actually quite an impressive.

Sir David Wootton: I think it is very important to maintain a regularity of visits and to maintain those visits at different levels, either on the same visit or separately. The Middle East is one of many parts of the world where relationships are extremely important. If the business in hand is technical—a transport system—there will need to be relationships at the technical level, but the technicians will not be the decision makers; the decision makers will be elsewhere in the system, and the decision will only go to a particular country’s way if the relationships at that level are properly handled as well—whether it is Government Ministers, members of the royal family or, dare I say it, on occasion, the lord mayor. You need the different levels all co-ordinated at the same time.

Q.126 Mark Hendrick: Sir David, the notes from your visit refer to the newly launched Two Kingdoms Strategic Partnership. What did you expect from the partnership? Lots of business and visits have been going on meanwhile, but the time will, at some stage, be right for a reconfiguration of the formal structure. It is work in progress, but meanwhile a lot of good things are going on.

Q.127 Chair: How important is the Gulf to the City? You were very focused on City interests. In particular, you have been involved in promoting London as a centre for dispute resolution. Has that been successful?

Sir David Wootton: Yes.

Q.128 Chair: Why do people in the Gulf want to come to London to resolve their disputes?

Sir David Wootton: Because the legal and judicial system here is perhaps more open, predictable and reliable than elsewhere. There are obviously very long historical links between the UK and the Middle East and much involvement of London lawyers. The dispute resolution mechanisms have not been as well developed there as they have been here. However, in Qatar and Dubai, there are recently-established financial centres, both of which have commercial courts—legal arms—attached, which have been led by British judges. Lord Woolf started the centre in Qatar and Lord Phillips is taking over from him, and a retired Appeal Court judge is the head judge at the legal centre in Dubai, but they are now bringing on local judges from Dubai and Qatar.

Q.129 Chair: That sounds like a recipe for losing business from London.

Sir David Wootton: But the City always does better—whether it is legal, financial or anything else—when other centres do better.

Q.130 Sir Menzies Campbell: You were complimentary, Sir David, a moment or two ago about the role of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in promoting British trade and commercial interests. Will you expand on that a little more? Perhaps give us an illustration of the sort of things that the FCO is able to do?

Sir David Wootton: One example, which may appear trivial but I don’t think is, is the quality of the people who turn up at an embassy or consulate reception. Standard fare when the Lord Mayor visits is that the ambassador, the high commissioner or the consul general will give a reception at which the Lord Mayor will speak. You can tell whether the people from the city in question are high-quality people or not high-quality people. Pretty well without exception on all the visits I made, but particularly in the Middle East, the quality of local who came—I knew it was not for me, it was a result of the hard work done by UKTI and Foreign Office staff locally—was extremely high. That is one example.

Another example is the access to Ministers, in particular, that is arranged. A good example is Jeddah. I believe that the only foreign diplomatic representative of any country in Jeddah who is a Muslim is our consul general, Mohammed Shokat. The point is that he is the only diplomat who can go...
Sir Menzies Campbell: On a slightly different tack, but also on how we can assist, I know what your view will be about the impact of visits of the Lord Mayor of the City of London, but what is your view about the impact of ministerial visits and even, on some occasions, state visits? Are they more than simply symbolic? Do they have real consequences?

Sir David Wootton: I think they do. I think they have direct business content. It could be a visit to Mecca and Medina, which, of course, is where a lot of business conversations take place.

Q133 Sir Menzies Campbell: Aplying the principle of who is invited to come to see the Lord Mayor by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, does the same apply in relation to ministerial visits—the higher up the tree the Minister is, the more impact he or she will have?

Sir David Wootton: Yes.

Q134 Chair: Mr Lloyd, do you want to comment on those points? Do you think ministerial visits help? Have you ever had a Minister accompany you on your SME delegations?

David Lloyd: Not to Saudi Arabia, no. Looking back on the days when I worked in Saudi Arabia, we used to have frequent ministerial visits. Yes, they served a very beneficial purpose. If the Minister’s visit was focused—if he were out on an energy mission and we called on Saudi Aramco and SABIC, the big petrochemical people—yes, it would have a big impact. Did it lead to any deals being signed? Probably not. It raised our profile, but I think the impact was minimal.

Q135 Sir Menzies Campbell: Does facility with the language help in the establishment of the relations you described?

David Lloyd: Yes, it does. If you can speak Arabic, exchange greetings in Arabic and carry on a conversation for as long as you wish, that makes a great impression. It is not vital to pursuing business because the reality is that most Saudis we meet speak much better English than we speak Saudi. Sir William Patey is a prime example of a Foreign Office Arabist who had a superb command of the language. It was always a pleasure to listen to him speaking in public at mixed receptions with leading Saudis.

Q136 Sir Menzies Campbell: I am sure he will receive that compliment gracefully. Thank you.

Q137 Mike Gapes: May I ask about changes that have come about since the change of Government here in 2010? The new Government said they had a priority to re-energise key bilateral relationships with the Gulf states. In 2011, they said that “the Gulf Initiative is delivering clear results for the UK. We are now better placed politically and commercially than we have been for some time”. Mr Lloyd, do you agree that that is the case? Are we better placed commercially than for some time?

David Lloyd: I don’t think so, no. I am not suggesting that we are re-inventing the wheel, but in my experience there has been plenty of Government involvement in Middle East markets and the GCC market, perhaps not always enough, but at the end of the day the way you do your business is to persuade more British companies to go out and do business. At this point in time, it is very difficult to recruit for missions to go to Saudi Arabia or the Gulf. We have just had to abandon one to Bahrain, which I hope we will resurrect four or five months hence, but the normal take-up of between 15 and 20 missionaries to Saudi Arabia had now dropped to 10 or below.

Q138 Mike Gapes: What is the reason for that? Are they related to Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, or they UK-related?

David Lloyd: It is a bit of both. On one hand, it is the recession at home, which has knocked people sideways. Budgets here have been cut drastically, and finance managers are not prepared to say, “Yes, you can go off on a trip to Saudi Arabia provided you come back with a nice fat deal in your pocket.”
Is that then going to challenge the ambition that the Government have to increase trade with the Gulf? Does it mean that their ambition is not achievable, because of these factors?

David Lloyd: I don’t think so, no, because in spite of what I have said, our trade with Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states is going up. With Saudi Arabia, in the period January to August 2012, it went up by 4%, and with Bahrain it went up by 35%, which is pretty impressive. There is a steady increase, but nothing dramatic, but I would regard that as a natural progression anyway.

Q139 Mike Gapes: Is that then going to challenge the ambition that the Government have to increase trade with the Gulf? Does it mean that their ambition is not achievable, because of these factors?

David Lloyd: That’s a difficult one.

Q140 Mike Gapes: What you are saying is that we could do much more and there is enormous potential that we are not grasping.

David Lloyd: Yes.

Sir David Wootton: We are better off commercially in the narrow sense. The governmental effort under Chris Innes-Hopkins in Riyadh and Dai Harris in the Eastern Province is much improved. It is much more sharply focused and directed. There are resource constraints, but all Government Departments have resource constraints. Mr Lloyd is entirely right in that the quality of Government effort has yet to be matched in the sector that it is really directed at, and I do not disagree at all with the reasons that you have given. One of the needs is to get that message across.

It is not so much a matter of getting the message across, but getting movement.

Q141 Mike Gapes: You referred to cutbacks in companies, but given your experience as a former diplomat, would you comment on whether you think that the FCO has the resources to carry through the commercial aspect of this Gulf initiative, not just in terms of people but in terms of the language skills and network; it would need? Is that a problem?

David Lloyd: I certainly think that language skills are not a problem. The problem as I see it, as a mission leader visiting GCC countries regularly, is the diminution of staff within the UKTI staff.

Q142 Mike Gapes: UK-based staff?

David Lloyd: Partly, but also locally engaged staff and the inability to recruit and retain locally engaged staff of the right calibre to carry out those jobs.

Q143 Mike Gapes: Is that because we do not pay them enough and the good ones get recruited by commercial organisations?

David Lloyd: I would say exactly that, yes.

Q144 Mr Ainsworth: All the same trend of trying to explore the support for exporters and businesses in the countries concerned, Mr Lloyd, you sent us a note—you have repeated some of those comments today—about the support being at one end exemplary and at the other lamentable. In your note, you appear to put that down to budget cuts and the inability to recruit and retain decent staff. How do you compare, or have you any ability to compare, the support given by UKTI with that given to exporters from other countries?

David Lloyd: There is a fact that has not been mentioned here, and that is the charges that UKTI raises on visiting business people. Some of my missionaries will say without hesitation, “This is a tax on exports. Why is it happening?” Charges have been in the system for as long as I can remember. When I was running the trade office in Khobar 25 years ago, charges were first introduced, but they were very light touch. But even then, there was quite a strong reaction against them. The instruction went round from London, saying, “If you have a British business visitor calling on you, and he is there for more than 10 minutes, the clock has to start ticking,” which, frankly, we found absurd. I used to learn quite a lot from British visitors coming to see me who knew the area and who were doing business there—or at least as much as I was able to give them.

Anyway, that is an older story. Far more recently, the overseas market introduction service—affectionately known as OMIS—now imposes a charge on non-UKTI missionaries if they want an official reception.Wrapped up with an official reception—that is a reception held at the embassy, on embassy premises—comes an official briefing and perhaps some minor programme arrangements with, for instance, the local chambers of commerce, or whoever it may be. The minimum charge across the world is £2,000 per post. If you are on my mission, I have to sell this to you in advance: I have to say, “Mr Ainsworth, the embassy is offering us this reception. Do you want to take it up?”

Mr Ainsworth: Do you want to put your hand in your pocket?

David Lloyd: Exactly. You say, “Well, yes, but who is going to come?” Answer: “You can’t be absolutely certain.” The biggest problem here is that you are paying money up front, and there is no guarantee what the product is. Sometimes it is good, sometimes it is bad. I have had missionaries who have said, “We’re going to ask for our money back. We went to this reception. We paid £300, and there was nobody there. We knew.” The net effect of that is that we are now starting to have to bypass UKTI services at the embassy, because missionaries cannot afford to pay that price. That seems to me to be a major deterrent. Why are we charging our exporters?
council tax payers. So far as I know, the embassies and high commissions do not charge the City for events and do not charge people to come to those events; that may have escaped my attention, but I do not think so. If it is possible to deliver these things within the budgetary constraints, it is a much better model, because you keep much more control, and you get away from the issues that Mr Lloyd refers to. We have, from time to time, had suggestions that we should charge to bring us in line with the market, but we have declined the opportunity thus far.

Q147 Mr Ainsworth: Have you any knowledge of other nations doing business in a much better or more supportive way?

Sir David Wootton: Not beyond the anecdotal. Almost everywhere I went, someone would say, “Where have the British been? You are not as visible as”—and then there was mention of a number of countries. It is always the same countries.

Q148 Mr Ainsworth: Give us the list. It is France, it is America, it is... 

Sir David Wootton: What I ended up not knowing is whether, if that person is having a conversation with a visitor from France, they say exactly the same thing, but just put Britain in the array of countries, and not France. I do not know. It would be wrong to make a judgment just on anecdote.

Q149 Mr Ainsworth: Mr Lloyd, in your note you raise one of the obstacles to trade, which is the disbelieving portrayal of Saudi Arabia, the big country in terms of trade figures, in the British press. You go on to say that you think that the Saudis do not help themselves, and that they could do more to explain some of the considerable reforms that have been carried out in the last few years. Would you like to expand on that? You are here, in front of a load of politicians who have been disbelieved by the press repeatedly and personally. Do you really think that Saudi Arabia is missing a trick in terms of presenting some of the changes that are taking place in that country?

David Lloyd: Yes, very much so. But then they are not good at promoting themselves. They are not in the business of lobbying. Without making too much of a generalisation, Arabs on the whole are not good at promoting themselves—at putting themselves on the map and saying, “Look, there may be lots of warts here, but there are also lots of good parts as well.” The Saudis, regrettably, after all, tend to be the focus of the British press. If something goes wrong, whatever it may be—human rights, corruption—that is the negative impression that is left with the British public.

If you take the appointment of 30 Saudi women—I am straying slightly into the political arena, which I was not intending to do—to the Majlis ash-Shoura, the King’s special council recently, that was a huge step forward. I was pleased to see that it got a report, albeit a rather short one, on ITN news about three weeks ago. The Saudi woman who was interviewed as the lead anchorwoman, if you like, is well known to us—I know her personally—and is as fine an example of Saudi professional womanhood as you would find anywhere. But how many people in this country, after reading the British press, will come away with an impression which is other than poor, at best, about Saudi women, because the story that is put around is that they are repressed, largely locked up in their houses and cannot travel? There is an element of truth in that, but things have moved on. When I was in Al Khobar, you could go into Saudi Aramco or any of the banks and there would not be a woman in sight. You go into these big organisations now and you find Saudi women who have been to university; they have good degrees, they have competed for their places against Saudi males, and they are taking up a lot of the middle management and, to an increased extent, the more senior management roles.

Q150 Mr Ainsworth: Sir David, do you think that some of the progress or reforms that there have been in Saudi Arabia are understood? If not, do you think that damages our trade relations?

Sir David Wootton: I think that there is a lot of scope for more awareness here of the experience of British businesses there, including the experience of what it is like to live and work—the experience of individuals, as well as of companies—and for more being said about the changes that are taking place. One does not want to overdo it. It is still what it is. It is Saudi Arabia and it is a particular culture, but greater understanding of what it is and what it is not would, I think, help.

Q151 Mr Ainsworth: The other issue that you and others raise, in terms of a barrier to doing business in Saudi Arabia, Mr Lloyd, is the visa regime. The Americans have managed to get a reciprocal arrangement with the Saudis; we have not. Do you think we have tried hard enough? How big a problem is the Saudi visa regime to people trying to do business in the kingdom?

David Lloyd: I would describe it as a major irritant. If you apply through the normal channels for a Saudi visa, and you ask for a 12-month multiple entry, which you are entitled to, there is a 99% chance that you will get a three-month single entry visa. If you want to go into any of the other GCC states from Saudi Arabia and you want to come back, you can’t without re-applying at a Saudi embassy in a GCC country, so that is frequently a big irritant. The fact is that you can go to any other GCC state, arrive there and pay $5 for an entry visa, no problem. You simply cannot do that with Saudi Arabia. The Saudi Government have tried hard. There is a curious situation where you have the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Saudi Arabia drawing up a set of rules and guidelines for the issuance of visas—to whom they should be issued, at what price, and so on and so forth—but there is an inability of embassies to carry out those instructions. So we are still stuck, basically.

Q152 Mr Ainsworth: Are you saying that there is clear guidance that we are failing to follow, or that we are failing to pass on to our own business people?
David Lloyd: Not us; the Saudis. The Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued instructions to its embassies that, largely, were not implemented. I certainly would not say that HMG has not tried hard to redress the situation, and it still is, but unless or until we have a reciprocal arrangement where we can apply for five-year multiple entry visits, just as the Saudis can to come into the UK, we still have not achieved one year multiple entry visits, just as the Saudis can to sit in the UK, just as the Saudis can at the moment to do business; we have not. The Americans have done it, so why can’t we? Perhaps they just have more clout when it comes to that.

Q153 Mr Ainsworth: Is there anything you would like to add on visas, Sir David?

Sir David Wootton: Visas are always an irritant. That particular issue—and the Saudi issue, as a matter of fact—was raised with me. It will not surprise you to know that British visa policy was raised with me by Saudis.

Mr Ainsworth: It was raised with me also—

Q154 Rory Stewart: Apart from the United States, which other of our major competitors has an easier playing field? We have a big problem, but so do our other competitors.

David Lloyd: As far as I know, only the Americans. I do not know about the French, the Germans or the Japanese. I suspect that they have to run through the—

Q155 Rory Stewart: Otherwise it is a relatively level playing field. We have a big problem, but so do our other competitors.

David Lloyd: Yes.

Q156 Rory Stewart: May I also clarify an earlier comment? Finally, you have told us a great deal about UKTI and British trade policy, but I want to give you a last opportunity, given all your experience, to say what ideally our trade missions should be doing in these countries, and what are they not doing. In other words, can you give a crisp, two-minute summary of what we are not doing right and what we should be doing in Saudi Arabia to get our trade better?

David Lloyd: A mission in a country is as good as the support it gets, at the end of the day, although some of our missions are very persistent. They are very competent business people and they have a lot of patience, as you need to have in Saudi Arabia and a number of the other markets. I think missions would like to be able to go to the embassy, or telephone the embassy, and say, “I’ve got a problem,” or “Can you help me with a contact here, or a contact there?” without feeling that they will be charged for it.

I took a mission to Qatar two summers ago. The ambassador, in his briefing to us, which he did not charge us for, which was very nice, was so concerned that he said: “Look, I must tell you that we here, in this embassy and among my UKTI staff, are here for you. We will be as helpful as we can, and we won’t charge you for it, provided you don’t push your luck too far.” The fact that he had to tell missions, to give them that message, I thought said a lot, actually.

Q157 Rory Stewart: You have also said, in a recent interview, that British companies have paid far too little attention to market and lost grounds to competitors. That is presumably the other side of the story. Is there anything to be done about that? Is it true that British companies are not as hungry for these export markets as they should be, and what on earth does one do about that?

David Lloyd: There is a big project going on in Riyadh at the moment for a public transport system, buses in the first instance. I picked this up in the local press, I passed it on to a contact of mine who is a consultant in infrastructure, particularly in transport, and I said: “How about this one?” I left it with him. He went to the four leading transport management companies in this country. One of them replied, and had to be persuaded to beat a path out to Riyadh. That company has now put in a bid, so fingers crossed. There is another huge contract coming up in Riyadh, and that is for a subway, light railway or whatever you care to call it. That will come into operation four years hence, which is pretty amazing. Are things going to be any British companies there bidding for it? I do not know. I hope so. Part of the trouble is that we do not have any big hitters in our rail industry now. We have some very, very good ones at signalling level, station design and that sort of thing, but we do not have any big manufacturers.

Q158 Rory Stewart: Sir David, is that different with the City? Are people hungrier there, more willing to get involved?

Sir David Wootton: Yes. The City has always found it easier to get on a plane and to go and establish itself. The capital investment, by and large, tends to be human capital rather than financial capital, at least initially, and in that sense the City has been better and more adventurous than the parts of British industry that we are now talking about. It has built up more experience of going abroad and setting up abroad. That experience and the experience of those who have gone successfully to Saudi Arabia, other parts of the Gulf and other parts of the world, including those who have made mistakes doing it, would assist the process, if those experiences were shared with others, persuading industry as a whole to be more adventurous.

Q159 Rory Stewart: You mean, Sir David, the City itself could play a middleman role in dragging British industry—manufacturers, exporters—along with it.

Sir David Wootton: Yes, along with Government, along with spokespeople like us, associations of one kind or another, and those who have done it successfully themselves.

Q160 Rory Stewart: To what extent do you think that British companies are put off by bribery and corruption in Saudi Arabia?

Sir David Wootton: Corruption was not raised with me by anyone on my visit to Saudi Arabia, in the way it certainly was on my visits to other countries. That is not a comment on whether it is there or not. With the 2011 bribery legislation here, which business worries about, as to whether it would make life more difficult, I was surprised to find that during the entire year no business person, no UK business—in fact, no business person, full stop—raised, at least with me, the Bribery Act as having made life more difficult.
Rather the reverse: it has come to be seen as part of the trust that other countries’ business communities place in the UK.
If I look back on the events at which I spoke around the world, the ones in which the room was fullest—full and standing, as we hear on the trains—were seminars about the UK Bribery Act in Brazil and Russia, where the audiences were Russian and Brazilian. I would not have expected that.

Q 161 Rory Stewart: How did we get that so wrong? If businesses get so gloomy about it and think that it would be a catastrophe for us and create dysfunctions, how did we mis-predict that?
Chair: Before you answer, I see that we have a vote in a few minutes. I want two more colleagues to ask questions, so would you keep the answers relatively brief?
David Lloyd: I am not aware of any reaction on the part of British businesses to corruption in high places. Curiously enough, if you read the English-language Saudi press, there are frequently reports on corruption, but it is local corruption, so there is an awareness of corruption in the kingdom. The Jeddah municipality sacked quite a lot of its senior staff recently for corrupt practices and for failing to sort out the water management system there.
Chair: Do you want to bring up the SFO report?

Q 162 Rory Stewart: Has the Serious Fraud Office investigation into al-Yamamah had any effect on any trade?
Sir David Wootton: Not that has come to mind.
David Lloyd: Not to my knowledge, no.

Q 163 Ann Clwyd: Mr Lloyd, you seem to have glossed over the poor image that Saudi Arabia has in this country. It has an extremely poor human rights record, and everyone knows that. There are public beheadings, floggings and torture—the whole host of human rights violations. There have been some reforms, which of course are welcomed, but they are very slow. How can you gloss over that quite so easily?
David Lloyd: I did not gloss over it. I simply did not bring it into my notes, because I felt that it was outside my remit.
All I would say is yes, Saudi Arabia has a poor human rights record. It is starting to improve. The number of public executions is diminishing. The execution of a Sri Lankan maid three weeks ago I think horrified everybody. I suspect that a lot of Saudis wish that that hadn’t happened. I, frankly, was surprised and rather shocked to hear Prince Waleed bin Talal on television, basically saying that this girl got her just desserts. You have a large portion of the Saudi population who are still third-country nationals, as they used to be known, and still maltreated, underpaid, and sometimes not paid at all. I wouldn’t dispute that. That constitutes a number of large warts, but I think you have to see things in some sort of perspective, and acknowledge that reforms under King Abdullah have been effective and, in relative terms, swift as well. I would go back to the role of Saudi women themselves, who are coming from behind the scenes to take up much more prominent positions.

Q 164 Ann Clwyd: Sir David, you spent, I think, two weeks in the Gulf. I was looking at your report. I see that when you visited Bahrain, one of your aims was to be briefed on developments in Bahrain, particularly about the human rights situation and the implementation of the BICI report. How exactly was this done?
Sir David Wootton: It was done by the ambassador, Iain Lindsay.

Q 165 Ann Clwyd: Is it in your report as one of the aims? What did you learn from that briefing?
Sir David Wootton: I learned that there is some way to go, that the direction of travel at the time was hopefully the right one, and that the job of everyone in Britain, everyone who has contact with the Bahrainis, must be to encourage them in that right direction of travel.

Q 166 Ann Clwyd: Did you meet any human rights activists? Did you meet any political opponents of the present regime?
Sir David Wootton: No. I confess I was only there for one evening.

Q 167 Sir John Stanley: The accusation is sometimes made that British Government Ministers and officials, diplomats, are cautious or reluctant to speak out in support of those wishing to see greater human rights in both Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, on the grounds that this might jeopardise a particular trade contract or group of trade contracts. Can either of you cite any example of a statement in favour of human rights being made by the British Government that has actually resulted in the loss of a trade contract?
Sir David Wootton: No.
David Lloyd: No.

Q 168 Chair: Are you aware of the reports that Abu Dhabi has dropped BP from the shortlist for the renewal of an oilfield concession that it has part-held since 1939, supposedly in response to BBC Arabic providing negative coverage of a security crackdown in the UAE in 2012?
David Lloyd: I was aware of it.

Q 169 Chair: I think we are on common ground here with our views of the British press, but do you think that the attacks by the press do impact on the ease of doing business in the Gulf?
David Lloyd: I think they might do at Government level if you’re talking about a significant contract. I think three, four or five years ago we lost a naval contract with the UAE because the then UAE Foreign Minister was allegedly involved in some financial misdealings or whatever, and it was reported in the British press. At the time, it was made very clear that the award would not go to a British company, so it can happen. I am not aware of its having happened in Saudi Arabia. It certainly would not happen at the sort of level at which I operate, because you’re looking at small business companies and it would pass them by.
It may create an atmosphere, which I think is relatively temporary, where the Saudis or whoever they may be are annoyed because their reputation is being put on the line, but it usually blows over.

Q170 Chair: Sir David, would you like to say anything in conclusion?
Sir David Wootton: There are always views about other countries and about what is said in other countries. I was lobbied during my time as Lord Mayor by Saudis and others on the matter of non-dom taxation, which is fairly predictable. Could I point you, Chairman, to any adverse business or political effect as a result of that? To be honest, no.
Chair: My constituents complain about it! We have a vote in one minute’s time, so may I thank you both very much indeed for this session? It has been really helpful to us and it is much appreciated.
Wednesday 5 March 2013

Members present:
Richard Ottaway (Chair)
Mr Bob Ainsworth
Ann Clwyd
Mike Gapes
Mark Hendrick
Andrew Rosindell
Mr Frank Roy
Sir John Stanley
Rory Stewart

Examination of Witnesses
Witnesses: Dr Jonathan Eyal, Director of International Security Studies at RUSI, and Howard Wheeldon, independent Defence, Aerospace and Industry Analyst, former Director (Policy, Public Affairs & Media) at ADS, gave evidence.

Q171 Chair: I welcome members of the public to this sitting of the Foreign Affairs Committee. It is the fourth evidence session for the Committee’s inquiry into UK relations with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. We will first hear witnesses on the defence industry, to discuss the defence and security relationship more broadly. We will then go on to take evidence from the most recent British ambassador to Saudi Arabia on the current state of relations and Saudi Arabia’s role as a foreign policy partner.

For the first panel I welcome Dr Jonathan Eyal, the director of international security studies at RUSI, and Howard Wheeldon, an independent defence aerospace and industry analyst and a former director (policy, public affairs and media) at ADS. I give a warm welcome to you both. Thank you for coming. Would you like to say anything as an opening statement, Dr Eyal?

Dr Eyal: I just want to say I was warned by you, Chairman, that I must not drone on, which I wouldn’t. I have a few talking points, if I may, to supplement the evidence that my institute has submitted in writing. The first is that the apprehension in the Gulf about British and US policies towards the region is growing. I am talking about the chattering classes and the Governments of the region. The second point is that we tend to underestimate the genuine fears that Governments have about the geopolitical situation on the ground. We tend to assume that a lot of it is a by-product of a certain national schizophrenia, and that we should simply discount a lot of it. I think that is a mistake.

Finally, we overestimate our— I mean the UK’s—ability to influence events, or at least assume a very direct connection between our diplomatic inputs and the potential outputs. So, we overestimate our abilities and we don’t seem to realise that there are many other players in the region when it comes to defence expenditure and defence supplies, for instance. There are many other players in the region that do not necessarily displace us but certainly put us in a diminished position as far as our leverage in defence relationships is concerned. I should stop there.

Q172 Chair: Thank you. Mr Wheeldon, I have a general question that may allow you to make points. Was there anything you wanted to say as an opening statement?

Howard Wheeldon: Just a couple of sentences, if I may. Our strong relationship with Saudi Arabia has been enduring. It dates back to the 1930s. It was founded on and remains based on serving mutual interests of trade and security. That close relationship in trade underpins a bilateral security relationship that benefits both the UK and its allies, together with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states, as you have just indicated.

The Gulf region is considered critical to UK foreign policy, quite rightly in my view. Bilateral trade between the UK and the Gulf region as a whole has increased by 39% over the past two years, according to Foreign Office figures, from £21.5 billion to £29.8 billion. That is an enormous sum that shows exactly what is going on out there.

Q173 Chair: Would you say that that illustrates that defence and defence sales are critical components of our bilateral relationship with Saudi Arabia?

Howard Wheeldon: Certainly. UK-Saudi trade relationships extend through energy, through pharmaceuticals—in fact, through a broad spectrum of product. I have been most engaged with defence, over many years; that goes back, really, to 1966. We have been selling defence equipment to Saudi Arabia for a long and enduring period. They have behaved, in my view, extremely responsibly through that time and through the whole relationship in how they have used the power that we have provided them with.

Q174 Chair: So is it fair to say that Saudi Arabia is very important to the British defence industry?

Howard Wheeldon: Yes. It would be foolish to say otherwise. It is very important.

Q175 Chair: Could we survive without it?

Howard Wheeldon: Of course we could survive without it—we have a lot of other markets— but it is a very important market, as of course are other defence markets in the middle east.

Q176 Chair: One more question for you while you are wearing your specialist hat. As you know, a number of Typhoons are being sold to Saudi Arabia. Some have been delivered, but there is now a pause as a result of price issues. Do you happen to know what those price issues are?
Howard Wheeldon: All I can say to you is that I believe that 23 or 24 aircraft have actually been delivered. The negotiation that has yet to be completed between the Saudis and BAE Systems revolves around the type of equipment that will be supplied on the remaining aircraft. If you look at it in terms of how the UK has been buying its Typhoon aircraft, we have a tranche 1 aircraft, which has been in service for some considerable while now, a tranche 2 aircraft, which is substantially upgraded, and a tranche 3 aircraft, which is yet to come, but will be an air-to-air and air-to-ground aircraft. The Saudis tend to do similarly to the UK: they want what the RAF has. This is a matter of negotiating a price so that they can have the air-to-air and air-to-ground aircraft.

Chair: It is just old-fashioned haggling over the price?

Howard Wheeldon: Indeed.

Q177 Chair: Dr Eyal, there were a series of questions there. Would you like to give me your take on this?

Dr Eyal: First, I would agree with what Howard has said. In terms of the current contracts there are some local difficulties. It is very easy to jump to the conclusion that what we are being subjected to is sort of—how should we put this politely?—a political blowback or that there is a suggestion that somehow if we do not behave in a particular manner, Riyadh would draw the consequences. I am sorry to disappoint some people, but I have not seen evidence of that. I have not seen direct evidence of that. I think they cherish the relationship and want it to continue. It is, however, true to say that the British export markets are being squeezed all the time in the region. If you look at the arms fair that took place in the United Arab Emirates last week, it is quite telling that of the 23 or 24 aircraft—how many of the contracts were with countries that were certainly considered second-tier players in military terms in the region—for instance, South Korea, which bundled a lot of military equipment as part of its nuclear reactors deal with the UAE, or Serbia, which now has an integral part in the purchases of the region for missile defence technology. They are the kind of actors that we did not have before. There are many reasons for that. One of the most important reasons is an apprehension in the region about how steadfast, as they see it, we are in protecting their interests. There is a feeling that there is the beginning of a diversification attempt, although I dare say that at the end of the day they know that the top quality, leading edge technology still comes from a handful of western suppliers.

Q178 Mark Hendrick: Mr Wheeldon, looking at the two Al Yamamah projects and the Salem project, how important do you feel those deals are in economic terms? Europe can obviously produce aircraft: it has the technology and the know-how. In terms of economics, without those exports do you still think that the British aerospace industry is sustainable?

Howard Wheeldon: The only wholly British-built aircraft sold to Saudi Arabia in either Al Yamamah I or I was the Hawk, a trainer aircraft which is still in build to this day. Some 998 of them are either on order or have been delivered. Typhoon, of course—and its predecessor aircraft, if I dare call it that, the GR4 Tornado—is, or was, a partner aircraft. It was a European partnership. Tornado was smaller in terms of the number of partners, then Typhoon, which is four partners. We are not just talking about the UK industry; we are talking about the industries of Italy, Germany and Spain. Of course France is involved, because the French company Aérospatiale merged into EADS. There is a French involvement, but not in work sharing.

Q179 Mark Hendrick: What do you think the impact on a region like mine—Lancashire, in the North-West of England—would be if Saudi Arabia suddenly said, “We don’t want to buy Typhoon”?

Howard Wheeldon: “Devastating” would have to be the word after the build for the European partners was complete, because Saudi is a large customer for the aircraft. There are currently 72 either delivered or being built, there is always the prospect of additional aircraft in future and, of course, we have recently received an order from Oman. There are other potential orders as well. Clearly, the Lancashire parts of BAE Systems are very reliant on their involvement in Typhoon. Hawk and indeed the more international programmes, such as the F-35 joint strike fighter being built by Lockheed Martin, where BAE and the British Government are full partners. There is no Middle East involvement, but your question very much relates to that. It would be devastating.

Dr Eyal: I do not have much to add, because I do not know whether I can assess in quantitative terms the impact that it might have on either your constituency or the region that you represent, but what is absolutely incontrovertible is the fact that the unit pricing, which is partly connected to the question of how many we can sell and to the work share arrangements with other European partners, would be affected were the deal to collapse. What most people effectively do not realise about deals that are forfeited is that not only is it a lost sale, but it changes the entire dynamic of the project, especially multinational projects, and it makes it much more difficult to sell elsewhere.

I would be foolish to predict anything that puts a figure on the impact that it would have, but I repeat that we are under pressure in this industry, which is still important for the UK. It is one of the main contributors to engineering skills in the UK, and we are under pressure. Please look at the figures in terms of world league tables for exports. Some people may find it refreshing that we are under pressure on this score, but we are.

Q180 Mark Hendrick: Mr Wheeldon, how effective do you feel the British Government are through the FCO or UKTI in selling British equipment to Saudi Arabia? How would we compare, for example, with the United States?

Howard Wheeldon: It is not, of course, the job of Governments to sell defence equipment to other Governments, but Governments are necessarily involved, for the simple reason that Governments are the only customers for defence equipment, so there
has to be an involvement by the heads of state or the various Ministers concerned. It is very important. To answer your question, the British Government has been very supportive through all the years that I can remember. I can certainly go back to when I started following this industry, in about 1966. From 1985 onwards, when the first Al Yamamah arrangement was signed, British Governments have been very supportive, but only on the surface, where they needed to be. The inter-company arrangements have been dealt with very adequately by MODSAP—the Ministry of Defence Saudi Arabia Protocol office—both here in London and with the Saudi authorities, so it has been very well handled and very well supported.

Q181 Mark Hendrick: How do you think our Government's involvement compares, for example, with that of the Americans? Indeed, how much do you think political considerations come into this, compared with economic or technical requirements for those aircraft?

Howard Wheeldon: That is a very interesting question. The Saudis have had a long-standing and very strong relationship with the United States. They have bought many military aircraft from the United States, but they do have memories. They remember a time back in about 1978–79, when the Carter Administration decided that they would not sell more F-15s, I think it was. It was at that time that the UK, and indeed France, came back into the equation, for want of another expression. I think the Saudis realised they needed to have more than one partner to ensure that they could go anywhere they wanted in the world to ensure that they could adequately defend themselves.

Q182 Mark Hendrick: So it is a bit like Airbus and Boeing?

Howard Wheeldon: In a sense, yes.

Dr Eyal: There is a problem with American suppliers because Congress tends to see any such suppliers as a factor in the balance of power between Israel and its enemies in the region. For instance, quite a number of Saudi contracts were delayed for a considerable amount of time pending congressional approval. There does not seem to be an objection now that some of our biggest competitors in the region are French. The Americans are rather less of a competitor in the past few years for a variety of political reasons, but both Mr Sarkozy and Mr Hollande have made a very personal push. There have been four presidential trips to the region in 2012—two each for the outgoing and the incoming President—and defence has been at the top of the agenda for both Presidents. Incidentally, I have not noticed any French newspaper make mocking remarks about that.

Q183 Mark Hendrick: How much impact do you feel the United Kingdom's Bribery Act 2010 has had on how business is conducted between the UK and not only Saudi Arabia but any other country with which we might want to do business?

Howard Wheeldon: Those who are well studied on the bribery and corruption laws that the UK has passed since 2006 would agree that we have some of the toughest—if not the toughest—rules in the world. It is a pity, of course, that the rest of the world does not necessarily play with us on a level playing field. That apart, the Government have decided that Saudi is a good customer that meets all of the issues that may or may not be raised within the current practice and that we want to continue doing that. Saudi fits very well as a customer of the UK.

Dr Eyal: I do not think I have anymore to add, apart from to say that there is an inherent problem with procurement and quality of governance in the region. Almost every field of business realises that. The region's economies are not diversified enough, so energy and defence are the two big-ticket items. One is absolutely right to tackle the phenomenon of corruption from the supplier end, but if one looks at Transparency International's efforts to gauge the whole question of defence procurement from the consumer end, one would see that an enormous amount of work needs to be done. Sadly, often a lot of the discussion is about the supplier end. I agree with Mr Wheeldon. If you compare us with American regulations, for instance, we compare favourably to most of the international suppliers.

Howard Wheeldon: Yes, we are just one notch ahead.

Q184 Ann Clwyd: The UK is constantly being criticised for its co-operation with Saudi Arabia on counter-terrorism and intelligence sharing, mainly from human rights campaigners and others. It has been suggested that there would be a threat to continued co-operation if we cracked down harder and criticised them more for the human abuses that undoubtedly occur. What is your view on that?

Dr Eyal: I would say this. First, the nature of intelligence co-operation is that it is enormously difficult to talk about in public. What is absolutely incontestable—I hope that our former ambassador to Riyadh will testify to this immediately after us—is that the link between Saudi Arabia’s Ministry of Interior and us was not only one of the most productive and important post 9/11, but was, bizarrely, one of the most innovative. The resettlement policies that the Saudis applied to Islamic extremists, or to people suspected of engaging in politically-related violence, was innovative in the context of the Middle East, and was actually quite enlightened. In fact, there was a big discussion in the intelligence services in London about whether it was as successful as was claimed, or whether it was a revolving door for people to be recycled back into terrorism. I think it was successful.

I do not think there is much doubt about the level of co-operation. I am not sure whether all that co-operation would be withdrawn if we had a more tense relationship, shall we say, with the Saudi Government. I submit that it suits the Saudi Government to engage in this co-operation, so I assume that a level of cooperation would continue. I do not make a direct link between the two. Nevertheless, I submit that there would be damage to the quality and the timeliness of the information provided to us. Far from aiding and abetting a dictatorship using repressive measures, we have paradoxically, given the media coverage of Saudi
Regional problems—Syria and Iran? To what degree countries' interests with regard to two topical and Can we look at our two the whole solution. They are also part of the problem. Nothing can be done without them but they are not would just point again to the question of Pakistan. Have we resolved the issue? No, we have not but I organisations in the Kingdom. I realise it now, which is why the Ministry of the I believe that they think it was ever Government-sanctioned money and governance, whether it was individual millionaires giving cash to whatever they considered their pet activity is a cancer to themselves. I believe that they think one can establish a causal link. It is absolutely clear that if you establish a close operational relationship with people, you have the ability to talk to them frankly in private: it is like two human beings. If we can reassure them that our aim is not to undermine their regime, we have the ability to talk to them more. It always puzzles me that when it comes to a settlement about Iran everyone says we must give the Iranians a guarantee that we do not want regime change, but when it comes to Saudi Arabia it is somehow bizarre to suggest to them a guarantee that we do not want regime change. I do not see the logic there. The reality is that we can go a bit further. I would not submit that we can change or reinvent the country, but we can go a bit further if they feel comfortable with us. I followed closely the dialogue between the UK and Bahrain after the tragic events of 2011 onwards. I can assure you that in private it was very intensive and shockingly frank. I mean, I heard things being said that would have made me blush had they been addressed to me in public. But we cannot say them in public. We can only do that because we are perceived to be friends. I know that is a rather old, boring argument, but I happen to believe that it is true.

Q186 Ann Clwyd: Can I mention one thing to you from a 2010 WikiLeaks document? It quoted Hillary Clinton claiming that the Saudis constitute the most significant source of funding to Sunni terrorist groups worldwide. What would your comment be on that?

Dr Eyal: I do not think it is remarkable. In one sense it is almost the mirror image of the problem that we have with Pakistan, which is that they are part of the solution but also part of the problem. There is absolutely no doubt that a lot of the funding that came for various terrorist organisations came from various Saudi sources. Whether it was bad governance, whether it was individual millionaires giving cash to whatever they considered their pet project— it is a mixture of all these things. I don’t think it was ever Government-sanctioned money and I believe that the Saudis have realised that this whole activity is a cancer to themselves. I believe that they realise it now, which is why the Ministry of the Interior is probably one of the more efficient organisations in the Kingdom. Have we resolved the issue? No, we have not but I would just point again to the question of Pakistan. Nothing can be done without them but they are not the whole solution. They are also part of the problem.

Q187 Mr Ainsworth: Can we look at our two countries' interests with regard to two topical and regional problems— Syria and Iran? To what degree are our interests and Saudi Arabia’s aligned?

Howard Wheeldon: I will just make a brief comment on that and bring another country in if I may, but link it to Iran. There was a huge sea change in Saudi attitude when Kuwait was invaded in 1990. That changed their whole approach. That made them see security, and it frightened them. I think it is from there that we move forward. I have been there many times and I see it from perhaps a different perspective from my colleagues who have either lived there or the former ambassador who has obviously spent a lot of time there. They do look over their shoulder. They are concerned. Iran, Syria and, indeed, Israel are all big concerns to them. So I think we should not underestimate how they see security and how they fear the potential of what could happen if they don’t get it right.

Dr Eyal: To answer your question, Mr Ainsworth, I think that our security interests are very closely aligned to those of Saudi Arabia when it comes to the two countries that you have cited. The Saudi perspective would be to create a unified Sunni-dominated Syrian Government, which is not necessarily pro-Western but is not dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt, keeps its distance from Egypt and keeps its distance from Iran. I submit that we may not put it in such stark terms, but HM’s intentions would not be that different. In the case of Iran, the same. They do not want an Iran that sponsors a variety of proxy militias throughout the region, supplies weapons to everyone, proliferates a variety of weapons and acquires nuclear capabilities as well.

I think the differences, however, are on the degrees. For instance, we would not see Shi’a as being necessarily impossible to accommodate in the structure of the Middle East as it is now. We accept that Iran is a big country in the region and deserves and has to have its secure place. Indeed, all the discussion with Iran is predicated on that, I do not think that we see eye to eye with Saudi Arabia on that; I think that their belief is that the weaker Iran is, the better. That is not our view necessarily. But I think that, in broad terms, if you look at the kind of security challenges facing us at this very moment, we approximate quite closely to the Saudi interests in the region.

Q188 Mr Ainsworth: I am a little confused. Are you saying that in the near term our interests are aligned but in the longer term they are not? I do not see how you can say that they are aligned and then indicate that we have a very different approach to how we see Shi’a and other minorities being treated—indeed, to how we see the biggest Shi’a country in the region being viewed and treated. Surely it is self-evident that we have a very different approach to Sunni hegemony than Saudi Arabia does.

Dr Eyal: Yes, absolutely, and that is what I was trying to say. I think it is only a question of shades of grey. We do want a resolution in Syria and we want a resolution in Syria with a Government who are not aligned to Iran. In that respect, tick the box with Saudi Arabia. We do want an Iran that does not have nuclear weapons; another box ticked with Saudi Arabia.

Dr Eyal: I do not think it is remarkable. In one sense it is almost the mirror image of the problem that we have with Pakistan, which is that they are part of the solution but also part of the problem. There is absolutely no doubt that a lot of the funding that came for various terrorist organisations came from various Saudi sources. Whether it was bad governance, whether it was individual millionaires giving cash to whatever they considered their pet activity is a cancer to themselves. I believe that they think one can establish a causal link. It is absolutely clear that if you establish a close operational relationship with people, you have the ability to talk to them frankly in private: it is like two human beings. If we can reassure them that our aim is not to undermine their regime, we have the ability to talk to them more. It always puzzles me that when it comes to a settlement about Iran everyone says we must give the Iranians a guarantee that we do not want regime change, but when it comes to Saudi Arabia it is somehow bizarre to suggest to them a guarantee that we do not want regime change. I do not see the logic there. The reality is that we can go a bit further. I would not submit that we can change or reinvent the country, but we can go a bit further if they feel comfortable with us. I followed closely the dialogue between the UK and Bahrain after the tragic events of 2011 onwards. I can assure you that in private it was very intensive and shockingly frank. I mean, I heard things being said that would have made me blush had they been addressed to me in public. But we cannot say them in public. We can only do that because we are perceived to be friends. I know that is a rather old, boring argument, but I happen to believe that it is true.

Q186 Ann Clwyd: Can I mention one thing to you from a 2010 WikiLeaks document? It quoted Hillary Clinton claiming that the Saudis constitute the most significant source of funding to Sunni terrorist groups worldwide. What would your comment be on that?

Dr Eyal: I do not think it is remarkable. In one sense it is almost the mirror image of the problem that we have with Pakistan, which is that they are part of the solution but also part of the problem. There is absolutely no doubt that a lot of the funding that came for various terrorist organisations came from various Saudi sources. Whether it was bad governance, whether it was individual millionaires giving cash to whatever they considered their pet project— it is a mixture of all these things. I don’t think it was ever Government-sanctioned money and I believe that the Saudis have realised that this whole activity is a cancer to themselves. I believe that they realise it now, which is why the Ministry of the Interior is probably one of the more efficient organisations in the Kingdom. Have we resolved the issue? No, we have not but I would just point again to the question of Pakistan. Nothing can be done without them but they are not the whole solution. They are also part of the problem.

Q187 Mr Ainsworth: Can we look at our two countries' interests with regard to two topical and regional problems— Syria and Iran? To what degree are our interests and Saudi Arabia’s aligned?
However, the method of going about it may be very different. There is an area where there is fundamental disagreement, as you mentioned, and that is the question of seeing the Shi’a as automatic disruptors of the status quo in the Middle East, which we have never accepted and I think rightly so. I think that there are methods for accommodating them in the Middle East. It will be delivering Iran an own goal if we were to accept a narrative that the only way that Sunnis and Shi’a can co-exist is by fighting. So we do not agree on that.

We also do not agree on the view in which we see Gulf stability; there is a fundamental difference. I think that the big danger in the case of the Gulf Cooperation Council is that we may end up—there are two ways in which the GCC can go. It could go the way of NATO—namely, a structure that co-ordinates the militaries of the region and perhaps even lowers the defence expenditure of some of them. Alternatively, it could go the way of the Warsaw pact—namely, an alliance that invades its own countries to keep the status quo. Unfortunately, if you look at the case of Bahrain, it has up to now gone down the route of the Warsaw pact structure. I am afraid that this is how the Saudis perhaps see the GCC developing, as a sort of self-defence mechanism of local Governments. So there is a big difference there.

Again, however, I refer to the shades of grey. For the moment, we have some immediate burning—literally burning—issues: Syria and the Iran nuclear issue. On both of them, our views coincide with those of the Saudis, in terms of where we want to get to. They do not coincide on how we travel down that route.

Q189 Mr Ainsworth: What about attitudes towards a nuclear-armed Iran and different methods of potentially preventing that? How would Saudi Arabia react if attempts to stop Iran from developing a nuclear weapon led to military action, either by the United States of America or by Israel?

Dr Eyal: To refer again to the Wikileaks information, one could see that there were a number of country leaders in the region who suggested to the United States that it is already too late or that it should have done it much earlier. I am not sure that that is the Saudi position. I think that, deep down, if they could be sure that there would be no repercussions and that “the snake”, to quote the Bahraini King, could be beheaded with one blow, they would be delighted to see it happen.

But I think that views are divided. I think we make the mistake of assuming that the Saudis as an entity have only one voice on the matter. The views are divided. Let us remember, as my colleague said, that each one of these countries has its own collective memory. Their memory is that we come in, we smash things up and we usually go away. The problem for them is how long we will stay after smashing things up, if we do in the case of Iran. But they are in the same cleft stick as we are, which is that, on the one hand, they do not want a nuclear Iran. That is an absolute red line but, at the same time, they would not want a convulsion if they could avoid it.

Howard Wheeldon: I agree with much of what you said. I have two quick points. One, we should remember that one concern of the Saudis is that there is no outside influence on the Gulf Cooperation Council. They see that as the responsible body of a group of nations, so they do not want to see influence on that. This is very much a personal view. If Iran had a nuclear weapon, I do not see that Saudi would automatically want to do the same.

Q190 Mr Ainsworth: If Israel were to take military action to prevent the acquisition of a nuclear weapon, what would happen?

Dr Eyal: The Saudi reaction would be to say, “This is terrible. It is regrettable.” They would condemn it terribly and then ask the Americans privately if they had intelligence information on whether the Israelis had succeeded.

Howard Wheeldon: That is a very nice way of putting it.

Q191 Mike Gapes: Dr Eyal, you referred to the Gulf Cooperation Council and, in that context, you referred to the Saudi-Bahrain relationship. Before I come to the UK-Bahrain relationship, I have a quick question to follow up that. How important for the Saudis is the stability of the current regime in Bahrain?

Dr Eyal: It is really important for about three or four different reasons. The first is that it could be the first monarchy to collapse in the region. That would have an enormously bad effect throughout the region. Up to now, let us not forget that the only regimes that collapsed out of the so-called Arab Spring were the monarchies masquerading as republics—Egypt, Libya or Tunisia. Now, if it were the turn of a real monarchy to topple, that would be very bad news for the Saudis.

My second point is that it would be seen throughout the region, regardless of how we put it, as a victory for Iran. No one who I have met in the Middle East believes or sees it otherwise. We could claim that it was a victory for the street, democracy or whatever but, throughout the Arab world, it would be seen as a victory for Iran. Thirdly, a Shi’a-dominated Government in Bahrain will be the outcome. That is without any doubt, and it will be smack-bang on the eastern province of Saudi Arabia, which has its own problem with Shi’as. From almost every angle that you can imagine, this is really thoroughly bad news for the Saudis.

Q192 Mike Gapes: Can I now switch to a question about the UK-Bahrain bilateral relationship? In the written submission that we received from RUSI, you referred to the Bahrain defence relationship as crucial to the UK pursuit of its national strategic aims. How important is that defence relationship? Are we and Bahrain, in a sense, equal partners in this relationship? Do they have as much to gain from it as we do, or is it a much more UK-dominated relationship?

Dr Eyal: If you are asking me, Mr Gapes, whether it is sort of irreplaceable, the answer is clearly no. There are other countries in the region that can fulfil the same job, assuming that the Government wants to have a British military presence in the region, which the current Government has indicated it does.
However, it would be costly. It would have to be negotiated, and it would have to be negotiated for the time when none of the countries of the region want to negotiate basing agreements if they can avoid it, for political reasons. It is important in that respect. It is very important for the Bahrainis as well. One of the unstated issues with Bahrain is that they themselves are desperate to counterbalance the overwhelming influence of Saudi Arabia. They are grateful to Saudi Arabia, they could not live without Saudi Arabia, but they would dearly like to have others involved. From their perspective the UK is one of those key partners, so they derive an important advantage from this relationship as well as giving us an important advantage.

Q193 Mike Gapes: And there are two hundred years of history and more recent agreements behind that relationship.

Dr Eyal: Indeed there are. History cuts both ways. I know the previous witnesses before this Committee tended to pooh-pooh some of the connections between the royal families, for instance. I can assure you that in those countries such connections go a long way and are supremely important. But apart from that, it cuts both ways. In many respects every time in Bahrain I got—and I think our Embassy got as well—a sort of feeling of sorrow from the local leaders. It was as though they were saying, “We did not expect it from you. We expected you—the Brits—to support us to the hilt,” precisely because of the historic relationship. It is rather strange that the Government are criticised here for not doing enough on Bahrain, and in Bahrain for doing too much. But I guess that is one of those things.

Q194 Mike Gapes: May I then ask how the Bahrain-Uk defence and security relationship has been affected by the events since 2011? Perhaps Mr Wheeldon could come in on this as well.

Howard Wheeldon: There has been no equipment supplied to Bahrain for some time, to the best of my knowledge. We would have to go back quite a few years before the last equipment was actually ordered and supplied.

Q195 Mike Gapes: That is not related to the human rights situation, or the unrest?

Dr Eyal: The Bahrain defence market was always very small. We provided some figures in our evidence. It was not a very large market and it never could be a very large market, given the size of the country and the size of its standing armed forces. So in that respect it is not a big issue.

Q196 Mike Gapes: So the defence accord which was signed last year in October in London was more about the continuing strategic relationship and the bases, rather than anything to do with defence sales?

Dr Eyal: Indeed.

Q197 Mike Gapes: Why do you think that the British Government seemed so reluctant to make it public, whereas the Bahraini authorities were reporting it?

Dr Eyal: For very obvious reasons. When you have street demonstrations, people being arrested and human rights violations being reported, it is a bit embarrassing to sign an agreement with that country, especially on a military subject. From the Bahraini perspective it is in their interest, for the reasons that I mentioned, to suggest that their country is not being ostracised—that its traditional allies are standing by it. That is part of the narrative. I should say, however, that we make a mistake again in assuming that there is only one view. I think one should look—dare I say it—at the Bahraini royal family as a coalition Government. There are wings within it on both sides, and very often the job of delivering any policy towards Bahrain depends on talking to particular elements within the royal family.

Q198 Mike Gapes: So it was perceived in this way by both wings, or by more than one wing? I do not know how many wings you are referring to.

Dr Eyal: At least three.

Q199 Mike Gapes: Was it seen by all of them as an endorsement by Britain of the authorities in Bahrain?

Dr Eyal: I am sure that that is how they would like to portray it in public, but I do not think that is the view in private when they know where we stand. I repeat that on a number of occasions they have expressed their displeasure. In fact, the media in Bahrain is almost constantly hostile to us, as you will hear when, as I hope, you manage to get to the region. Most of the reporting is hostile. There has been a lot of reporting about the supposed British plot to divide Bahrain with Iran—all the usual kind of nonsense that one gets. But I would say that we do not have a good media in Bahrain. We are not seen as their stalwart supporters, although officially that is the position being made.

Howard Wheeldon: I am deferring on Bahrain, but I might add—you have brought up media—that Saudi Arabia look at our media here and take fright because of the innuendo that I think we see so frequently published without any underlying facts behind it. It really worries them. They cannot just ignore it, as we might choose to do if we see particular issues in the press that relate to the UK. They are hugely embarrassed by just seeing their names associated—that is something that worries them.

Q200 Mark Hendrick: UK sales to Bahrain are for equipment used for external defence only. Nevertheless, at the time of the Arab Spring, the UK revoked 23 individual export licences and removed the country from 18 open licences. The licences that were not revoked included goods such as airport components for the Bahraini defence force. Are those continuing defence sales a symbolic gesture of support for the Bahraini regime?

Howard Wheeldon: Factually, I do not know the answer to the question in terms of what the actual items were. I may imagine that, as we sold a number of Hawk aircraft to Bahrain over 20 years ago, there
may be some parts and components related to the support of those.  

Dr Eyal: In any case like this, one has to balance a set of interests. One of them is that of being a reliable supplier. A lot of this equipment has been in the possession of the Bahraini forces for quite some time, and it is very difficult to say how it could be used for any repressive measures internally. Therefore, I would say that the whole purpose of continuing some items but not others was precisely in order to emphasise that we remain reliable suppliers as long as this is feasible. I repeat—I am not saying anything unusual here—that the British position has been of an extra or deeper engagement with Bahrain, not ostracising the Government.

Q201 Mark Hendrick: What would happen if those sales were further restricted—for example, the aircraft parts?
Howard Wheeldon: If I am correct in my assessment, these are very old aircraft now. They are trainer aircraft, not fighter aircraft; Hawk is not and never was a fighter aircraft. It is an entry into and used for fast jet training. They would stop; they can't get those parts from anywhere else.

Q202 Mark Hendrick: You say that, Mr Wheeldon, but there was some evidence at the time that, for example, similar aircraft was used in Indonesia against the inhabitants of East Timor.
Howard Wheeldon: You are correct. That was back in 1998, and the UK Government stopped the whole issue as soon as we found out what was going on.

Q203 Sir John Stanley: Dr Eyal, can you tell us what interpretation you put on the fact that, following the Arab Spring, there was a substantial number of revocations of extant arms export licences to Bahrain, but the British Government have not so far made one single revocation in relation to Saudi Arabia, notwithstanding the Saudi Arabian military intervention in Bahrain in the course of the Arab Spring?
Dr Eyal: There are many ways of referring to this. One is the distinction between what kind of weapons we are delivering and whether they could be used for internal repression. The second one, which is slightly more cynical, is that we tend to react more strongly when there is an eruption of violence on the ground. As long as there isn't a sustained eruption of violence on the ground, the Government are not put by the media under pressure to do very much about it. I suspect that it is a mixture of both answers.

Q204 Ann Clwyd: There are lots of views on what is going on in Bahrain, but the commission of inquiry did not find any credible evidence that Iran was involved. Why should the commission of inquiry come to that conclusion and you come to a different one?
Dr Eyal: Thank you for that question. I am genuinely very grateful for it, because it gives me the opportunity to expand. I have read the evidence of other witnesses who also suggest that there is negligible evidence of Iranian involvement. I believe this is absolutely true. The eruption of the tension was probably unrelated to Iran, which in any case at the time had other fish to fry than to stir up trouble on the ground.

Q205 Chair: That concludes our questions. Mr Wheeldon, we have spoken about 65% of the time about the more international aspects. Is there anything you would like to say in conclusion about defence sales, or any point we may have missed?
Howard Wheeldon: No, I don't think so. I mentioned that we have had a long history of support. It has been mutually beneficial in defence terms, intelligence terms and trade and industrial terms. I can only speak for the Saudis; they have been great customers for the UK, and we have been for them. Some five years ago, King Abdullah began a policy of industrialisation; “Saudi-isaton” was the word used. British companies working in Saudi have embraced that. There are a large number of partnerships, and U.K.T.I. and the Saudis have worked hard together. We have a mutually beneficial state of trade relations, and I would like to think that that will continue for a long time to come.

Chair: Thank you both very much for coming. It is really appreciated and very useful to us.

Q206 Chair: Sir Tom, you were British ambassador to Saudi Arabia from 2010 to 2012. Welcome. Is there anything you would like to say by way of opening remarks?

Sir Tom Phillips: It may be helpful if I try to set out how, when I was there, we defined the spread of UK interests, and how we sought to pursue them, which is a point that I do not think has quite come through in some of the previous evidence sessions. First, as Sir Alan Munro and others have said, this is a country where we have extensive interests at stake. Saudi Arabia is a long-standing ally and a key partner in a complex and volatile region. We have many shared interests there, and that came up in the previous session. It is a G20 partner and an important CT partner, again as came up in the previous session. I hope that I will have a chance to come to that in more detail. It is a key player in world energy markets, a supplier in OPEC, and was able, for example, to supply additional oil during the Libya crisis, to keep prices down. It is a member of key groupings such as the Organisation of the Islamic Conference, the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council and a significant voice in the Islamic world and on issues such as interfaith dialogue. It is a major market for British goods, and with £6 billion of goods and services a year it is the biggest in the Middle East. It matters on the consular front, which again has not quite come through before, with tens of thousands of British citizens going over there every year for the Haj and Umra, apart from other purposes. At the same time, it is a very different country with different values and traditions, so there may be issues on the values compatibility front, if I can put it that way.

When I was ambassador there, we tried to map as clearly as we could the spread of the relationship and the UK interests at stake for the whole of Whitehall. We put together an across-the-board engagement strategy aimed at Whitehall as a whole, not just the Foreign Office, and designed not simply to boost the bilateral relationship for its own sake, but to provide a mechanism to advance our interests. High-level visits were a key part of that, as they always are in the Middle East. We made the case to London against the background of the Arab Spring that the way to reconcile our values and interests was indeed by means of such an across-the-board agenda with a friend and ally, and that engagement strategy in essence comprised the Saudi leg of the Gulf Initiative. On the values agenda, we worked under the rubric of the Foreign Secretary’s September 2010 speech on British values in a networked world, in which he spoke about seeking to work with the grain of particular societies to advance UK values, against the assessment, which is in line with the input you have had from Sir Alan, Robert Lacey and Caroline Montagu among others, that the current Saudi regime is in Saudi terms a reforming one. Many issues flow from that, and maybe we can talk about them in detail, but I never interpreted the working-with-the-grain mantra as meaning that one should not be clear when necessary about our principles on any particular issue. On the values front, there is one particular text that I don’t think the Committee has looked at. The Riyadh Declaration, which came out of the December 2010 GCC summit, was essentially a Saudi text and highlighted the role of leaders in meeting the aspirations of younger generations and achieving greater participation of all citizens, specifically men and women. I saw that as something of a landmark text in indicating Saudi thinking. I certainly do not want to underplay the problems in Saudi Arabia. It is a country where a great deal needs to be done—women’s rights, the death penalty and a whole series of socio-economic challenges— plus living in a high-risk region to live in. However, I am convinced that sustained across-the-board engagement, including between the Shura and the Parliament, can help with the positive evolution of Saudi society.

I think the British Council’s written evidence was very impressive in what it said about what is happening on the education front. We have spoken about the CT front and the co-operation there. As an example, the forensics training we have provided makes it easier for the Saudis to have evidence to go to court with, rather than relying perhaps on other means to get material or information out of people. On the military front, the training that we are providing, for instance, to the National Guard—based on the rule of law and the rules of international conflict, etc.—again, allows us to put across a values element in that sort of thing. Moreover, I was consistently struck, and remain so, that when you talk to people who went to Saudi Arabia 5 to 10 years ago and then go back now, they consistently talk of it moving in the right direction, being a more open society. Of course, it is at its own pace and wherever it ends up, it is not going to look like the British parliamentary model.

There were a couple of specific points that came up in the previous session that I wanted to comment on. First, on the Bahrain front, for the record, it was, of course, at the invitation of the Bahrain Government that Saudi forces went in, under a GCC banner. The second point was that when trouble started to occur, in the context of the Arab Spring—at that stage, there were some fairly minor outbreaks of unrest, I think in the Eastern province—we did a review of all extant licences to Saudi Arabia against the EU criteria and concluded that there was no evidence of any of the material that had been sold being used for internal repression. I note, too, that the commission of inquiry report in Bahrain also gave a clean bill of health, as it were, to the Saudis, saying that there was no evidence that the Saudi forces had been involved in internal repression in Bahrain.

Q207 Chair: Thank you. There were a lot of important points in there, and it was very useful. On a fairly general point, you spoke about it being a
reformed country, and that people were coming back and seeing a change after being away. You say that, looking back over the past decade, it is a country that has changed; is that trend going to continue?

Sir Tom Phillips: Well, I certainly think that King Abdullah, the current King, will go down in Saudi history as one of the great reforming kings. He has done a great deal to set the direction. I think that, very interestingly, in terms of the Saudi response to the Arab Spring, they were one of the few Governments that got it— that the answer is not to clamp down, but to move faster in some areas. Of course, Saudi-fast may not be as fast as everybody wants it, but they immediately came up with a large $137 billion economic package focused on such as employment and housing, which were some of the causes of concern. The King has, of course, moved further on the reform agenda, particularly regarding women’s rights— women have been appointed to the Shura, and they are able to vote and stand as of the next municipal elections, and so on and so forth. So the signal he has sent is of maintaining the reform pattern. Of course, there is a question mark over what comes after King Abdullah. I know the individuals, in a way, likely to be in immediate succession, so I am not feeling over-worried. A key point here is that the al-Saud do try to shift the consensus, but they also try to rule within a consensus. They try to judge the pace of change. I think it would be very difficult— almost impossible—to reverse the course that the King has set. The exact pace that they move at, I cannot predict.

Q208 Chair: On a different point, you said that Saudi Arabia went in to help Bahrain in 2011 as the result of a request under the scope of the GCC. Does that not illustrate that the GCC is slightly different from NATO? NATO will help each other out when there is an external threat. Here, this was an internal threat. Is that quite common in the GCC?

Sir Tom Phillips: I am trying to think if it was the first of its kind. You are right— I do not think the GCC has a clear military model for itself; it is what it is trying to evolve. Part of its raison d’être is a defensive alliance, particularly against the Iranian threat. Of course, they would have been Bahrain. In the context of an Iranian threat and would have wanted to send a very clear signal to Iran. I think the GCC is still evolving, in terms of what it is going to mean over time. I think that they are looking at NATO and other models as ways to go, and they are looking at military compatibility, security, co-operation and all those areas. Those are high on the agenda.

Q209 Chair: We upgraded our relationship to a full strategic partnership. What was the objective of that? What were we hoping to achieve? What were we not achieving that we hoped that we would achieve by having this full strategic partnership?

Sir Tom Phillips: We had had, before my time, what was called the Two Kingdoms Dialogue. That had been in particular areas quite driven by the business community. When we had mapped the interests under this engagement strategy, we wanted to send a signal of the importance that we attached to that huge spread of UK interests that was at stake, hence the proposal that we put to the Saudis. I do not know how formalised it has yet become for a full-scale strategic partner dialogue, as it were. In many ways, any formal structure that one did get to, or a label like that, would be formalising what is already taking place. In all the areas that I ran through— that stretch of UK interests— we do have a very intensive dialogue with the Saudis already at ministerial and lower level. In some ways, it is recognising the reality of what goes on anyway.

Q210 Chair: Was this ever formalised into a formal agreement?

Sir Tom Phillips: When I left, we put the proposal to them. I do not know whether it has been carried forward.

Q211 Chair: It is still on the table, is it? Why did it take the Prime Minister 19 months to visit Saudi Arabia?

Sir Tom Phillips: He had hoped to visit earlier, but there were health reasons why the Saudis asked for it to be delayed.

Q212 Mr Roy: Sir Tom, we know that the Saudis sign contracts Government to Government and in our case it is with the MOD in relation to defence. Is there a school of thought there that, by that type of relationship, the MOD has more sway over foreign policy towards Saudi Arabia than the Foreign Office?

Sir Tom Phillips: No, I do not think so. It is certainly true that, for big-ticket items, and not just on the defence front, the Saudis like to know where a particular Government is coming from— they like to know if you are behind your company on that. That is part of the way that they go about the world. But I certainly did not feel that I took my orders, as it were, from the MOD. I was happy to work extremely closely with the MOD on all their items, but the Foreign Secretary is my boss and, more than that, I was an ambassador, so I was representing the whole of Whitehall. What I found particularly helpful was going and presenting to the National Security Council, because there you have got the spread of UK Ministers who are going to have a stake in my country. On one occasion, I came back to the NSC to present on Saudi Arabia, and I found that to be a very natural point of docking in, given the range of UK interests.

Q213 Mr Roy: But you did not feel that you had to shape the policy towards the Saudis because of any MOD contracts or anything else that was going on?

Sir Tom Phillips: No.

Q214 Mr Roy: May I ask about the British defence industry? In your opinion, does it need Saudi Arabia more than it needs the United Kingdom?

Sir Tom Phillips: It is a very large market. Of course, the British defence industry are looking for a lot of other markets. In the end, I do not know. It is a key market, but, as I think one of the previous witnesses said, we could undoubtedly survive without it. The thing is not going to fall off its perch if you take Saudi Arabia out of the equation, but it would be a major—
Q215 Mr Roy: And if we stopped selling arms to Saudi, is it right to presume that the UK defence industry would find itself in a perilous position?
Sir Tom Phillips: Saudi Arabia is a long-standing friend and ally in a volatile region with legitimate defence requirements. So far, in Arab Spring terms, looking at the sort of dumb things that people in Syria and Libya have done, Saudi Arabia has acted with restraint when it comes to coping with pressures, and it is pursuing a reform agenda. I find it hard to think of the scenario that you are sketching out. What would get us there? That is why I stress that we did do this review of the licences while I was there, and it was done very thoroughly.
Mr Roy: What I am trying to get at is what would happen if our foreign policy got to the point where there was such a breakdown in communication between both countries that our defence industry was affected?
Sir Tom Phillips: If you ever got to the point where the relationship broke down and we were not selling any arms, it would obviously have a major impact on the British defence industry, yes.
Q216 Mr Roy: Can I ask about the 2010 Bribery Act and the effect on UK defence sales to Saudi Arabia? How did it affect it—or did it affect it?
Sir Tom Phillips: As far as I know, it didn’t affect it. Certainly, I saw nothing to suggest that it did. We briefed British companies in Saudi Arabia on the Act when it came in that is the various business groups in al-Khobar, Jeddah and Riyadh. It went smoothly and people understood the briefing. No company then came back to me suggesting major problems.
Q217 Ann Clwyd: You mentioned the appointment of women to the Shura Council. Of course, that is very much to be welcomed. I wonder if you could clear up one or two questions? While the women are on the Shura Council, apparently they are not allowed to sit in the same room with the men. They can communicate, but not in the same room.
Sir Tom Phillips: I do not know what physical arrangements they have come to. If how is it going to be, it sounds a bit silly to me. It is still important to move forward. This is one of the interesting areas of what one means by engagement. Of course there is a range of opinion, but if you talk to many of the women pushing for change in Saudi Arabia—and there are some admirable women out there—most will say: “We trust the King. We think he is trying to move things in the right direction”. Work with him and don’t hit him round the head with big public statements from time to time. An instance of that would be the Olympics, where we were obviously keen for there to be women in the Saudi Olympic team. We made our views clear to the Saudi Government are making important steps forward. Yes, of course, from the point of view of our society we would like it to be more, faster and so on, but I believe it is a system that is trying to move in the right direction and that we get more traction by working with it and encouraging it, rather than banging from the outside.
Q220 Ann Clwyd: But then, would we have got women into the Olympics had we not made a noise about it? Doing it all very quietly and politely sometimes seems not the best approach.
Sir Tom Phillips: You mean the generation of sons of Abdul Aziz? I don’t know. It is always interesting with Saudi Arabia; one cannot avoid the succession issue, and clearly it is at a very interesting moment as to whether we are looking at the present people in power in Saudi Arabia handing over to the next generation, or will they hold on to power as long as they possibly can?
Sir Tom Phillips: You mean the generation of sons of Abdul Aziz? I do not know. It is always interesting with Saudi Arabia; one cannot avoid the succession issue, and clearly it is at a very interesting moment as to whether we are looking at the present people in power in Saudi Arabia handing over to the next generation, or will they hold on to power as long as they possibly can?
family in the next generation. They are going to be in positions over the next few years with a chance to prove themselves, which I assume is part of the purpose of the reshuffle, and I admire the political nous of the king in the way in which he is obviously trying to move it forward and get ready for that moment of transition.

Q222 Ann Clwyd: What do you think would be a realistic goal for political reform in Saudi Arabia, and how do you think the UK can assist that?
Sir Tom Phillips: Again, it is very hard to know. When the Arab Spring started, the Saudis would come to me and say, "Are you saying that every country in the Middle East should be a Westminster democracy"—or an Israeli democracy, or an American one, or whatever—and I said, "No." The point is that any Government in the world is based on some kind of contract between ruler and ruled. It can be written or unwritten. It can be one based on fear—if you do x we will lock you up or kill you—or it can be based on consent. One of the best ways to get consent is through participation. The judgment we tried to make of a particular system is, "Does it have consent, and has it got meaningful participation?"

Then of course you have to try to make the judgment about where Saudi Arabia stands on all that. I think the al-Saud are pretty good at getting out there and listening to people. I have been in on some of the Majlis meetings held by members of the royal family, and it is quite striking, I sometimes wonder how many MPs see that many people on a Friday. They work very hard at trying to work within the consensus while changing the consensus. If you asked me to make a judgment at the moment about whether there is meaningful consent in Saudi Arabia to the current regime, I would say yes. That is my dipstick view as ambassador, having been out there. Of course, I cannot guarantee that it is always going to be like that, but yes, I would say so.

How it is going to evolve, I do not know. I do not think that the royal family are looking to be a constitutional monarchy any time soon, but we now have municipal elections and I hope that over time we will see elections to the Shura. You may well get to a point of some kind of Prime Minister, as it were, separate from the royal family. All those evolutions seem to me possible over time. I do believe that there is discussion at the top of the Saudi family about what is the right way to go.

Q223 Ann Clwyd: When you were ambassador, did you feel you could speak frankly with them about human rights concerns expressed in this country?
Sir Tom Phillips: Yes, against the "working with the grain" mantra, as it were. I had frequent meetings with the chairman of the Human Rights Commission. I had slightly fewer meetings, but the embassy as a whole had meetings, with the National Society, which is another body there.

Q224 Ann Clwyd: Sorry, what was it called?
Sir Tom Phillips: There are two human rights bodies: there is the Human Rights Commission and there is the National Society for Human Rights. The Human Rights Commission is the more formal one. I had frequent meetings with the chairman and I ran over our concerns. As part of the EU, we had some very good exchanges with the Minister of Justice, including on issues such as the death sentence. Of course, the Minister of Justice then made a very good visit to the UK and saw our system.

Again, that seemed to me to be the benefit of engagement—"Come and see how we do things over here." I will leave it to when you have a Foreign Office Minister in front of you, but I know that Foreign Office Ministers raised human rights issues with Saudi Ministers in the room when I was there and, indeed, on visits over here. Yes, we do raise issues.

Q225 Ann Clwyd: So you think that public pressure is important to accelerate reforms in Saudi Arabia?
Sir Tom Phillips: This was not public pressure; this was in meetings.

Q226 Ann Clwyd: There is public pressure in this country—for example, on Government Ministers or anybody who is meeting the Saudis.
Sir Tom Phillips: That is part of our system on a lot of issues. I have got no problem with that.

I have contributed to the FCO’s human rights annual report and all of that, and part of our system is to put it out there. Of course, no Government like being listed as a country of concern. I am sure that the Saudis do not enjoy it. There might be an issue: if you really want to encourage the Saudis to move, do you get more or less bang for your buck by having a public document like that, which will probably make them feel, “Those Brits are at us again”? I do not know; that is a tough judgment. The Saudis know enough of our system to know that that is the way we are, as it were. I never had a major problem with that.

Q227 Ann Clwyd: It is not counter-productive?
Sir Tom Phillips: I do not know—possibly, but I am not 100% sure. Having some sense of the current leadership in Saudi Arabia, I think that they would be moving in a reform direction anyway. I do not think that the fact that the British public want human rights in the Middle East is the determining factor.

Q228 Chair: May I press you on that very last point?

To put it evenly, do you think that it is better to put pressure privately or publicly?
Sir Tom Phillips: Privately.

Q229 Chair: That is your preference?
Sir Tom Phillips: Absolutely. That is part of this engagement strategy. We are working with a friend and an ally. They are trying to go in the right direction, and we are trying to encourage, speed it up or whatever.

Q230 Chair: May I go back to an answer that you gave Ann a moment ago, when you were talking about women’s participation in sport and driving cars? Can you confirm that that is cultural rather than statutory—there is no statutory basis for that?
Sir Tom Phillips: There is no statutory basis for women not being allowed to drive.

Q231 Chair: Indeed, there are some regions in Saudi Arabia where women quite freely drive cars.

Sir Tom Phillips: Well, so they say; I have not seen it myself.

Q232 Chair: That is important: you have not seen it.

Sir Tom Phillips: But they say that Bedouin women out in the desert drive and so on and so forth, and in other parts. I am sure that that happens, because I have been out in the desert and there is nobody there to watch what you are doing.

Q233 Chair: There is no prosecution for breach of a law by women driving.

Sir Tom Phillips: Occasionally, when I was there, women tried to drive in Riyadh and Jeddah. They did have problems and were locked up, but I think that they were all let out. I do not think that anybody faced a charge because, as you say, there is not actually a law preventing it.

Q234 Sir John Stanley: Sir Tom, during your time as ambassador in Saudi Arabia, was it made clear to you formally or informally by the FCO back in London that, while you should do your best for human rights, you should not under any circumstances do anything that would jeopardise our defence exports to Saudi Arabia or our intelligence relationship?

Sir Tom Phillips: No, it was never put to me in those terms.

Q235 Sir John Stanley: So you just exercised your judgment as to how far you could go without jeopardising those other two British Government objectives.

Sir Tom Phillips: Yes, to a degree. That would be what I am paid for. This is also why we tried to put together a formal engagement strategy—these are the priorities and this is what we are going to do under each of the headings—and to focus Whitehall, as it were, on seeing the whole and understanding that bigger picture. I cannot think of an instance when this was problematical in the way that you are suggesting.

Q236 Sir John Stanley: You made it clear, in answer to the Chairman’s question, that your preference was to write a fortnightly column in Al Riyadh, which is the biggest Arabic language newspaper in Saudi Arabia. All of us—I am sure William did it as well—used that. You cannot every week simply set out British Government positions, because nobody will read you if you do that. All of us tried to give it a personal touch in our different ways. I certainly used that to give a sense of British values. On the web, you can see my last one, which has a barbed bit at the end of it about how women driving would certainly improve the standard of driving in Saudi Arabia. I felt able in those articles, especially when you have been there a little bit of time with some sense of the market and what people are reading and getting feedback on that column, to put across British values.

Q237 Sir John Stanley: Again, while you were ambassador, did you, or members of your embassy staff, have meetings with individuals who may have been jailed or been threatened with criminal prosecutions as a result of their support and the pressure they were seeking to apply on human rights issues?

Sir Tom Phillips: I did actually meet some of the older critics of the al-Saud regime who had in their time been locked up for one reason or another. And other members of my embassy did meet some of the younger critics. Of course when trouble broke out in the East, one gets a lot of people giving you in a way too information, you cannot verify it all. It is quite hard often to verify what is going on. I do think that, through the process of engagement, we did have means to put questions to the Saudis. For instance, when there were clearly problems in the Eastern province in the latter half of 2011, we, through our links especially with the Minister of Interior, were able ask what was really going on and they gave us some assurances, so that dialogue helped.

There is another interesting point here in the Arab Spring context. When I arrived in Saudi Arabia, some of what I would call the traditional critics of the al-Saud on the East and the West would joke about needing to take a visa to go up to Riyadh. Some of those very same people a year into the Arab Spring were saying, "Look what is happening around the region. Change comes at a price. Maybe democracy could mean tribalism, at least the al-Saud have unified the country." Some of the impact of the Arab Spring was to make people understand more what the al-Saud have achieved, to put it that way. That was in the older generation of critics. There is something else happening within the e-world, the social media world. Like many of the Arab Spring countries, there are a lot of young people out there looking for jobs and needing change. The real challenge for the al-Saud is meeting the aspirations of those people. That is one of the reasons why I referred to the GCC Riyadh declaration text. There was a very interesting recognition from the leadership that is what they have to do; that is the challenge. I think, from my own exchanges with them, they recognised that.
Q238 Sir John Stanley: You have just touched on my final question, which is on the e-world. It is, I suggest, one of the world’s most powerful and ever-more pervasive forces in favour of basic human rights. Can you tell us how concerned the Saudi authorities are about it? What is their attitude to freedom of expression and how far are they trying to curtail it to prevent their own people from seeing the experience of human rights not just in European countries, but in other countries, including those in the Gulf states, quite close to them, that have a very different and more progressive attitude to human rights, including women’s rights?

Sir Tom Phillips: I don’t know how concerned they are about it. I am sure they watch pretty carefully what is happening as part of trying to keep their finger on the pulse of what is going on and monitor it. Quite a lot of what is happening in the e-space out there is coming from the right—not the left—from more conservative critics of the regime. That is a factor that one should not rule out. If you have elections in Saudi Arabia tomorrow, the chances are you would get a more conservative Government than the one you have. Part of it, one of the things, is whether they are getting criticism from the right, not the left. I am sure they watch it very carefully.

Is there freedom of speech in Saudi Arabia as there is here? No. I cannot imagine “Spitting Image” or suchlike in Saudi terms. Overt criticism of the royal family would not go down well over there. Having said that, I come back to the point about people who were in Saudi Arabia five or 10 years ago. I was always struck when they would come back and say how much more is now being talked about. In the time that I was there, I certainly got a sense of an evolving space with more being said and more being doable.

Q239 Mike Gapes: Sir Tom, you mentioned the Arab Spring. In the response to John Stanley, you talked about the impact within Saudi society. Did the events that took place while you were there result in any strain in the UK-Saudi relationship, because of the different perceptions of the Arab Spring between our Government and the Saudi Government?

Sir Tom Phillips: That is very interesting. I referred earlier to their asking me, “What do you want? Do you want us to turn into a Westminster democracy?” and the exchanges that that led to. I think that at the beginning of the Arab Spring, they were obviously worried about what was going on. Like everyone, they were struggling to analyse and assess. They noted how a great respect for the BBC. In my view on Bahrain, I am paraphrasing. One of their worry lines from the start would have been they were getting criticism from the right, not the left. I am sure they watch it very carefully. Is there freedom of speech in Saudi Arabia as there is here? No. I cannot imagine “Spitting Image” or suchlike in Saudi terms. Overt criticism of the royal family would not go down well over there. Having said that, I come back to the point about people who were in Saudi Arabia five or 10 years ago. I was always struck when they would come back and say how much more is now being talked about. In the time that I was there, I certainly got a sense of an evolving space with more being said and more being doable.

Q240 Mike Gapes: You mentioned Egypt. Were they also concerned at the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood? Were they concerned that that might have knock-on consequences domestically and in terms of their position of pre-eminence within the Muslim and Arab world?

Sir Tom Phillips: As you know, there is a complex background to Saudi relations with the Muslim Brotherhood. They were certainly worried about what might happen in Tunisia, because they recognised when Mubarak had made mistakes and had fallen behind the curve in terms of meeting his people’s aspirations. In any exchange that I have had with the senior Saudis, it was not the substance of British policy that troubled them, because they recognised when Mubarak, and indeed Assad, had gone wrong; it was western public lines that I think caused them some unease.

Q241 Mike Gapes: May I ask you about Bahrain? The official position is that the Saudis were invited in by the Bahraini Government. Is that similar to what happened in Czechoslovakia in 1968, where the Soviets were invited in?

Sir Tom Phillips: Well, I wasn’t ambassador in Moscow at the time, so I don’t know. Nor do I know if what happened in Bahrain choreographed in the way you say.

Q242 Mike Gapes: The BBC had a December 2011 news report that basically said that the Saudis said to the Bahraini Government, “If you don’t stop these protests, we’ll come in and do it for you.” I am paraphrasing.

Sir Tom Phillips: I have no idea if that is true. I have great respect for the BBC. In my view on Bahrain, there are a lot of Saudis and not all of them are going to think the same thing on an issue such as Bahrain. One of the analytical issues you always have to ask
Q243 Mike Gapes: Did we, as the UK Government, at the time, have concerns about this GCC intervention?  
Sir Tom Phillips: Did we have concerns? Well, they explained to us the terms on which it was being done, that it was under the GCC mutual co-operation and defence agreement or whatever invitation. So we were able to talk to them about it. They also explained to us at the start that their troops would not be in “front-line positions”, you know, at the roundabout. They would be protecting critical national infrastructure behind. There was a dialogue from the start.

Q244 Mike Gapes: So, did we express any reservations or concerns to them?  
Sir Tom Phillips: I am trying to remember. As I remember it, they actually proactively explained to us what those troops would be doing, so the question of our expressing concern as it were did not come up in that way. However, I was not at every exchange on that.

Q245 Mike Gapes: May I switch to Yemen? Saudi Arabia has played a very important role in the transition in Yemen. We and the Saudis jointly co-chair the Friends of Yemen group. How did we work with Saudi Arabia to achieve that transition in Yemen? Has it been successful, or is the jury still out? Were we really involved with them in what they did with the GCC, or was it very much a Saudi initiative that we were giving support to?  
Sir Tom Phillips: To change the order of your questions; has it worked? I am almost a year out. I came out last summer, so I am sure they will be taking stock. At the end of the day, this is a massive strategic interest for the Saudis; on their border, a lot of people—AQAP—down there, the al-Houthi and so on. It is very high on their strategic radar. However, I was not at every exchange on that.

Q246 Mike Gapes: That includes the Americans. Sir Tom Phillips: Americans, and I think a group of about 10 was called, including the Russians. That grouping was very important, because it ensured that the international messaging to the Yemenis at any one time was consistent. I think that was a real example of successful diplomacy on the ground.

Q247 Rory Stewart: Sir Tom, I will try to keep it under nine minutes, but thank you very much. What is your sense of Saudi Arabia’s foreign policy capacity and will?  
Sir Tom Phillips: They have got some very capable people. They have got an extremely experienced Foreign Minister, I think he is now the longest serving Foreign Minister still going, as it were. They have got good people, and not just in the Foreign Ministry. When they are looking, especially in the region, sometimes you get a bit of a carve-up among the senior princes on who is going to lead. At the top, there are very capable people at stake. Like other systems in which we have worked, it is sometimes harder to engage at lower level because the senior players are so good, and working on mobile phones, as it were, I think that sometimes when engaging with the lower levels of the system, however capable the people are, you did not always hear everything that needed to be said. The real competence was at the top, and that put a premium on the top-level engagement.

Q248 Rory Stewart: Jane Kinninmont said that one thing that we need to be careful of is that the Gulf countries are not necessarily representative of wider Arabic opinion. Neil Partrick also told us that they do not have a significant policy-making capacity, and there is the problem about willingness to advance policy, so as a foreign policy partner they are not exactly the same, presumably, as France. Sir Tom Phillips: No, but if I look back over the last two years, I would say that what we have seen is, with the pressure of events—the Iranian threat, events in Syria, Bahrain, Yemen and so on— the Saudis playing an increasingly important role, not just in the regional groupings, such as the Arab League and the GCC, but even on an ad hoc basis. I think that is because they have recognised the growing scale of the challenges that are out there. You are right, it is not like working with the French or the Americans but, to take something like Libya, we were talking to them all the time and they played a very helpful role in the Arab League and the GCC in the early stages in encouraging those organisations to take a certain line—to push for a no-fly zone and things like that. On Syria, again I think we had a very close dialogue, and we have a very close dialogue with them on Iran.

Q249 Rory Stewart: Just to clarify, because we cannot cover all of them in the time, let us take Syria as an example. To what extent do they have a clear
strategic mission? Do they have a clear idea about what kind of outcome they want? We know that they are arming people, but is that because they have a clear strategy in some PowerPoint presentation which they could share with the world on where Syria is supposed to turn up?

Sir Tom Phillips: I think Syria is an example of how Saudi policy evolves. It would go from a starter position of: “Let’s hope Assad does the right thing—reforms.” Heads rolling in the region are not generally a good thing, even if they were not a particular fan of him. Secondly, when he did not reform and missed the opportunity to make the speeches, to change the pace, and he started to bomb and shell his own people, you got a very striking statement from the King in Ramadan 2011 saying that this is just not what leaders should be doing. That then led through to a policy of much more active support for the opposition. Once they had recognised that this guy was not going to hack it, it as it were, they were certainly and I think genuinely morally affronted by what Assad was doing and they moved to more active support for the opposition.

Q250 Rory Stewart: A part from their affront, what is their vision of a post-Assad Syria and how they achieve it?

Sir Tom Phillips: I am not sure now where that would be. When I left, like all of us, they were trying to assess who the opposition were, who the key players were, who was going to come through and who was going to matter. I do not know if they were arming at that stage, but they were already very focused on what they called the Syrian people having a right to self-defence against the way their regime was attacking them.

Q251 Rory Stewart: I am sorry to push this too much in a short time, but a lot of these things seem like slogans—right to self-defence, moral affront—but what I am trying to get at is, to have a foreign policy, they have to be able to—

Sir Tom Phillips: What I was going to say was that I think that they were trying very hard at that stage to get a real feel of who the key people in the opposition were. I am sure that they will have carried that much further forward. I do not know whether that means they will now have: “This is what the Government...”—whatever.

Q252 Rory Stewart: They armed, as we did, people like Hekmatyar in Afghanistan; they are now arming rebels in Syria but, certainly in the Afghan case, it was not because they had a clear vision of what a post-Soviet Afghanistan would look like. They have made a different decision from us: we have not decided to arm the rebels. Is that because they have a different political calculus about what the end state will be? What does that tell us about their foreign policy?

Sir Tom Phillips: What they learned in Afghanistan was that arming people carries risk; it turned into al-Qaeda and came back to bite them. I do not know because I have not been in play for a few months, but I think that they have taken time to reach a decision on actually allowing arms to go through, because I think—my judgment would be—they have been looking for people whom they could work with and who are not people who will turn into the al-Qaeda threat down the pike. My assumption is that is what they have been trying to do: to find who to support and who will not become an own goal down the pike.

Q253 Rory Stewart: Very quickly, on the Middle East peace process and military action against Iran, is Saudi still the key to Middle East peace processes? What attitude would they take to military action against Iran?

Sir Tom Phillips: The Middle East peace process, yes, although like everybody else they have got a lot of priorities at the moment. The Saudi view would be that 70% to 80% of the region’s problems will be substantially alleviated or helped if there is meaningful progress and resolution of the Palestinian issue, quite apart from the fact that they see it as a sacred cause in its own right. They are very focused on it and I think that they were disappointed, to say the least, by the way in which President Obama played it in “Obama I”—that there was no meaningful follow-up to the Cairo speech. They regard the Arab peace initiative as being still on the table and it they matters to them that there has been no formal Israeli Government response to that initiative—at least saying that it could be one of the bases, or a basis, for a negotiating process. If there is now to be any sort of revived peace process, my own view would be that there is a lot there to work with, in terms of the API. It has not come through quite as strongly as perhaps it should have in the remarks to date, but Iran is Saudi Arabia’s No. 1 foreign policy strategic priority threat, and they do feel threatened, and encircled indeed, by what they think Iran is trying to do. What line would they take on military action? They certainly do not want Iran to develop a nuclear weapon. They hope diplomacy will achieve that goal, but they are probably pretty realistic that that might not be the case. I think the King’s WikiLeaks remarks about cutting off the head of the snake are significant, and I think they probably hoped that the Americans to have done it; I don’t know if they think that Americans are going to do it.

On the Israeli front—again, this is all conjecture—my assessment would be that they do not think Israel could do a thorough enough job and that they think that Israeli action would increase Iranian resolve to get there in the end, having not been that much delayed in the first place, and that it would have difficult consequences in the region to handle as well.

Q254 Rory Stewart: Finally, and with apologies about the time, I have two very quick questions on the Foreign Office. First, clearly under Michael Jay, the pendulum swung in the direction of a focus on core management skills rather than on more traditional linguistic and policy skills. Do you feel, on the basis of your experience in Saudi Arabia, that the pendulum should swing back a little in the previous direction? And secondly, is it a problem in terms of getting independent advice out of the Foreign Office that such
a very large number of our senior diplomats and soldiers go on to take jobs where they are employed by members of the Gulf royal families, or work with businesses with significant interests in the Middle East? Does that get in the way of our being able to achieve objective criticism of these Governments?

Sir Tom Phillips: On the second question, I do not think so. I know a few people out there in the positions you mentioned, but I do not think that it has ever come up as a factor or affected the way in which ambassadors on the ground seek to give advice upwards within the Whitehall system.

On the core management skills and all that, the pendulum has been swinging back for some years now, at least since the current Government came in. I think that the Foreign Secretary has been pushing back towards what he would see as core diplomatic skills. While I think that we do have to be good managers and good leaders as ambassadors, I certainly welcome the emphasis on core diplomatic skills.

Chair: Thank you, Sir Tom. That's it. I thank you very much for giving up your time, and at the outset I should have thanked you for your flexibility over the timing when you came here; I think that we originally booked you for a different time and changed it once or twice. Anyway, thank you very much for coming along. It is very much appreciated.

Sir Tom Phillips: Thank you.
Tuesday 14 May 2013

Members present:
Richard Ottaway (Chair)
Ann Clwyd MFR Frank Roy
Mike Gapes Sir John Stanley
Andrew Rosindell Rory Stewart

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: David Mepham, UK Director of Human Rights Watch, and Philip Luther, Middle East and North Africa Director for Amnesty International, gave evidence.

Q255 Chair: I welcome members of the public to this session of the Foreign Affairs Committee. It is the fifth evidence session of our inquiry into the UK’s relations with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. Today we will hear from human rights organisations, the main Bahrain Opposition and academic commentators on human rights.

As our first pair of witnesses from the two main human rights organisations here in the UK, we have David Mepham, the UK director of Human Rights Watch, and Phil Luther, director of Amnesty International in the Middle East and North Africa. A warm welcome to you both. Thank you very much for coming along. I have already conveyed to you the need to keep your answers narrow and focused specifically on the question. Is there anything you want to say briefly by way of opening remarks?

David Mepham: I know that you want to start the session on Saudi and move on to Bahrain, so perhaps I can make two quick overview comments relating to both. The first is about UK policy towards Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. We would say that there has been a tendency in recent years for the UK Government to overstate the amount of reform that is under way in both countries—to play up the amount of reform, possibly to downplay to some extent the severity of the rights abuses taking place in both countries and probably not to give as much priority to human rights abuses as is warranted by the seriousness and severity of those abuses. That is an overview comment on UK policy, on which I am happy to elaborate in discussion.

The second comment about Saudi Arabia and Bahrain is that although they are clearly very different, not least in terms of size, what they share is a concentration of power, particularly in the royal families in both countries, and a lack of sympathy or tolerance for dissent in both cases, which we have seen manifested in recent years. When dissent is manifest—when people say things that are critical of the ruling authorities—there is a willingness to deal pretty harshly with that dissent. That is the overview observation that we would make about what is going on in both Saudi and Bahrain.

Philip Luther: Very briefly, without repeating anything that David has just said, one key issue on which I hope we can expand a little is the gap, as Amnesty International sees it, between rhetoric with respect to reform, particularly with regards to Bahrain in recent months and Saudi Arabia, and reality, and the importance of then scrutinising the claims made by those separate authorities about reforms that are underway and the measures that are being taken, and then taking the appropriate measures. Thank you very much indeed.

Q256 Chair: Thank you both very much. Mr Mepham, as you are well aware—this is a point I have had to make in the past—this is an inquiry into the bilateral relations process between the United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. Clearly, human rights is a component part of that, but on this occasion the bilateral relationship is the primary point; but your points were well made. May I start with a general question about Saudi Arabia? Do you think the situation is improving, staying the same or deteriorating—from a human rights perspective?

David Mepham: It is a mixed picture. What we have certainly documented in the past year or so has been an increasing crackdown on human rights offenders and human rights organisations. There are cases that we have put in the public domain in the past couple of months. There is an organisation called the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association which has basically been disbanded. The two co-founders have been imprisoned; one for 10 years. When he has completed his 10-year sentence, he will then have to have a travel ban for 10 years. The other individual has been given a five-year sentence. This is an organisation that was about promoting and advancing the cause of human rights in Saudi Arabia. Interestingly, it tried to register formally; it wanted to be a recognised organisation. The way in which the Saudis responded to that was to disbanded the organisation, to arrest the individuals concerned and to confiscate its assets. That is a pretty disturbing indication of how the Saudis are prepared to respond when individuals within their society peacefully make the case for reform.

On women’s rights, it is a mixed picture. Clearly, the situation facing women in Saudi Arabia is very bad. Basically, women are treated as perpetual minors; they have very few rights. There have been some modest improvements in the last year or so, which are welcome. They are small but significant. We should encourage that process but recognise that when it comes to women in Saudi Arabia, we are starting from a very low base. King Abdulrahman has announced that some women will be on the Shura Council. They will be allowed to take part in elections in 2015, albeit the Assembly to which they are elected has relatively little power in terms of what happens in Saudi Arabia.
Even though we should acknowledge some modest reforms in respect of women’s rights and welcome and encourage them, it is important that the Committee should acknowledge that the male guardianship system remains in place in all its essentials, that women need the consent of a male relative—a husband, a father, a brother—to access certain medical treatments, to travel, to get married and so on. There are very serious systematic processes of discrimination against women in Saudi Arabia that continue, despite the modest changes in recent years that we should welcome and encourage.

Philip Luther: I would like to add a couple of things. Again, I will try to do so without repeating anything David said, all of which I agree with. The first is in relation to the crackdown on activists and human rights defenders over recent months. There are a number of issues there. Part of it is imprisonment, but there are also ongoing harassment and travel bans against others. I am talking about not just the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association, but founding members of other human rights organisations such as the Union for Human Rights, the Adalah Center, the Saudi Arabian Human Rights Monitor and other online activists who, in some cases, have then been charged with apostasy, which is obviously a very serious crime in terms of the penalty. In the case of Raif Badawi, who is the founder of a website for political and social debate called Saudi Arabian Liberals, his trial is ongoing.

Chair: Try and keep it focused on more general aspects, but do bring out specific cases. I think you will get some questions on them later on.

Philip Luther: I appreciate that. I have two other issues that have not come up so far. One is the death penalty, which is a perennial concern with respect to Saudi Arabia. In 2012, Saudi Arabia was the fourth largest executioner in the world, according to Amnesty’s figures. In the first quarter of 2013, at least 28 people were executed. The concern is also that not all the executions are officially recorded, and we can speak more about that. What is perhaps particularly important to note about the death penalty in Saudi Arabia is first, the fact that in some cases juvenile offenders still continue to be sentenced and executed, and that fair trial procedures are flouted in many cases. There are confessions tainted with torture allegations and there is lack of legal representation in many cases. Finally, we have talked about human rights activists; also, in recent weeks and months, we have seen repression against activists from within the Shi’a community, many of whom are political activists. Most recently, there has been the case of two prominent Shi’a clerics who are detained. We can speak more about that.

Q257 Chair: Have you seen any change in the UK’s attitude here, as democracy is sweeping through the Middle East at the moment?

David Mepham: The observation we would make is that although the UK does on occasion make statements about human rights abuses in Saudi Arabia—not least in the chapter devoted to Saudi Arabia in the annual Report on Human Rights and Democracy—our general sense is that the UK is not pressing human rights concerns with sufficient vigour. As I said at the beginning, I think it tends to paint an overly positive picture about reforms under way. To give one example of that, some people seem to think that the Arab Spring has passed Saudi Arabia by and there have been no protests or demonstrations, but that is not the case: certainly in the eastern provinces there have been lots of demonstrations.

Interestingly, in the chapter that the FCO wrote about Saudi Arabia, it commends Saudi Arabia for their restraint—I think that was the word that was used—in how they dealt with the protests in the eastern provinces. I do not know how they reached that conclusion: to the best of our knowledge, 15 people have been killed in the eastern provinces since 2011; about 800 people were initially arrested, and 180 of those people are still detained, including eight children. They have reached the conclusion, apparently, that the Saudis displayed restraint, when we have 15 deaths and many people still in detention. That might be a question you could put to the Minister when he is here: how did the Foreign Office reach the conclusion that that was a restrained response?

Q258 Chair: Thank you for that advice. Mr Luther, staying on Saudi Arabia, do you think we get the balance right between trade and human rights?

Philip Luther: I will mention one issue that is illustrative, because it relates to arms sales. One issue we raised in our written submission was the concern around the use of British-supplied aircraft by Saudi Arabia during the conflict in northern Yemen in 2009 and 2010. I mention that because there were very serious allegations about very serious violations of international humanitarian law during that conflict, particularly from the Saudi Arabian side. We have not seen any suggestion of concern or questions that have been raised with the Saudi Arabian authorities, although perhaps there have been behind closed doors. Certainly, we would have a question as to whether there was any investigation into the use of such military aircraft and military support given to the Saudi Arabian armed forces—

Q259 Chair: You are dissatisfaction?

Philip Luther: That is right. In a sense, the reason I bring it up is that obviously, military transfers are a major issue with respect to trade. But we haven’t then seen the balance, if you like, or the other side, where there are suggestions that that trade in itself has led to violations of something as serious as international humanitarian law. We see silence on that front.

Q260 Chair: Do you agree with that on the trade point, Mr Mepham?

David Mepham: Human Rights Watch is in favour of trade. On the issue of the arms trade, that is not an issue that we have looked at so much.

Q261 Chair: Do you think we have got the balance right?

David Mepham: No, I don’t think that the UK Government gives as much priority as it should to
human rights in the relationship with Saudi Arabia, or indeed Bahrain, which we will come to shortly.

Q262 Sir John Stanley: Mr Mepham, in your opening remarks, and indeed subsequently, you have suggested that the British Government has been somewhat feeble in standing up for human rights in Saudi Arabia. I would like to ask you both: what, in specific terms, would you wish to see the British Government doing to take a more robust position on human rights in Saudi Arabia?

David Mepham: I can give you two very specific examples. One is that Saudi Arabia, in October or November this year, has its Universal Periodic Review—that is the process within the UN system where every five years or so countries are looked at in terms of the totality of their human rights commitments—when Governments around the world, including the UK Government, will have an opportunity to question Saudi Arabia on its human rights performance. I hope that the UK human rights department, which is now in the Foreign Office, and Foreign Office Ministers are thinking hard about the kind of issues that they want to press Saudi Arabia on in the context of its UPR. It is a unique opportunity—it happens every couple of years—to put the spotlight on the human rights situation in Saudi Arabia.

The second specific thing we ought to do—both of us have talked about this—relates to the situation facing human rights defenders. There are individuals—some high profile, some less high profile—who are repressed, imprisoned and abused because of their commitment to peaceful reform in Saudi Arabia. It is very important that Foreign Office Ministers and the UK Government are more public in drawing attention to their individual cases. We do that in other places around the world. I have been to events where David Cameron has rightly talked very publicly about Ai Weiwei in China. There are opportunities to do the same for the courageous men and women in Saudi Arabia who are similarly pressing for reform and human rights.

Philip Luther: To try to complement David’s observations, we feel that the British authorities can push to ensure that there is more international scrutiny from within the UN system, whether it is within or outside the context of the Universal Periodic Review. There is something to base themselves on there. The Saudi Arabian authority is not completely averse to accepting visits from UN special rapporteurs, for instance—the UN special rapporteur on violence against women visited back in 2008—and there is a memorandum of understanding from June last year between the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Saudi Human Rights Commission, although it remains to be seen what impact it will have; but pushing the Saudi Arabian authorities to invite special rapporteurs on issues of particular concern, including some of the issues that we are talking about, such as torture, is important. The British authorities can also raise the fact that international non-governmental human rights organisations—Amnesty International is one, Human Rights Watch is another—have tremendous difficulty in accessing Saudi Arabia. That is something we feel can be raised. Amnesty International has never been allowed to conduct a research visit to Saudi Arabia. My second point builds on David’s point about individual cases and is also relevant to Bahrain. The ability to conduct trial observations, which often need to be done in collaboration with other EU partners, by sending someone to the trail of some of the high-profile, illustrative cases of human rights defenders can be very important. Lastly, the death penalty is a very difficult issue to engage with the Saudi Arabian authorities on, but there is an entry point in cases involving juvenile offenders—those who have been sentenced for crimes that they allegedly committed when under the age of 18—because Saudi Arabia is a state party to the convention on the rights of the child.

David Mepham: Can I make two quick points? I will try not to duplicate, but they might be useful to the Committee. On the point about UN special rapporteurs, it is a useful fact that in the last 11 years only three UN special rapporteurs have had access to Saudi Arabia, and seven requests to visit the country have been refused—the visas were simply not allowed. That gives some context about the unwillingness of the Saudis to permit that kind of access.

Chair: That is helpful. Thank you.

Q263 Mike Gapes: Can I get back to the way human rights issues have been raised and the level they are raised at? A number of our witnesses have put to us that the Saudis are likely to robustly reject public criticism, and what has been described as “quiet diplomacy” would be more effective—they say that with regard to Saudi Arabia, it would be more effective to raise human rights issues in private than in public. What is your response to that?

David Mepham: It is a well worn debate and a well worn argument. Private diplomacy and public diplomacy, in my view, are not mutually exclusive. There is a role for both. It is obviously important that Foreign Office Ministers and others talking to the Saudis have robust and candid conversations, but that needs to be complemented by, where appropriate, clear public messaging of our concerns about what is happening to human rights in Saudi Arabia, as we do in many other places around the world. That is important for two reasons: first, to demonstrate our concern about what is happening in those places; secondly, and most important, to give a spotlight and support and solidarity to the courageous men and women in that country who are pressing for reform.

The thing that is said to Human Rights Watch most consistently—I am sure it is the same for Amnesty—when we meet human rights activists around the world is, “We value so much the fact that you speak up on our behalf. You find forums in which our issues and our concerns are given a degree of public prominence and public profile.” That is the reason for the rationale of public alongside private.

Q264 Mike Gapes: Can I come back on that point? It was put to us by the FCO in one statement that some human rights activists in Saudi Arabia did not wish such issues to be raised publicly, because it made their position worse. How do you respond to that?
David Mepham: That is very intriguing. I would like you to question the Minister on that when he comes before you. That has not been our experience. When we talk to activists in Saudi Arabia, what they say to us most consistently is that they want the public spotlight to be shone on their situation.

Q265 Mike Gapes: Is that a universal view?

David Mepham: I am sure that there will be the odd occasion somewhere when someone takes a dissenting view, but the consistent view of the overwhelming majority of people we meet in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and around the world is that they want a public profile for their case.

Mike Gapes: Mr Luther, do you agree?

Philip Luther: Broadly, I think there are cases where individuals who are being brought to trial or are being subject to persecution in other ways will say specifically to us, “At this stage of the process, we do not want you to raise our case publicly,” but that often changes as they realise that the avenues open to them for redress at an early stage are effectively closed. In our dealings with such individuals, we are only taking up these issues when it is clear to us that they themselves want us to do so. However, I agree with David that certainly the vast majority of human rights activists and those who are openly human rights activists are telling us that they want the spotlight shone on Saudi Arabia. There is a slight distinction between different profiles of people.

Q266 Mike Gapes: What about the general questions of, let’s say, women’s rights or civil liberties in the general sense, not dealing with individuals? Is it always better to raise those issues publicly rather than discreetly or privately?

David Mepham: As I said, it is important to do both. It is slightly worrying when a Foreign Office Minister or whoever says, “We always do the private thing. It is unhelpful to be public.” It seems a little too convenient that, where it might be embarrassing for them to press issues more publicly, they always prioritise and give more emphasis to the private route. Both are required to effect change.

One of the other virtues of public diplomacy is that you are talking to the population of that country, so that when there are movements for change or people pressing for reform, you are saying, “We show support and sympathy for your position.”

Q267 Mike Gapes: How does the position taken by the UK Government compare with, let’s say, the United States or major western European countries such as France? Do they take a different attitude, or are they equally reticent about making public criticism?

David Mepham: That is a good question. I partly anticipated it because conversations with your staff indicated that that might come up. We have not undertaken a research into whether the Germans, French or Nordics have addressed the issue. It is a good question. You may well be right that there is a general reticence on the part of Governments around the world to push Saudi Arabia in the way that it needs to be pushed on human rights issues, whether that is to do with geopolitics, security interests, trade and so on. I do not think that that is an argument against the UK doing so, not least because the UK has been very public and high profile in saying how important human rights are to its foreign policy. The Foreign Secretary has said time and time again that human rights are at the heart of British foreign policy. If that is true, it needs to apply to Saudi Arabia as well as to other places.

Q268 Mike Gapes: In the US, for example, the US Congress quite often passes motions on different countries in a different way than is done in this country. Would you say that that is more effective than a quieter approach with a country such as Saudi Arabia?

David Mepham: I did not touch on the US. There are certainly examples in US relations—of course, they are hugely important—where the US has exerted pressure in ways that have been beneficial. There was some WikiLeaks stuff a couple of years ago that suggested that the Saudis had been pushed quite a lot by the US on women’s rights. Perhaps the modest changes that we are seeing now are in part a reflection of that pressure. It is hard to establish causality—pressure here led to outcome there—but I think it contributes, not least because it opens up more space and provides a bit more leverage for reformers within that society. Reformers within the ruling family in Saudi Arabia can benefit from the fact that people externally are making the case for reform.

Philip Luther: I just want to make two points in relation to some of the questions that have just come up. When we talk to women’s rights activists on the ground in Saudi Arabia, they are clear to us that what helps them is that we are shown to show solidarity with their initiatives, rather than in some way blindsiding them or doing something that they are not putting on the agenda at that particular moment for tactical or strategic reasons. That is important, and that is the stance that Amnesty International takes. That is one point.

The second is slightly different. I am not pretending that anyone is doing this, but there are occasions when we certainly feel that the Saudi Arabian authorities want to convince Governments and human rights organisations such as Amnesty International that quiet diplomacy is the best way and we will see better results. I agree with the general points that David has made on that point. One interesting example is that we had a particular moment of confrontation with the Saudi Arabian authorities a couple of years ago, back in 2011, when a leaked copy of a draft anti-terror law was published and we made a fuss about it. Why? Because it was effectively criminalising peaceful dissent as a terrorist crime. It would have, if you like, legalised indefinite incommunicado detention without charge or trial, and included as crimes endangering national unity and questioning the integrity of the king, with penalties of around 10 years’ imprisonment.

The point I am trying to make is that at that point, the response back to us was, “Raise this quietly with us and we will look at the concerns seriously.” The reality is that what has happened with that anti-terror
David Mepham: I think that people in Saudi Arabia, including people in the ruling family, care about what the rest of the world thinks about them. They care to varying degrees and some may care less than others, but we believe certainly important people who care about how the rest of the world views them. They want to be more integrated into the wider world. They want a stronger and closer relationship with the wider world, and that gives us leverage to make these arguments and press the case for reform and change.

Q270 Mike Gapes: Is it economic? Is it military? What can we tangibly do to get the changes you want?

David Mepham: I think that in Saudi Arabia, including people in the ruling family, care about what the rest of the world thinks about them. They care to varying degrees and some may care less than others, but we believe certainly important people who care about how the rest of the world views them. They want to be more integrated into the wider world. They want a stronger and closer relationship with the wider world, and that gives us leverage to make these arguments and press the case for reform and change.

Chair: You have both put in written evidence and if anything comes up, please feel free to write again afterwards, as I am pushing you along. We shall switch to Bahrain now. Andrew Rosindell.

Q272 Andrew Rosindell: Would you say something about Bahrain and give us your current assessment of the human rights situation there following the events of 2011?

Philip Luther: Thank you very much. I said at the beginning that there is a gap between rhetoric and reality on this front—rhetoric because it is certainly true that the Bahraini authorities accepted in full the recommendations of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry. We mentioned the Universal Periodic Review mechanism back in September 2012. They accepted a vast majority of the recommendations—more than 140 of the 176—including the release of all those held on the basis of violations of freedom of expression and investigations into allegations of torture and the prosecutions of those found responsible.

It is true that some measures take time—there is no question about that; I am not arguing against it and the point has been made in various forums—but others can happen overnight, if there is political will. The problem that we are currently identifying in Bahrain is that the political will often seems to be lacking, meaning that in some cases good measures—such as say more on them—are being circumvented, other measures are not being implemented properly and in some cases regressive steps are being made.

If I may give two or three examples. In relation to freedom of expression, prisoners of conscience, as we would define them, have been imprisoned since 2011. Currently, Amnesty International has adopted some 20 individuals as prisoners of conscience, including human rights defenders and opposition activists. Others have been arrested people who are otherwise harassed for documenting human rights issues. The issue is that the authorities often say, “They were arrested on criminal charges; this has nothing to do with freedom of expression.” That is where one must cut through the rhetoric, because often the problem is that the law itself—some of it has been amended, but not sufficiently—criminalises freedom of expression. In some cases there have been regressive steps. Although there have been some positive amendments, there are some amendments on the table that include, for instance, an increase in the penalty for offending the king to five years in prison. That has been endorsed by the Cabinet. That would be a regressive step.

On the issue of good measures being circumvented, I want to say a word about allegations of torture. Such allegations continue. There has been a positive development in the sense that, as we have heard from the follow-up unit to the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, some 26 rooms in police stations have been fitted with CCTV. That is a good measure, but it is being circumvented in some cases because we find that there are detainees who are being held outside those police stations, so their situation is not being scrutinised. They are being held in some cases for days or weeks in situations that may amount to enforced disappearance. In some cases they are in unrecognised places of detention. There you see the problem: there is a good measure—CCTV—but it is of no use to those who are being held in unrecognised places of detention.

Finally, the issue of accountability is very important, but there have been major problems with the investigations that have been taking place since 2011. We have seen family members being unable to present evidence to the investigations and having no access to information relevant to the investigation. In some cases they have had no access to hearings, and they are unclear as to whether they can challenge the decisions before a court. The number of prosecutions is very low relative to the dozens of deaths and the scores of allegations of torture over the past couple of
years. There is an important gap between rhetoric and reality that we would like to underline.

David Mepham: I agree with a lot of that. I would like to highlight two issues. There are ongoing abuses—there is sometimes a sense that there was a big problem in 2011 but that it is now much improved, but there are ongoing abuses. In fact, just today, Human Rights Watch has put out a press release about serious allegations of torture made against human rights activists in the past couple of weeks, and about two women who were arrested in the context of protests around the Formula 1 site in Bahrain, again just a couple of weeks ago. There are ongoing abuses that are of deep concern to us.

As Phil mentioned, there has also been a real failure to put in place proper accountability mechanisms for the abuses that took place at the height of the unrest and the response to it in 2011. I think that people forget, but in early 2011, scores of people were killed, hundreds of people injured and thousands of people were arrested, and there were 300 very credible allegations of torture. As Phil mentioned, in only a handful of cases have people been held to account for those very serious crimes. So there is a real, ongoing failure on the part of the Bahraini authorities to account for what went on and to hold people accountable for those abuses.

Q273 Ann Clwyd: We have recently been in both Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, as you know. It seems that many of the people who should be taking part in dialogues with the Government are still in jail. Is that your understanding?

David Mepham: It is absolutely right that a significant number of people are in jail. Another figure was mentioned, but there were 13 cases that got a fair degree of prominence, and seven of the 13 were given a life sentence. There was a court of cassation judgment in January that basically confirmed the previous decisions that those people would be imprisoned. These are people who have argued and pressed for peaceful change in Bahrain; there is no evidence that they have been associated with violence, yet seven of them have been given a life sentence. You are absolutely right that they are precisely the people who ought to be involved in a meaningful, inclusive process of Bahraini national dialogue, and as it is, they are imprisoned and criminalised for that for which they have been pressing.

Philip Luther: I agree. In a way, it throws up an interesting issue in relation to the dialogue. Subsumed within the political dialogue is not only an obligation but a commitment that the Bahraini authorities have already made in their response not only to the BICI recommendations but to the UPR mechanism at the UN. Clearly, one of the demands of opposition activists is that such people are free, but of course, that is something that should be nothing less than a precondition for dialogue, rather than something that is on the negotiation table.

Q274 Ann Clwyd: Would you say that the UK Government’s assessment of the implementation of the recommendations of the BICI is optimistic or inaccurate?

David Mepham: To some extent, the way they have described the amount of progress the Bahraini authorities have made in implementing the BICI is slightly misleading. Paragraph 42 of the Foreign Office’s long submission to your Committee lists eight examples of where the Bahraini authorities have begun to implement the reforms of the BICI. I am not going to comment on all eight because I don’t have time, but I will give you two quick examples of where I think they are overstating what is actually happening. They say “all charges relating to freedom of expression have been dropped”. That is manifestly untrue. The 13 individuals to whom we have just referred are being imprisoned and have been criminalised for exercising their right to free expression.

One of the other examples of progress is that “convictions and sentences that were handed out by a Special Military Tribunal have been/will be reviewed in civilian courts”. Well, they have been and the convictions were upheld, even though they were on the basis of a fundamentally flawed process.

In those cases, and in others on which I would be happy to elaborate or to send written comments to the Committee, they are overstating what is happening and not providing an objective assessment of the relatively limited progress on implementing the BICI recommendations.

Q275 Ann Clwyd: Are people still being tortured in Bahrain?

David Mepham: I mentioned some recent cases. There needs to be a proper independent investigation, but the cases to which we have referred in press releases in the last day or so are of individuals who claim to have been subjected to electric shock treatment, to have been hung from a ceiling, to have been beaten or to have been waterboarded. Those are the allegations that are being made, and the veracity of those claims needs to be properly investigated, but the evidence we have to date suggests that they are serious claims that deserve serious examination. They happened in the last couple of weeks.

Q276 Ann Clwyd: What prospect do you see for reconciliation?

Philip Luther: Do you mind if I go back to an issue that was touched on in the answer to the previous question? One important issue that does not seem to have been highlighted is that there have been some positive remarks from UK authorities—David has mentioned some of them—about, for instance, the willingness or interest in ratifying new treaties, which, of course, is to be welcomed. One point to highlight, and I haven’t seen the UK authorities say anything publicly about it, is that in the past few months, most recently in April, two visits by the UN special rapporteur on torture—going back to the issue of torture—have effectively been cancelled. In our view, it is a very serious, regressive step for the Bahraini authorities effectively to block such scrutiny after saying that they are open to it.

I agree with David that torture remains a serious issue. We have documented cases over the past few months. Just to highlight a point I made earlier, the reality in
some cases is that those who have been tortured, in some cases, are in conditions that amount to enforced disappearance. They are held for days and weeks, sometimes in unrecognised places of detention, by security forces reporting to the Ministry of Interior, which is facilitating torture despite positive measures such as introducing CCTV in police stations.

Q277 Ann Clwyd: May I quickly ask you about the position of foreign domestic workers, particularly women, in both countries?

David Mepham: There is a big issue in Saudi Arabia, which we didn't get to, but in both Bahrain and Saudi Arabia there are real issues about the treatment of foreign domestic workers—people who are maids, cooks and so on, to families. It is an area we have done a lot of work on as Human Rights Watch and we have been able to produce a huge number of reports. We have documented people living, in some cases, in slavery-like conditions, and I use my words advisedly. That is what we have documented—people being subject to sexual abuse, psychological abuse, confiscation of passports, denial of wages and so on. It is a very serious issue and it is one that the UK ought to press much more strongly. I am not sure to what extent at all it featured in the submission that we put to you, but it is an issue that deserves much more serious attention.

Philip Luther: I agree with all that. I just want to make a related point and to tie up with another concern that was brought up earlier, which is the death penalty. Certainly our analysis over recent years is that a disproportionate number of migrant workers from developing countries—people who are maids, cooks and so on, to families. It is an area we have done a lot of work on as Human Rights Watch and we have been able to produce a huge number of reports. We have documented people living, in some cases, in slavery-like conditions, and I use my words advisedly. That is what we have documented—people being subject to sexual abuse, psychological abuse, confiscation of passports, denial of wages and so on. It is a very serious issue and it is one that the UK ought to press much more strongly. I am not sure to what extent at all it featured in the submission that we put to you, but it is an issue that deserves much more serious attention.

Q278 Andrew Rosindell: Do you agree with the UK Government's position that the best way of influencing Bahrain and working for reform is to continue to be a friend and a partner with Bahrain, or do you feel that a much tougher line should be taken by the British Government?

David Mepham: I think a stronger line should be taken. We are all in favour of engagement; no one is against engagement. That is how you try to effect a process of change, but I do not think that the UK has used its leverage sufficiently or argued the case with sufficient vigour. I am clearly not saying that Foreign Office Ministers have not raised concerns about human rights—Alistair Burt has done so repeatedly, and I give him credit for that—but I think that, overall, the Foreign Office should be pushing human rights concerns more strongly than it has done to date. I have talked about the extent to which I think they overstate the amount of change in Bahrain, in relation to the BICI recommendations.

Most recently, at the Human Rights Council the UK did support a statement that was agreed by a number of other countries. At the previous Human Rights Council, back in March, the UK was an outlier; it refused to back a statement that most of the other countries of the world had signed up to, which was very disappointing. So, yes, there are clearly examples where the UK could be stronger and more forceful in pressing human rights concerns with Bahrain.

Philip Luther: To complement that, and to build on what David finished on there, in terms of the UN forums and the collaboration with other EU partners, opportunities will be coming up at the Human Rights Council sessions in May to June this year, and then later in September, where we certainly think that the UK can play an important role in working with EU partners to table a resolution on Bahrain for those sessions.

Q279 Andrew Rosindell: In those forums, have the British Government been vociferous enough so far?

David Mepham: No, I don't think they have. As I say, at the March Human Rights Council session of the UN, it was the UK—and the US, actually—that were in a very weak position in refusing to accept a statement that was absolutely accurate in its analysis of the problems, and sensible and pragmatic in what it was calling for, and the UK did not want to support it. They have moved their position a bit because they did come out in favour of the most recent statement at the Human Rights Council.

Q280 Andrew Rosindell: Why the caution? What do you put that down to?

David Mepham: That is absolutely the question you should push Ministers on. Their argument, as you have put it to me, is that we will engage with the Bahraini royal family and will have close relationships with them and by so doing will exert influence. That approach has been used for two years and it is not obvious, to us, that it has had much impact. There have been very modest changes—modest steps to implement the recommendations made by the BICI—but not much to show for it, so a question to put to the Minister is: is his approach working? One of the statements, I cannot remember whether it was in the chapter, or rather the case study on Bahrain—there was no chapter because it is not regarded as a country of concern, which is another problem—or in the submission to your Committee, talks about the trajectory in Bahrain being positive, that the trajectory for reform is positive. Again, I am not sure how they have reached that conclusion, that things are moving in a positive direction. There are major outstanding issues that need to be addressed.

Q281 Chair: When you visit Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, are you getting support from the embassies?

David Mepham: In Saudi, we don't get access. We were in Saudi between 2006 and 2009 and they have not allowed us to go since. They refuse to give us visas. With Bahrain, a delegation from Human Rights Watch went there in February.

Q282 Chair: And does the British Embassy support you there?

David Mepham: No, it wasn't involved at all in the visit.
Q 283 Chair: Did you ask for support? David Mepham: No, we wouldn’t have asked for support.

Philip Luther: On Saudi Arabia, we have never had access to Saudi Arabia for research purposes, though we have repeatedly asked. That is Saudi Arabia. In terms of Bahrain, we have had fairly regular access over the years. We last visited in January of this year. One issue that remains and is certainly a problem in the message it sends, quite apart from the restrictions it puts on the work of international human rights organisations, is the fact that Bahraini authorities still insist on a restricted period of access of only five days, specifically not including weekends. The idea, it seems, is to ensure that international human rights specialists are not there when there are most likely to be demonstrations, which we would like to observe. That is a major issue. Having said that, when we were there last in January we were able to meet a range of Government officials, which is in itself positive. There is engagement at least. We were able to visit two or three detention centres and meet some of the prisoners of conscience I talked about earlier.

Chair: Thank you both very much. It has been short and sharp. I repeat my offer that if you have any further thoughts, do drop us a line. We have the benefit of your excellent written submissions.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Ali Alaswad, Former MP for Al Wefaq, and Maryam Alkhawaja, Bahrain Center for Human Rights, gave evidence.

Q 284 Chair: I remind members of the public that this is a public sitting, we are in Parliament, and photography is not permitted, so those of you using mobile phones desist from doing so. Thank you. I welcome two important witnesses. Mr Ali Alaswad is a former MP for Al Wefaq, one of the main political opposition groups in Bahrain, although there are other important groups, and the Committee met and heard from some of them on its visit. Maryam Alkhawaja represents the Bahrain Center for Human Rights. A warm welcome to both of you. Would you like to make an opening statement, or opening remarks, Ms Alkhawaja?

Maryam Alkhawaja: Yes, thank you. First of all, thank you for inviting me here today to testify. I want to start my opening remarks by sharing a message that I received from a human rights defender in prison in Bahrain today. He asked me to read this to you. It is very short. He said: “Now that the Americans are taking the front seat, this puts them to more responsibilities towards the region. The British have been running the show since 1965 in Bahrain. They have been running the national security apparatus through the CID—the central intelligence department. We found that, because of the recommendations of the BICI, which put a focus on the national security apparatus and its role in the violations, the national security apparatus has more or less re-emerged with a new face, which is the central intelligence department, which is where people usually go when they disappear.”

Q 285 Chair: Thank you. Mr Ali Alaswad?

Ali Alaswad: Thank you very much, Chair, and the Committee, for having me here today. In previous sessions of the Committee, there has been a little debate about the nature of Bahrain. No one has denied that human rights abuses have occurred, and that politically Bahrain is an absolute monarchy, with power in the hands of one family.

On the question of whether Britain’s interests are being met in relation to Bahrain, my argument is that Britain’s interests are not being met on all fronts. First, the UK is failing to promote reform and respect for human rights effectively. Bahrain is ignoring international calls for reform, proving that attempts by Governments such as the UK have been too soft in bringing about reform. Bahraini authorities believe they can act with immunity from serious international pressure.

Secondly, in light of this failure, Bahrain remains unstable, which is inherently bad for UK investment, trade and partnership; in the short term, investors are scared off, and in the long term, the reputation of Britain in Bahrain is in danger of being damaged. A more robust approach from Britain will not only lead to the UK’s interests in human rights promotion being met, but help to create a more stable country that is a much better investment for all.

Q 286 Chair: Thank you. I have a very general question to both of you. What is the situation in Bahrain at the moment? Is it improving, is it the same or is it getting worse?

Maryam Alkhawaja: From a human rights perspective, we are seeing a continual deterioration in the situation on the ground, which we have been documenting for the past two years, whether that is in regards to torture in unofficial torture centres, or the fact that it has now returned to places such as the CID—the central intelligence department. We found that, because of the recommendations of the BICI, which put a focus on the national security apparatus and its role in the violations, the national security apparatus has more or less re-emerged with a new face, which is the central intelligence department, which is where people usually go when they disappear after their arrest. Of course, the highest concerns about torture and ill-treatment usually arise during incommunicado detention, which people are subjected to after their arrest.

We have also seen the continued use of excessive force against protesters. Part of that, to our concern, is that two people have been brought from abroad to consult the Bahraini Government to try to reform the police, namely John Yates and John Timoney.
Unfortunately, we have seen a continuation, or sometimes increase, in the use of excessive force against protesters on the streets. Cases of extrajudicial killings have not stopped. Just recently, in February, for example, two youths were killed during protests. Cases of people being arrested during peaceful protests have also continued, almost on a nightly basis. We are getting reports—documented cases—of people’s homes being subjected to house raids during the middle of the night by masked men, exactly the way we were documenting them in 2011: masked men, no uniforms, without warrants, going into people’s homes, vandalising the homes, and then arresting people. More or less everything that was documented in the BICI report continues to happen today, and in some cases it has gotten worse.

Q287 Chair: Do you think that the implementation of the BICI report is poor?
Maryam Alkhawaja: We did release a report, of course—I would be happy to send it to you—assessing the implementation of the BICI recommendations, and we found that most of them have not been implemented, and those that have been implemented have been implemented in a way that does not affect or influence the human rights situation on the ground. An example is the installing of CCTV cameras in police stations; once they finally got around to installing CCTV cameras, they started creating unofficial torture centres where cameras were not present, and that is where they take people when they are arrested.

Q288 Chair: We do have your comments, and we will have another look at them. Mr Ali Alaswad, is the situation improving, and are the BICI recommendations being implemented satisfactorily?
Ali Alaswad: I would like to share this paper with you from an independent body, Project on Middle East Democracy—

Q289 Chair: I would rather like your views, rather than someone else’s.
Ali Alaswad: That is fine. Of 26 recommendations to the Bahrain Government, only three were implemented. What is happening on the ground is that people keep talking about this subject, but the BICI is just ignored by the authority. The situation in Bahrain has deteriorated and is getting worse, as more detainees are now behind bars. We have no fewer than 2,000 behind bars according to our records in Bahrain. We have many students, physicians and teachers behind bars, so the situation is not getting better.

Q290 Chair: And the BICI report?
Ali Alaswad: It is not implemented.

Q291 Chair: Not at all?
Ali Alaswad: Not at all. Implementation is not paperwork, websites and what the Government are saying; I am talking about implementation on the ground. The people need to feel that there was a committee, and that it made recommendations that were accepted by the authorities; the authorities have to implement them—recommendations such as stopping torture. Stopping torture does not take time; with just an order from the high authority to the police officers or the interior ministry, the authorities could stop torture.

Q292 Mr Roy: Can I turn to the national dialogue? What prospect do you see for reconciliation through the national dialogue talks?
Maryam Alkhawaja: As a human rights body, we do not have involvement in the national dialogue. The only position that we have had on the national dialogue is that we have put out a statement saying that the basic human rights and liberties of the Bahraini people are not to be used as a bargaining chip during the dialogue between the Opposition and the Government, because these are things that are guaranteed to the Bahraini people. As a human rights watchdog in the country, what we have done is document all the human rights violations that have continued to happen during the time of this national dialogue. Of course, what is concerning to us is how we can expect a successful outcome to any dialogue if human rights violations continue to happen on the ground.

Ali Alaswad: The situation in Bahrain, after 17 meetings, which we in the Opposition call preparation for the dialogue, as we are not yet getting to substantive issues, is that the agenda is not yet open for discussion. Issues needed to be sorted out: the King’s representation in this dialogue, and the referendum. Those are two major issues that have not yet been sorted out by the authorities. We do not want to end up with the same dialogue as in July 2013 when there was only a wish list that was to be sent to the King, it being up to him to decide which recommendations to take and implement.

Q293 Mr Roy: What role should the United Kingdom play in supporting the talks, or should it stay out of the whole discussion?
Ali Alaswad: The United Kingdom is supporting the talks. It has been calling for dialogues for 18 months. The question is whether Bahrain needs a facilitation or mediation role from the United Kingdom. Bahrain is always rejecting any kind of mediation or facilitation. It would love to see the United Kingdom issuing statements in support of the regime, rather than in support of the people. The people in Bahrain feel that the United Kingdom could do much more to move forwards to achieve peace in Bahrain.

Maryam Alkhawaja: I do not really have much to add. As I said, as a human rights body, we do not have much of a position on the dialogue. If I may talk about the UK’s involvement on the ground and its influence, one important thing that the UK can do in regard to the situation on the ground is this: a British company, Gamma International, has sold surveillance technology to Bahrain, which has used it to target even British Bahraini activists.

Q294 Chair: Can I interrupt you? Gamma International is subject to litigation, and we have a sub judice rule here in the UK, so I would be grateful if you did not refer to it.
Maryam Alkhawaja: Of course. The only thing is that we were hoping that questions on the subject could be relayed to the UK Government, because they are refusing to release any kind of information to Privacy International. We were hoping a question could be put forth on why that is, and if they could release that kind of information.

Ali Alaswad: If I may add something here, we feel that public pressure has been proven to be more effective than pressure behind the scenes. Whenever we see public statements made by the FCO with regards to human rights issues, we see the Bahraini Government react. We have several issues on which we have not seen real pressure on the Bahraini Government, such as their revocation of 31 Bahraini nationalities. In this room we have two of them. They were MPs in Bahrain; they were here in the UK doing other jobs when the Bahraini Government revoked their nationality, so now they cannot go back home to see their families or stay with them. The United Kingdom can make still more public statements, which we feel would be more effective.

Q295 Mike Gapes: Mr Alaswad, can I ask you about your position on the perception, certainly outside Bahrain, and from some people within Bahrain, that this conflict is actually sectarian, based on a Shi’a-Sunni conflict? Is that how you perceive it?

Ali Alaswad: Not at all. If you look back in history, there was a video broadcast by the BBC, which, if I remember, was recorded in 1956. At that time, they linked movements in Bahrain to Egyptians. There was union in Bahrain among the Shi’a and Sunni communities on these demands, so it is not a sectarian issue. When the Bahraini Government try to escape from these demands, they try to convert this into a sectarian issue. They say that the Shi’a are demanding an elected government, but that is not a sectarian issue, nor is the issue of human rights violations.

Q296 Mike Gapes: What about the accusation that your party, and indeed other opposition groups, want the overthrow of the Al Khalifa family in order to establish a theocracy—a velayat-e faqih system, as they have in Iran?

Ali Alaswad: I do not think that this is true, as Al Wefaq and other political parties issued a Manama document in October 2011, in which they stated that the opposition want reform within the regime. They stated clearly that we need an elected government, and we have other demands.

Q297 Mike Gapes: When you say an elected government, would that include accepting a constitutional monarchy?

Ali Alaswad: Exactly. This is what we are looking for: a constitutional monarchy, not an absolute monarchy.

Q298 Mike Gapes: So it is not a question of overthrowing the royal family?

Ali Alaswad: Not at all. As the opposition stated clearly, we need a constitutional monarchy, and we need people to have the right to elect their governments.

Q299 Mike Gapes: Is that the view that is generally held among the opposition?

Ali Alaswad: If you are talking generally, I cannot say that that is the universal view, as there are others who are saying that they want to overthrow the regime. When this movement started in February 2011, the Bahraini people used some slogans from other countries, such as Tunisia and Egypt, as Bahrain was the third country to start these movements in the Arab Spring. The main opposition parties raised this issue and stated it clearly. They are now in negotiations, discussing these demands with the regime in Bahrain. They stated clearly that we need an elected government, and we have other demands.

Q300 Mike Gapes: You referred to the February 2011 events. In terms of the February 14 movement, some events and some protests have got violent; when we visited Bahrain, we were certainly given information about some of the violence that had erupted. What is your attitude to violent protest?

Ali Alaswad: The opposition parties, including Al Wefaq, have issued non-violence declarations. We condemned the violence every time. The question here is, who acts and who reacts? Who is starting the violence? As BICI documented, about 35 protestors were killed by the police at the time. The youths in the street are reacting to this. That is not accepted by us, and we are working to make all the movements peaceful. A lot of massive demonstrations and marches start and end peacefully.

Q301 Mike Gapes: I had some experience of Northern Ireland. Molotov cocktails and other kinds of weaponry are not spontaneous; people prepare them. Who do you think is responsible for the violence?

Ali Alaswad: Of course it is the Government.

Q302 Mike Gapes: Sorry, all the violence, including the weaponry that was used against the police.

Ali Alaswad: There were no weapons in Bahrain; there were Molotov cocktails, as used by the youths.

Q303 Mike Gapes: Who is responsible for that? Is there an organised group?

Ali Alaswad: I have no idea whether there is an organised group, but the youths are using these Molotov cocktails. If you are looking at the picture from one angle, you will see this, but if you look at the picture as a whole, you will see that the police and the Government side are abusing the protestors; they are using excessive force. Massive, huge, excessive amounts of tear gas are being used in the villages every night. A lot of people die because of the excessive tear gas being used by the Bahrain Government.

Q304 Mike Gapes: I will move on to questions about the British Government’s role. Both of you have referred in your answers to the close relationship between the UK and Bahrain going back to the 1960s,
Ali Alaswad: In my opinion, definitely public. We have seen, as was mentioned earlier, that the use of diplomatic or quiet conversation with the Bahraini Government has not worked; so far, what we have seen is a further deterioration in the human rights situation. Despite hearing over and over again from the FCO that they have had these conversations with the Bahraini Government about bettering the human rights situation, what we have seen in actuality on the ground is a deterioration of the human rights situation. In large part, that is because of the culture of a lack of accountability inside the country, but it is also because of the lack of accountability outside the country. People like the King's son, who has numerous torture allegations against him—this has been brought to the attention of the UK Government—are allowed to come to the United Kingdom to take part in events and, even more concerning to us, to attend the arms sales and Counter Terror Expo exhibition. The King's son met with BAE Systems to discuss arms sales. For us, that is very concerning, because you should be in court facing torture allegations travelling to the United Kingdom to attend arms sales expositions. That is one area where the UK can have an influence. If people who have torture allegations against them, or who have been said to have been involved in human rights violations, are not being held accountable inside Bahrain, they should at least be held accountable internationally and not allowed to travel freely from one country to another.

Ali Alaswad: This is an example of how the UK can play a more effective role in the Universal Periodic Review in Geneva. The United Kingdom also agreed that Bahrain needs reform. In terms of implementation, if the United Kingdom keeps saying, "The Bahraini regime is our ally," it is a kind of green light to the Bahraini regime to abuse people in Bahrain more. They will say, "We have coverage from the international community." We suggest a more equal balance of the two: kind of public and kind of private. Public statements are more effective. Within the regime there are hardliners. If you go to the hardliners, there is the question of accountability. One of the major issues from the BICI that is not yet implemented is accountability. The Bahraini Government will look at it seriously. They will say, "Okay, we have to stop them from torturing people. We have to take away their powers." So we need more public statements from the United Kingdom.

Maryam Alkhawaja: If I may add two more things, one of the things that we have been working on a lot, and I believe Amnesty has as well, is to cease arms sales. This is one thing that encourages the Bahraini Government to continue with their crackdown, because they see this as being business as usual. The second thing is to put pressure on the Bahraini Government to agree to allow international organisations—non-governmental organisations—as well as journalists access to the country. They have, on and off, been denying people access to the country. I have personally met most of the UN special rapporteurs. They said that they have made a request to visit Bahrain and have either been told to wait or have not received a response.

Q305 Mike Gapes: How does the UK compare to other countries—other western states, in particular—in terms of its attitude and support for the Bahrain Government? Is the UK more supportive than others or less?

Ali Alaswad: The Bahraini Government supporting the Government?

Q306 Mike Gapes: The UK Government's attitude—is it more supportive of the Bahrain Government than, say, the United States or other western European Governments? Or do you have a general perception that they are all the same?

Ali Alaswad: If you compare the UK and the US, they are working together and they are more or less the same, except that some of the statements from the United States clearly said that the Bahraini Government should respect human rights. The latest report from the United States was much clearer than for the UK. I think that the UK Government was exaggerating the report published by the UK Government. It said, "the most serious human rights problems included citizens' inability to change their government peacefully". This kind of statement is more effective than the private or unseen statements.

Maryam Alkhawaja: I think that we have seen, in our opinion, with regard to statements made about the human rights situation, a more positive outcome from the United States than from the UK. For example, when Human Rights Watch recently put out a report about there being no progress and reform in Bahrain, the UK ambassador to Bahrain said, among other things, that Human Rights Watch was exaggerating. When Human Rights Watch responded to that, the FCO at first came out and supported the ambassador's statement, and then afterwards made a different statement. But that in itself is very telling of the situation on the ground, when we are seeing the UK ambassador coming out and even attacking in some form an international human rights organisation that is documenting human rights violations on the ground.

Q307 Rory Stewart: Have you had a clear example of a political settlement somewhere else in the world—a model that you are following? Do you have a clear idea of what you need to do and how you are going to get there—an example that you can follow for this kind of political settlement?

Ali Alaswad: If we go to the Arab countries, Morocco could be a positive model. From 2001, the opposition worked together with the Bahraini Government to improve the situation. The regime promised that we are going to be a constitutional monarchy, and this promise has been broken from the day this movement started two years ago. A Moroccan model could be a good model.

Maryam Alkhawaja: As a human rights defender who has been following the case of Morocco, I hope that we do not turn into a Moroccan-type Government. We need Bahrain to be held accountable internationally for their human rights violations. Bahrain is a country that is susceptible to international pressure, and if we
can get international accountability for the human rights violations on the ground, we can see real change come to the situation in Bahrain.

Q308 Andrew Rosindell: How is Britain perceived by the people of Bahrain? Do they feel that Britain has been supportive and helpful over the crisis, or do they feel that Britain has not done enough, considering our long-standing history and friendship?

Maryam Alkhawaja: We have seen a rise in anti-US and UK sentiment among people on the ground, which has happened quickly over the past two years, and I note that there have also been several complaints from civil society. For example, as human rights defenders, my colleagues on the ground have a very difficult time getting meetings with the UK embassy to discuss the situation. I have colleagues who have been told flat-out by the ambassador that he will not meet them, despite them being human rights defenders who just want to relate the human rights conditions to him. So there has even been the problem of access to the UK embassy for civil society, which has not been the case with other embassies in Bahrain.

Ali Alaswad: In a speech given when he became Foreign Secretary, William Hague said that the UK wanted to promote an ethical foreign policy. It would be more effective if UK Governments played a positive role. According to our observations, the UK’s reputation in Bahrain is being damaged by not being more effective or active. The Bahrainis look to the UK—they need more support. They are seeing their officials received here in the UK when they are not received in the United States, for example, or in any other European countries, so they feel that the regime is getting more support from the UK Government than any other Government.

Q309 Chair: I think it was Robin Cook, rather than Mr. Hague, who said that he wanted an ethical foreign policy.

Ali Alaswad: I have taken this from the FCO website and I have the link with me. That is what it says.

Chair: Everyone wants ethical policies.

Ali Alaswad: Okay.

Q310 Ann Clwyd: How many people in Bahrain have been stripped of their nationality? I know that some MPs have. Can you think of any other country that has done that?

Maryam Alkhawaja: Thirty-one people have been stripped of their nationality in Bahrain. In the past few years, the UAE has done the same thing with a few political dissidents. But it is not something that is new to Bahrain. I believe it happened in the 1980s, and one person was stripped of their citizenship in the 1990s. It has been used as a tool to punish political dissidents or activists who criticise the Government. It is interesting to see that the King of Bahrain granted Bahraini citizenship to 240 British citizens yesterday as what he called a reward for their loyalty. They use citizenship as a way of rewarding or punishing people who either criticise or are loyal to the ruling monarchy.

Q311 Ann Clwyd: How many MPs?

Ali Alaswad: Two Bahraini MPs from the Al Wefaq political society—Mr. Jawad Fairouz and Mr. Jalal Fairouz—who are with us in the room, have had their Bahraini nationality revoked. The decision was taken completely by the hardliners within the regime, who, according to our information, have decided to revoke the whole family’s nationality. It happened only one night before the opposition political parties announced the non-violence declaration.

Q312 Ann Clwyd: Maryam, your father is in jail and your sister has recently been arrested for tweeting. What did she put on Twitter that was so reprehensible?

Maryam Alkhawaja: Zeinab’s last case was not about Twitter. She has had 13 different cases in court for staging one-person protests, inciting hatred against the regime. Illegal gathering and so on. She received another three-month sentence a few days ago, so she could be in prison until September. What is very concerning about the current case of the Bahrain 13 and Zeinab is that they have been denied family visits for more than two months. They have been denied lawyer consultations. They have been denied medical access, which is very important, because many of them suffer from the fact that they were tortured or because they already have chronic illnesses. They have also been denied consular visits. As you know, three of them are EU citizens and they have been denied consular visits. The Government have therefore escalated the pressure that they are putting on political prisoners, especially in these cases.

Q313 Ann Clwyd: How useful have your meetings with the British Government been?

Maryam Alkhawaja: To be very honest, I have met with the FCO several times, and their response is usually, “The violence on the streets needs to stop for the Government to be able to implement reforms.” That is the same line that the Bahraini Government use when they try to justify why they have not implemented reforms. For us, that is very concerning, because we are looking at a situation where the violence on the streets came as a result of the systematic violence being used by the Government. The Government have left no space for people to use their right to freedom of assembly and freedom of expression, thus we are seeing a certain number of youth starting to resort to violent means as a form of pressure on the Government. That is very concerning for us, because we are worried that it will escalate.

The more the Bahraini Government put those who are advocating non-violence behind bars and the more they disallow people the right to freedom of expression and freedom of assembly, the more we will see youth deciding that violence is the only means possible for them to voice their opinions, or their dissent against the Government. It is very concerning when we hear the same line coming from the UK Government. We saw it in the 1990s. In 1999, when systematic Government use of excessive force stopped, so did the violence on the streets, because that was a reaction to it. We need to see the same thing right now: stopping
the excessive use of force by the Government, so that the same thing will happen on the streets.

Ali Alaswad: We are sharing our views with the Governments in Bahrain and in the U.K. We have been received officially once, in a meeting last November. There have been a lot of other meetings—unofficial meetings—and lots in Bahrain. We are trying to benefit from them and take the opportunity to share our views with the British Government, so that they can speak with the Bahraini Government about the implementation of human rights recommendations and about political reforms. That is what the Bahraini people are looking for.

Chair: I thank you both very much indeed. You have been model witnesses, conveying lots of information with brevity and accuracy. I repeat the offer I made to the earlier witnesses: if you think of a point you have not made, do drop us a line.

Examination of Witness

Witness: Sir Nigel Rodley KBE, Professor of Law and Chair of the University of Essex Human Rights Centre, former Commissioner on the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, gave evidence.

Q314 Chair: May I welcome Sir Nigel Rodley, the chair of the University of Essex Human Rights Centre and a former member of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry. He is also the current chair of the United Nations Committee on Human Rights. Sir Nigel, thank you very much for finding the time to come along and see us. Is there anything you want to say by way of an opening statement? My first question is quite a general one.

Sir Nigel Rodley: Sure. Briefly, I do not consider myself a regional expert. You are looking at things to do with the region, and probably the region I knew least about before I was on the BICI was the Gulf. I had a nearly five-month immersion course in part of it, and there I did learn a lot. Equally, I got spoiled by the amount of information I was able to get with the benefit of a bunch of people on the ground and so on. Since then, I have not had access to that kind of information, so I am not going to be in a position to comment authoritatively on the extent to which I consider the BICI recommendations as having been implemented, although I have no reason to disagree with the evaluation of Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and the State Department.

Q315 Chair: Quite understood. It is your role on the BICI inquiry about which I want to pick your brains. My first question is: did you find the UK Government supportive of your work?

Sir Nigel Rodley: Yes, I did. They were perfectly supportive. I did not need a lot of support, but I did visit the ambassador a couple of times on visits to Bahrain. He was extremely informative and open, and I found him helpful. Also, two weeks before we were due to present the report, I had a meeting with the Foreign Secretary. He was there with a lot of his advisers, and I was impressed at his grasp of the situation and his willingness to try to see that whatever we came up with would indeed be implemented.

Q316 Chair: You have just put down the caveat that you are not a regional expert, but may I ask you if you consider the human rights situation in Bahrain to be getting better, staying the same or getting worse at the moment?

Sir Nigel Rodley: It is really hard to tell. What I can say is that it is obviously not good—listen to Human Rights Watch, listen to Amnesty and listen to the State Department. A lot of what the place would look like if it had fully implemented our recommendations is not there; that is obvious.

Q317 Ann Clwyd: What are you most concerned about in the recommendations that have not been implemented? Which ones do you consider to be the most important?

Sir Nigel Rodley: It is a good question, not least because it is not a question of the bottle being wholly empty. A number of recommendations obviously have been complied with, such as, for example, substantial reinstatement of sacked people and so on. There are clear problems with political imprisonment that you have heard about and general impunity, certainly at the higher levels. This is particularly disturbing to me. When I was UN Special Rapporteur on Torture, I was concerned about torture in Bahrain. It figured in my reports, and I kept seeking to go to Bahrain but I was not allowed to be there. It then appeared that torture was subsiding, and had subsided for a substantial amount of time, and then it started again—if not immediately, then around the time of the February 2011 events. One just gets the sense that they are not prepared to bite the bullet. That bullet really does mean both complying with the measures of prevention, rather than circumventing them, as you have heard, and seriously sending out a message that the people responsible for this—it is not just the torturers between the four walls, but those who give the orders, those who organise them, those who bring bad cases against them, those who exonerate them despite the evidence, and those who give trivial sentences for torturers and serious sentences for people who speak out against the regime. That sends out the wrong message of implementation. One recommendation we made—Mr Gapes, I think, referred to Northern Ireland, which was very much in my mind when I was in the BICI, not least because I was familiar with two discourses, both historic and current, that totally went across each other. One thing that we had hoped to do with our report was give both those discourses to the other side. It was very interesting to hear both sides say yes, that they had heard, and then I have been to meetings since where both sides have been present, and they still come up with the same stories, as though we had not said anything.
So one of the recommendations that we tried to make—I am getting there—was integration of the security forces. People forget that actually there was some integration, but because some Shi’a police did not want to be involved in what clearly was repression, in the February-March period they were all sacked, and the integration has not really gone very far. Meanwhile, there is the problem of non-Bahrainis making a substantial part of the police force anyway. It is something I have not looked at, but it might be worth asking how many of those who have been prosecuted and convicted are actually native Bahrainis at all—for torture and harm created during detention.

Q318 Ann Clwyd: When you talked about the higher echelons being protected from being charged or prosecuted, who exactly did you mean?

Sir Nigel Rodley: I didn’t say “protected”; I just said it hadn’t happened, and we didn’t identify who. Let me say something: I know you and your colleagues have seen the report—all 500 pages of it, and I can’t remember it all, so I certainly don’t expect you guys to. It was done in just over four months—four-and-a-half months. We were given four, and we were able to get another three weeks with a little string-pulling, with some help from abroad. We put it together very fast.

We were not just investigating, as with Bloody Sunday, one incident in one town on one day. We were investigating thousands of different kinds of incidents across months and months, and we were having to do it in four months, so inevitably, there were areas of inquiry that we could not pursue to any serious conclusion. That included how far up the responsibility went, but a point we certainly did make is that the operations involved the combined security forces, and those forces operated in a particularly systematic and coherent way, which suggested that the orders of how they should operate came from pretty high up, at both the administrative and political levels.

Q319 Ann Clwyd: The UK Government say that they are trying to support the implementation of your recommendations via training and ministerial visits. Do you consider that to be a useful engagement?

Sir Nigel Rodley: The training was a recommendation, and on its own, it is not going to—

I am an educator, and I have always known what the limits of education are. People ultimately do what is in their interests, and they will not torture if it is not in their interests, and they will torture if it is. It sometimes helps if they can be given the means of doing their job of maintaining law and public order in more sophisticated ways than perhaps they have been used to, and training can be helpful, but on its own it will not be enough. There has to be concern when the training might be used as an indication of an evolution that has not taken place.

I have nothing against ministerial visits. It all depends on what they say to whom, when, where and how. I have no reason to think that the UK would not prefer Bahrain to implement all the Commission’s recommendations. However, it is very difficult to be clear about how far that wish is translated into the deployment of political initiatives and statements of various sorts—public and private—at various levels, or even at the intergovernmental level, in order to make the message very clear that it is not just a wish but a demand.

Q320 Ann Clwyd: Have you been back to Bahrain since you published your report?

Sir Nigel Rodley: No, I haven’t.

Q321 Ann Clwyd: Have you been invited or have you expressed a wish to go back?

Sir Nigel Rodley: I have neither been invited nor expressed the wish. Some parts of the Opposition have occasionally expressed—purely privately to me; I shall not identify whom—that it might be nice if I did. My position is that, given my role originally on the Commission, I would be willing to go back if there were anything that people felt I could do, if both sides wanted it. But I don’t want to go back on the basis of being able to be of use to one side only.

Q322 Mr Roy: Sir Nigel, may I take you to last month’s cancellation of the visit of the Special Rapporteur on Torture? Obviously, you were displeased. In your statement, you spoke about the Bahrainis dangling the possibility of a visit when they come under pressure to implement the BICI report. Would you expand on your thoughts?

Sir Nigel Rodley: This is the second time that Bahrain had invited not my immediate successor, but my successor but two, UN Special Rapporteur Juan Mendez. He is absolutely excellent, professional and sensitive to how to conduct oneself in situations of crisis, so there are no fears there. He had an invitation last year, and then it was summarily withdrawn. It was issued again and, again, summarily withdrawn. The press statement to which you referred was put out by the International Commission of Jurists, of which I happen to be the president. I said that one could at least suspect that the offer was there while the pressure was on—for example, with the universal periodic review at the Human Rights Council or Formula 1—and once that was all behind them, they could withdraw it again.

I guess that the underlying question is why—why they would do it. I have not heard a clear account, but I would not be surprised if the Government said something like, “There’s this dialogue going on and we don’t want to disrupt it.” That is certainly hinted at in Juan Mendez’ own press release on the topic. I find that so utterly unimpressive because there is no reason why it should affect the dialogue, unless they were afraid about the sort of information that would come out, but would be within the mandate of a Special Rapporteur on Torture. Whether even that would affect the dialogue, I don’t know, but it is certainly not the presence of the guy in Bahrain that would affect the dialogue. It is what information he would elicited that could affect the dialogue, so one has to be really quite suspicious of the reason.

Q323 Mr Roy: Is there anything that the UK Government can do to support mechanisms such as the rapporteur?
Sir Nigel Rodley: I have to say that in my case, when I had that job, they supported it by giving my university money so that I could have a research assistant to supplement the rather meagre support I got from the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. I have no doubt about the UK’s support for the system, particularly their support for the particular mandate of the special rapporteurship on torture and their desire that he should have gone. I hope and expect that they are rather embarrassed by the withdrawal of the invitation. I hope that they will find some way of so kicking and screaming that there will be another invitation, within short order and not a long time ahead so that a few months can go by before the invitation is withdrawn again.

I have no better sense than you of the levers of policy, other than that I think it is foot-stamping rather than hand-wringing time on an issue like that.

Q324 Chair: Do you think we need any further independent inquiry in Bahrain, or do you think your report covers it all?

Sir Nigel Rodley: It does not cover it all. First of all, its main focus was on two months, even though it continued for the months following. There has been no independent inquiry into everything that has followed since, including all the allegations of excessive use of force, torture, political imprisonment and so on. I am not commenting on whether it would be useful to have one, but the report certainly did not cover it all. It did not even cover all of what we could have covered.

For example, we had a mandate to identify cases for prosecution. We just didn’t do that, not because we were squeamish, but because we did not have the time to develop the kinds of information it would be necessary to develop in order to be able to point the finger. It is back to my response to Ann Clwyd’s question. We had to do a lot in a very short period of time, and that simply meant that we could not identify where individual responsibility lay, either at the direct infliction level or at the higher levels of instigation and aiding and abetting. There is certainly plenty of room for that to be identified.

Ideally, by now, Bahrain would have gone a lot further in doing so itself, but we thought that we had laid the basis for them to do it. I am not absolutely convinced that that is the case. We also thought we had maybe laid the basis for some sort of reconciliation. That certainly still seems a bit distant, although I do not want to be too pessimistic about the dialogue that is apparently starting at the moment.

Chair: Any particular point you would like to add before we let you go? Actually Rory Stewart would like to ask one more question.

Sir Nigel Rodley: By all means, I’ll come back.

Q325 Rory Stewart: Sir Nigel, to follow up from the Chairman, the big elephant in the room that we keep coming back to is clearly the one that you are most reluctant to touch on: the question of how much of it has been implemented. Can you give us any suggestions or gestures towards how we might set about answering that or what your instincts are?

Sir Nigel Rodley: I said it in a way by saying that I had no reason to disbelieve what Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and the US Department of State were saying about the incidence of excessive force, political imprisonment, torture and so on, not to mention the level of impunity. That is the measure of non-implementation of our report.

Thank you for the offer of some final words. They relate, I guess, to the broader element of your inquiry, which is Saudi and Bahrain. Again, I stress that I am not an expert, but certainly what I was hearing almost uncontestedly when I was on the Commission was that basically the people who pulled the strings in the Government for the hard-liners were the Saudis, and while everybody was worried about the Iranians nobody blinked an eye at the Gulf Co-operation Council, which included the Saudis, coming in at the time. Interference in internal affairs seems to be a one-way process.

If you had asked me a few weeks ago what I would have thought would be really important, I would have said, as I have said to Foreign Office officials and State Department officials and others consistently, “Please get Saudi Arabia away from supporting the hard-liners”—it was interesting to listen to Ali Alaswad, who kept making the point about the hard-liners in the family—“and create some more space for the reformists in the family to take things forward.”

In the last few weeks—I am sorry I can’t be more specific than this—I have been getting indications that maybe, to the extent that the dialogue has started, the Saudis may have something to do with it: that they themselves are beginning to worry about the radicalising effect of the absence of the hard-liners conceding very much. If that is the case, then I suppose it will be a slightly different message, and that is very much to encourage the Government to use whatever leverage it has with Saudi Arabia, to continue to use that influence in the right direction. I am not, of course, blind to the conundrum of how you balance wanting to be concerned about the human rights situation in Saudi Arabia on the one hand and still somehow trying to engage them as an ally in relation to the human rights situation in Bahrain. I realise that is a difficult circle to square, but it happens sometimes.

Chair: In truth, we have found conservatives and liberals in both countries. What we as a Committee have yet to deliberate on is our conclusions on the direction of travel. Anyway, Sir Nigel, thank you very much indeed for coming along. It is very much appreciated.
Examination of Witness

**Witness:** Caroline Montagu, Countess of Sandwich, gave evidence.

**Q326 Chair:** I welcome Caroline Montagu, Countess of Sandwich, who has been writing on Saudi Arabia and on specific Middle East topics for quite a long time—since the mid-1980s. Lady Sandwich, thank you for coming along today. Is there anything you would like to say by way of an opening statement?

**Lady Sandwich:** Yes. The first is that in 20 minutes I do not think that I can bear the whole Atlas-like burden of talking about all aspects of human rights in Saudi Arabia, but what I would like to say about my own position is that I have been going there virtually every year for 30 years. I used to write only on business and then moved on to women’s issues and civil society about 15 years ago.

On the changes, there are one or two that I would like to point out now. When I first went there, the oil price was about $10 a barrel and the country was in a fearful state. The defence contractors, particularly the US defence contractors, were screeching, and the Ministry of Health was not paying its bills. The duration of the evening prayer was only 10 minutes. I have measured the religiosity of Saudi Arabia over the last 30 years by the length of the evening prayer, which has stretched from 10 to 20 to 30 minutes now. Initially I only met men, then I met men and women and now I meet both together, but there is a new generation of educated men and women whose sense of entitlement is as high as that of their parents and unlikely to be fulfilled. That is something that your Committee and the Foreign Office should be looking at.

**Q327 Chair:** Are popular perceptions of Saudi Arabia accurate?

**Lady Sandwich:** I do not think so.

**Q328 Chair:** How do they differ?

**Lady Sandwich:** It is too easy to flag up human rights abuses in Saudi Arabia, of which there are many and not a single one is justifiable. It seems that the speed of progress and the amount of progress that Saudi Arabia has made in the last 30 years is not sufficiently acknowledged. Indeed the amount of change for women in the last 30 years is not acknowledged enough.

The country is a completely different place. It has a very large cadre of educated young people now, which it did not have. That is not talked about enough except in terms of unemployment, which is probably its greatest problem—in fact, unemployment is definitely Saudi Arabia’s greatest problem. Obviously, the second greatest problem is the lack of representation and the failure of the Government to be able to bite the bullet and let there be more public expression, but the change even in public expression over the past 30 years has been enormous. It started after 1990, after the first Gulf war, when everyone started babbling about everything in a way that is quite un-Saudi-ish.

**Q329 Chair:** Is the embassy in the same position as you are? How do you think the embassy is doing at the moment?

**Lady Sandwich:** I have known the British embassy in Saudi Arabia on and off. Sometimes it has been deeply helpful and sometimes it has not been helpful at all, but it has a job that it could do at the moment and that would make a real difference to the progress of reform in Saudi Arabia, and that is to start looking at what the Saudis are trying to do about reform of the judicial system. It is interesting that while the executive and the legislature have been dealt with to a degree, reform of the judicial system has been left out, and they are now starting to grasp that nettle.

If the Foreign Office and the British embassy were able to be helpful and devote resources to helping the Saudis with this reform, it could help in many ways. First, it would help with job creation. Secondly, it would help with human rights abuses, because some of those are due to the Shari’ah interpretation of the courts—I will come back to that in a minute. Thirdly, it would help with women’s rights, which are also due to the way the Sharia courts work. It would help with removing some of the tribal accretions of Sharia. Also, in the UK we have a big Muslim population and an organisation called the Muslim Arbitration Tribunal, which is able to work on family dispute in various areas of Shari’ah family law, so we have some expertise in some of the areas that this reform programme is trying to address.

**Q330 Chair:** Just sticking with the embassy for a moment, I have heard the phrase, “There’s a Saudi way of doing things.” Do you think the embassy has a grasp of that?

**Lady Sandwich:** I think that some ambassadors and first secretaries do and some don’t. I have been impressed by—

**Q331 Chair:** How about at the moment?

**Lady Sandwich:** I don’t know.

**Q332 Chair:** Have you been recently?

**Lady Sandwich:** No, not in the last year. There is an ex-ambassador sitting here—[Interrupt.] He’s offering to leave the room, but it won’t make any difference to what I say, so don’t hesitate to sit and hear it.

No, I don’t think they have a sufficient grasp. I don’t think they have sufficient relations with the young people’s movement. The youth movement is one of the most interesting areas of Saudi social reform at the moment, and I don’t think that the embassy is sufficiently in touch with that; nor is the consulate in Jeddah. I have always been impressed by the British Trade Office in the Eastern Province and thought that it was very much in touch with what it had to do, which was dealing with the oil sector. The British Embassy, it comes and goes. Some ambassadors can make it and some can’t. I don’t think that’s the most interesting thing. I think the more interesting area is what the FCO itself can do about some obvious areas of reform in Saudi Arabia that need support.
Q333 Mike Gapes: I have been to Saudi Arabia only twice, on our recent visit and 13 years before, and I was surprised by how much it had changed. I can concur with the sense that people here generally don’t understand that there has been a lot of change. Earlier, when we had Amnesty and Human Rights Watch in, we asked how the UK can best be effective. What is the best way with the Saudis to get the kind of changes and improvements that we want? Is it public or is it private, or is it a combination?

Lady Sandwich: You haven’t told me what changes you are talking about, but never mind.

Q334 Mike Gapes: Let’s say, for example, women’s rights, the judicial issues that you talked about, or human rights—the way in which people are treated. Rights, the judicial issues that you talked about, or women’s rights will be accepted by that conservative majority, slowly, when they see the benefits of it. For instance, if you are talking about the Shura, provided the women are in all the committees and not just put in the soft committees, the women in the Shura will have effect, because they are tough women and they are very well educated. I know that you met Princess Moudi bint Khalid, who is a tough woman. This is a digression, but it is relevant. She went to the Ministry of Social Affairs and presented the first blueprint for the campaign to stop family violence. Those women will have an effect. The municipal elections do not have much teeth or power, but if you are get powerful women into them, things are going to change, because women are very powerful in the private arena and increasingly so in the public arena.

Q335 Mike Gapes: Let’s say, for example, women’s rights, the judicial issues that you talked about, or human rights—the way in which people are treated. There is definitely a need for a public statement on all these issues of reform, because King Abdullah is a reformer and he is trying to push reform through against a majority conservative country. The reform is top-down, so he needs support. He needs to be able to say, “My brothers, look what they’re saying. We want reform. Yes, many of us want reform, and they are saying it out there.”

When I was writing in the ‘80s a magazine on business and oil and all that stuff, was used by Saudi businessmen to wave at the Government to say, “Actually, look what they’re saying out there.” So there is lots of room for substantial public statements on women’s rights, women’s issues and human rights, and I think that would definitely be welcomed by people such as King Abdullah, his daughter Princess Adilah and the many reforming members of the Al Saud family, as well as by the liberal element of the population. Private discussion of course is necessary, but it isn’t an either/or, it’s a both/and.

Q336 Mike Gapes: You have touched already on the advances in Saudi society, or is the King in advance of the conservative culture to which you have referred?

Lady Sandwich: I think that’s neither/or.

Q337 Mike Gapes: How can the UK best assist the process of greater recognition of women’s rights and the reform process?

Lady Sandwich: I go back to what I said at the very start. There is this root and branch judicial reform process—new courts, new clerks, new assistant judges, new training of Sharia judges, new written judgments and, in the future, codification of the Sharia. If the British Government can help with that in any way—such as training in court procedure and clerks’ duties, helping with the education of young lawyers—at a stroke they will assist with job creation, and help deal with women’s abuse, and the erosion of some of the more unpleasant accretions of Sharia law in Saudi Arabia. That is where I would start. The next area, which is not very easy, is a serious lack of systemic infrastructure in Saudi Arabia—the stuff that keeps Governments going. There is a failure to take decisions. Implementation is an utter disaster in Saudi Arabia—you only need ask lawyers about enforcing judgments. But it is not just at that level; it is everywhere. Good regulations are on the statute books, but they are not implemented. Another area is leadership. There are not enough leaders and not enough people trained in leadership. Many good roles; too few people. Job creation in the services industry is very important; in the arts; in providing recreational pursuits for young people—39% of young people between the ages of 15 and 25 are unemployed, which is a disaster for a country—in training for volunteering and training for leisure time. What else do you want me to say? I could go on for hours.

Q338 Mike Gapes: I get the point. You are saying that we should engage constructively with the Saudi authorities at all levels to try to pursue these goals.

Lady Sandwich: I wholly agree that we should maintain pressure on the Saudi Government over the Shi’as in the east and the Ismailis in the south-west in Najran. There is no excuse for treating the Shi’as as second-class citizens and imposing a glass ceiling for them. They have been outrageously treated in the past two years—180 are in prison, many without trial. There should be continuous pressure on the Ministry of Interior and the Mukhabarat not to hold people without trials, particularly Shi’as, and, of course, the dissenters in Riyadh. There must be pressure to release people who have been put in jail for political
dissent, and pressure to regularise and improve the position of third-country nationals, not just the women—the domestics—but these poor guys from Sri Lanka and all over the developing world who work and live in appalling conditions.

Q339 Rory Stewart: You said something quite interesting about the potential for arts and culture. Would you expand a bit on that, on why that might be important?

Lady Sandwich: Yes. There has been a development in the last, say, five or seven years in the arts in Saudi Arabia. The Saudis are proud of having an arts culture. They are proud of their painters, of their arts spaces and of exporting some of their art to the west; a girl has just got a prize at a London exhibition. There is also film, which I think could satisfy a number of objectives for the British Government. For the Saudis, the arts have given people something to do. I also see it as a means of integrating the country. As you know, Saudi Arabia is not a nation but a polity of diverse areas. Perhaps the Government might feel sufficiently grown up to allow a little bit of regional diversification in the arts.

Q340 Chair: You said a second ago to Mr Gapes that your observation is that the Government are quite liberal, and it is the population who are rather conservative and who are resisting reform. That is rather out of kilter with the rest of the world. Does that make it quite hard to criticise the Government on human rights terms?

Lady Sandwich: If I said that all the Government were progressive, I would not be correct.

Lady Sandwich: I said that 60% of the population was conservative. King Abdullah is undoubtedly more liberal than some other Ministers. I find the Minister of the Interior—

Q341 Chair: So that 40-60 split applies to all—ministries, the public and everywhere?

Lady Sandwich: It is all the way through. So of course it is possible and correct to criticise the Saudi Government in a large number of areas in which they could improve their performance.

Q342 Chair: That finishes our questions. Is there anything you would like to say by way of closing remarks? Do you have any points that you wish you had made?

Lady Sandwich: Only that there is a lot of room for the British to help with the reform process and to push it forward. While I advocate the reform process in Saudi Arabia, I realise that it is slow and that gradualism is sometimes a kind of smoke and mirrors for not doing enough and not doing it fast enough.

Chair: Thank you very much. It is very helpful to have your perspective. We wish you well in your next visit to Saudi Arabia. Thank you for coming along.

[Note by witness: Most ministers are “liberal” in their attitudes to social reform. King Abdullah would not have them there if he wanted political dissent. I would not use the 40/60 split for the Ministries. I gave the wrong impression in this answer. However political dissent is another matter.]
Tuesday 18 June 2013

Members present:
Richard Ottaway (Chair)
Mr John Baron
Sir Menzies Campbell
Ann Clwyd
Mike Gapes
Mark Hendrick
Sandra Osborne
Andrew Rosindell
Mr Frank Roy
Sir John Stanley

Examination of Witnesses


Chair: May I welcome members of the public to this sitting of the Foreign Affairs Committee? This is the sixth and final evidence session for the Committee’s inquiry into UK relations with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. The Committee will hold a 40 or 45-minute evidence session with Dr Andrew Murrison of the Ministry of Defence followed by a short break, and then a full evidence session with Alistair Burt from the Foreign Office.

I give a warm welcome to Dr Murrison, who is probably more used to sitting this side of the Table. He is the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Security Strategy in the Ministry of Defence. He is accompanied by Mr Tom McKane, Director General for Security Policy in the Ministry of Defence, and Mr Matthew Armstrong, who is Head of Policy and Resources for the MOD Saudi Armed Forces Project. I warmly welcome you both.

Dr Murrison, is there anything you want to say by way of an opening remark?

Dr Murrison: Thank you for your welcome. If it is agreeable to the Committee, I am more than happy to crack on with questions.

Chair: As you are aware, the Secretary of State at one point was possibly going to give evidence to us, but we spotted that he ended up in Saudi Arabia last week. Are you able to tell us what he was actually doing there?

Dr Murrison: Yes, I can—in broad terms of course I can. I will start by saying that the relationship with Saudi Arabia is good; it is strong and it is important to us. It is important to understand the extent of our involvement with Saudi Arabia and the quality of Saudi Arabia as an ally to this country. As you will know, following the Gulf Initiative, which was launched in the summer of 2010, there has been an increased tempo of visits by Ministers, including the Prime Minister, officials and serving personnel. I think that that has been appreciated by our colleagues in the Gulf, particularly by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The Defence Secretary’s visit last week was a flying visit. However, he did pick up very good atmospherics during that visit, and came away with the impression that it was well worth while and that we are making progress in that country.

As far as matters of substance are concerned, he did sign a letter of agreement dealing with SANGCOM—that is, the Saudi Arabian National Guard communication element of the work that we do. You will forgive me if I do not go into the details of that, but that was another step in our formal relationship with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Chair: I fully appreciate that this is an unclassified briefing, but are you able to say—there were press reports that, following his visit, the BAE Typhoon deal is back on track. Are those reports inaccurate?

Dr Murrison: As you are aware, Project Salam is part of the general package that we have with Saudi Arabia and will see us sell to Saudi Arabia 72 Typhoon aircraft, of which 26 are in play at the moment. More than that I cannot say. What I would say, however, is that it is hoped there will be further export opportunities to a number of partner nations over the next several years, involving Typhoon. It is an excellent aircraft, as you know—we believe the best on the market—and I think it speaks for itself.

Chair: When this inquiry was announced, some months ago, it filtered back to me, and I shared this information with the rest of the Committee, that our inquiry was hampering or hindering the relationship with, and sales to, Saudi Arabia. Is there any evidence that this inquiry did actually hamper the relationship with Saudi Arabia?

Dr Murrison: There is always sensitivity on the part of both Saudi Arabia and a number of the Gulf states around inquiries of this nature. They, I think understandably, are concerned about the nature of the inquiry—where it may be heading—and it takes some effort on our part to assure them that there is no ill intent: that this is the way we do things, if you like. I would characterise your inquiry as being part of what they may, on reflection, expect to see in this Parliament. They do understand the differences—as indeed we should understand the differences, for our part, in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. The key to this is understanding some of those cultural differences; that is important. So I don’t think your inquiry can be said to have helped relations, if I can...
Chair: When we were in Riyadh, we got the impression that they now fully understood how democracy works.

Dr Murrison: As a result of your visit, Chairman?

Chair: No. By the time we got there, that was the impression that we gained.

Dr Murrison: Well, I would say again, your comments invite me to make a general point, which is, engaging with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states, I hope, will enable them to understand us rather more.

Q347 Chair: Thank you.

Is it correct to say that the Ministry of Defence has double the number of staff in Saudi Arabia than the Foreign Office has?

Dr Murrison: I don’t know.

Tom McKane: It wouldn’t surprise me, Chairman, because there are, for example, about 100 Ministry of Defence staff in Saudi Arabia on the Saudi aircraft project. If you take into account those and the other Ministry of Defence teams and the defence section in the embassy, I imagine it could well be double, if not more than double. I don’t have the precise figures.

Q348 Chair: Do you think this suggests that the MOD has got better access than the Foreign Office in Saudi Arabia?

Dr Murrison: I would be surprised if that were the case. I have the figures for the number of MOD employees we have in the various teams in Saudi Arabia, if it would be helpful. It is substantial. This is not new. Some of this goes back to 1964, so it is a long-standing relationship with Saudi Arabia. We can certainly provide you with the raw figures if that would be useful. I should also say that it is at senior level, so we have an RAF two-star heading the defence section in Riyadh.

Tom McKane: The Saudi aircraft project.

Matthew Armstrong: But many of our staff, at a more junior level, are dealing on a day-to-day basis with the Saudi air force, helping and assisting them, so I am not sure I would characterise that as access. It is direct practical assistance on the ground rather than political influence.

Q349 Sir John Stanley: Minister, could you explain to the Committee how it is that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in its latest human rights report lists Saudi Arabia among 27 countries of the greatest human rights concern of countries around the world, yet at the same time another Government department—the Business Department—presumably with your Department’s support, lists Saudi Arabia among the top priority markets for arms sales? How is it that within the same Government, one part lists Saudi Arabia as a top human rights concern and another part lists it as a top priority market for arms exports?

Dr Murrison: A country wins a place on the list of countries of concern for a variety of reasons. It does not, by any means, have to be internal repression or aggression against its own people directly. It can be due to, for example, its record on the treatment of women in society. In the case of Saudi Arabia, for example, we have made very clear over many years our opposition to capital punishment. There is a raft of reasons why countries win a place on that list. To then say that we will not treat with them in terms of defence engagement is a step too far because they nevertheless have the right to protect themselves. I suggest very strongly that those countries and societies gain a great deal from our engagement with them. For example, if we want to introduce concepts in our training like the moral component of warfare, which we do, we must engage with them. We could pull out, of course, and disengage completely but I am not sure, Chairman, where that would lead us. It is not clear to me that that would make the situation better.

Q350 Sir John Stanley: Does it not strike you as somewhat anomalous, Minister, certainly in terms of public perception, that you have the same country listed by the Government as a top human rights concern and at the same time a top market for arms exports? Does that not seem anomalous to you?

Dr Murrison: Part of the work of a Committee such as this is to improve and to inform public perception, but I hope that my explanation enables you to come close to understanding why we feel it is important to engage with countries like Saudi Arabia in the way we do, in terms of defence engagement. We make it very clear—behind the scenes is I think particularly effective with countries in the Gulf—that we have concerns about some aspects of how they conduct their business. That is no secret. If we were to disengage from them, we would be unable to do that.

Tom McKane: It might be worth adding that whether or not a country is regarded as a top priority for defence exports, every proposed export must pass through the Government’s export licensing system. The criteria that the Government publish and that are used to assess whether sales should go ahead are used in testing the proposal.

Dr Murrison: It is important to say that all sales go through the consolidated criteria, and I maintain that they are the best in the world. Clearly, they take full cognisance of European Union criteria, and they are rigorous. That is our safeguard, judged on a case-by-case basis, in terms of what we do in providing defence and security equipment to Saudi Arabia and/or other countries.

Q351 Mr Roy: Minister, still on the sales criteria, it has been suggested to us previously that Gulf rulers have used their buying power to apply political pressure on the United Kingdom. Are defence sales used as a bargaining chip between Gulf states and the UK?

Dr Murrison: No. Defence sales are very much part of our defence engagement strategy. It is clear that, in order to engage with countries in terms of defence, you need to train with them, exercise with them and treat with them generally, but more than that, to have some sort of sales arrangement with them. This is British kit—kit that we know and use. We find that that is a very effective way of engaging with a number of countries, states in the Gulf being several.
Q352 Mr Roy: So there is no cross-over in discussions of, “This is what we want to buy. In order to buy this, we would also like to think politically about any type of situation.”
Dr Murrison: No. BIS owns the consolidated criteria. They have ownership of that—clearly, informed by the Foreign Office and the MOD where appropriate. If there are concerns from either quarter, that informs the decision that BIS makes. The consolidated criteria are rigorous, and each case is determined on its own merit.

Q353 Mr Roy: So no one on our side would partake in any discussion that is supposed to be about arms sales or whatever if it goes into any other political issue?
Dr Murrison: No. Each case is determined on its own merit against the consolidated criteria.

Q354 Mr Roy: Exclusively?
Dr Murrison: The consolidated criteria.

Q355 Mr Roy: On the remaining Typhoon aircraft, are you confident that the ongoing issue relating to those aircraft will soon be resolved, and a further Typhoon contract signed?
Dr Murrison: The situation at the moment is that Saudi Arabia wishes to purchase 72 aircraft. We have a Government-to-Government arrangement. As you know, that facilitates that. I am confident that the deal will be done.

Q356 Mr Roy: Are the problems that have been headed at the moment entirely related to pricing, or are there other political issues? I suppose, going by your last answer, that you will say, “No, there are no other political issues.” Is it based solely on pricing?
Matthew Armstrong: When the Typhoon deal was struck, there were a number of fixed price elements to it and some variable price elements that were left for later resolution. We are at the point where we are nearly finalising those discussions. I think they will be resolved at some point in the near future. They are purely pricing issues. There is nothing political about the aircraft that is an issue at the moment. The Saudis are happy with—

Q357 Mr Roy: Just for the record then, Mr Armstrong, is it just purely pricing that is the issue?
Matthew Armstrong: Yes. I think perhaps we are overstating it. It is not a major issue. It is something we talk about with the Saudis on a regular basis, and something that will be resolved, as the press report said, in the near future.

Q358 Ann Clwyd: Why does Saudi Arabia need so much military equipment?
Dr Murrison: Saudi Arabia notes, I suspect—Saudi Arabia can speak for herself—the challenges of the region in which she exists. I suspect that she would say that she feels threatened in many respects by the political situation in the region. But it is not really for me to second-guess Saudi Arabia’s requirements. Clearly, what we have to do is to respond to them on a case-by-case basis, which is what we do.

You will be aware that one of the criteria is that we need to have cognisance of whether a country is spending way in excess of what its budget would allow. In other words, is it spending a gross amount of money on arms that should be applied elsewhere? That does not apply in the case of Saudi Arabia, which is well placed to buy the sorts of things that we and others are selling to it.

Q359 Ann Clwyd: What if any of the equipment that we are selling were to fall into the wrong hands—is that a scenario you have even contemplated? What is the possible reaction to that equipment going into the wrong hands?
Dr Murrison: Clearly, we have to take note of the end user when we sell any equipment. I would characterise the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia as a country where we have a reasonable degree of certainty about the end user and that the equipment that we sell will be used for the purposes that we can easily foresee. You can imagine countries around the world where that might be more difficult, but I think we are reasonably safe with Saudi Arabia.

Q360 Ann Clwyd: Do defence purchases, or lack of them, by the Gulf affect the MOD’s own defence procurement?
Dr Murrison: No, I don’t think so. Again, we purchase equipment that we feel is best for the tasks that we have before us. We pride ourselves on having the very best. I am pleased when our armed forces are able to showcase British kit. I think that particularly those countries that are contemplating buying equipment from this country are reassured when they see equipment being used by our armed forces, since our armed forces, as you well know, are held in very high regard across the world. Armed forces, particularly in countries where the armed forces military hierarchy assumes an elevated place in society, will note that the British armed forces are using particular bits of British kit and will be encouraged by that in their buying plans. Also, they are very keen to train alongside British armed forces that are using similar kit, so I think there is an holistic relationship between our defence industry and our armed forces, but I certainly would not characterise the relationship in the way you have suggested.

Q361 Ann Clwyd: Do you think that UK civil servants who work on UK Saudi defence matters, paid for by Saudi officials, can be expected to flag up concerns about, for example, corruption? There have been numerous concerns about corruption in the past, as you know.
Dr Murrison: Indeed. A lot of them are history. I do not think we necessarily need to go into some of the history of this. I am clear that British civil servants are well briefed on British legislation that relates to bribery and corruption. They can be in no doubt about what that looks like and what the consequences are in the event that they err. Our record in this respect, going way back to 1992 when the matter was looked at originally, is good. I am confident that our officials operate appropriately.
In terms of paymaster, of course they are British civil servants and they are paid for by the Crown. Any Government-to-Government arrangement is purely that, and the paymaster for civil servants remains the Crown.

Matthew Armstrong: As one of those civil servants, I would have no hesitation in raising any concerns that I had about bribery or corruption in any of our programmes. I have seen nothing that would give me any concern.

Q362 Ann Clwyd: There have been allegations. If we go back to 2006 and the Al Yamamah case, the investigations were controversially halted after it was advised that Saudi Arabia could withdraw intelligence co-operation. In 2012, the Serious Fraud Office launched an investigation into a subsidiary of the pan-European defence contractor, EADS, in the light of further bribery allegations. In answer to a parliamentary question inquiring about the case on 15 May this year, the Solicitor-General declined to give a running commentary on current investigations, so there are clearly investigations ongoing.

Dr Morrison: These are matters for the SFO. I am certainly not going to comment on them. All I will do is reiterate what I have said, which is that our civil servants are well briefed on bribery and corruption, and they should be in no doubt about how to handle such matters. In the event that they have concerns about them, they are passed up the chain and eventually land on a Minister’s desk, so such allegations would be treated extremely seriously.

Q363 Sandra Osborne: Can I take you on to Bahrain? In 2011, the Bahraini authorities, by their own admission, used excessive force to put down a popular uprising. It emerged that Saudi Arabian troops had been sent in to assist. At that time, the UK Armed Forces Minister said that it was possible that some members of the Saudi Arabian National Guard who were deployed in Bahrain may have undertaken some training provided by the British military mission. Has the UK investigated whether any UK equipment or UK-trained Saudi forces were used in the GCC deployment to Bahrain, and if so, are you satisfied that the UK involvement was appropriate?

Dr Morrison: Yes, I am. Indeed, I can go better than that, because the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry considered these matters, and although fault was found, I am very pleased to say that it was not found with Peninsula Shield, which is the GCC mission to Bahrain. It did contain people who had been in receipt of training, but I think that we can be reassured that none of that was used in a repressive way. Peninsula Shield was used, in the main, to protect installations, as I understand it, and the BICI report exonerated it from anything of the sort that you have described.

Q364 Andrew Rosindell: Minister, good afternoon. Will you elaborate a bit more about Britain’s defence relationship with Bahrain, particularly in terms of operations in the Gulf and the Red Sea? How would the United Kingdom manage if we were not working as closely with Bahrain as we are?

Dr Morrison: We would manage; we always do. However, Bahrain is very important to us. It is a long-standing friend and ally, and it has been extremely helpful in providing basing and overflight facilities. Our defence engagement with Bahrain is very strong. You will know that the UK maritime contingent command is based in Bahrain, and that is part of the combined maritime force operating in the Gulf. So Bahrain is extremely important to us, but in the event that it was not there, we would clearly have to seek other alliances and partnerships. However, Bahrain is one of our closest relationships in that region, and we are very grateful to the Bahrainis for their hospitality and accommodation.

Q365 Andrew Rosindell: In 2011, it has been suggested that the Bahrainis threatened to withdraw their defence co-operation with the United Kingdom. Can you tell us, Minister, whether that is accurate? If it is, how did Her Majesty’s Government respond to that threat?

Dr Morrison: I am not prepared to talk about conversations that we will have had with the Bahrainis at a fairly high level. Needless to say—I think I touched on it in response to an earlier question—when we say or do something, there is a risk that we will inflame sensitivities in that part of the world. I think that the way to deal with it, as indeed we have, is to continue our dialogue with those countries so that they can understand where we are coming from. We can simply disengage—we can always do that—but as I have said before, it is not clear where that would then lead us. If we are seeking to introduce countries to our values, working of course with the grain of those countries all the time and respecting their traditions—that is vital—then we need to engage with them. We are happy to do that, understanding that there are differences between us and the way that we each view the world, and in our culture and traditions. But we need to respect each other’s.

Q366 Andrew Rosindell: But you are not able to confirm whether that threat was made?

Dr Morrison: I am not willing to confirm or deny it in the terms you have stated.

Q367 Mike Gapes: May I take it further? The Bahraini Foreign Minister came to the UK in October 2012, and a new UK-Bahrain Defence Cooperation Accord was signed during that visit. It was not publicised in any major way here, but it was publicised extensively by the Bahrain Government. Can you tell us, in the light of your previous answer, why a new defence co-operation accord was needed in 2012?

Dr Morrison: We sign accords—memorandums of understanding, letters of agreement—all the time, with a variety of countries, as you know. I have done it in the short while that I have been a Minister. These things are part of the weft and warp of the way in which we do business. I will not discuss the content of that particular document; it would be wrong of me to do so, given the request of the other party. However, what I will say that it was a routine expression of our continuing desire to engage.
Q368 Mike Gapes: Was the timing in 2012 meant to signal British Government support for the Bahraini Government at that time?
Dr Murrison: No, it was part of our routine, ongoing engagement with Bahrain, which is a country that is important to us.

Q369 Mike Gapes: You said that you are not prepared to discuss what is in the accord. Without going into detail, however, can you confirm that there are provisions in the accord relating to human rights standards and training, and provisions that the accord could be suspended if the human rights situation in Bahrain was to deteriorate seriously?
Dr Murrison: I am not going to comment on that. I am perfectly prepared to enter into a correspondence and consider such a request carefully, but I am not prepared in open forum to discuss the contents of that accord.

Q370 Chair: May I take you up on your invitation to consider the nature of the questions? Perhaps you can respond in some general way.
Dr Murrison: You can certainly do that, and I will be happy to consider it.

Q371 Chair: Thank you, I would be very grateful. This is a fairly self-evident question, but in the Ministry of Defence do you view closer co-operation with the GCC to be a good and positive thing? If so, what efforts are you making to advance it?
Dr Murrison: Yes. We need to understand that the GCC is a forum for dialogue. It is chiefly a political construct; it is not primarily a defence forum, so our defence engagement is primarily with individual member states. We do engage with the GCC Secretariat in Riyadh, but primarily our defence engagement is with the GCC’s members and not with the GCC corporately.

Q372 Chair: Do you have any contracts with the GCC as a collective, as a body?
Dr Murrison: No. I am aware of none.

Q374 Mike Gapes: Do you ever publish any defence co-operation accords with any countries?
Dr Murrison: No, it is not our usual practice, unless of course the other party wishes to do so. I have to say, many of the accords are extremely anodyne and, I would say, most countries might probably welcome the publication of some of those more anodyne reports, but—
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Q379 Chair: We will continue with the sitting. May I welcome Alistair Burt, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs? With him are Jon Davies, Director of North Africa and the Gulf at the Foreign Office, and Sarah MacIntosh, Director of Defence and International Security. I welcome you all. Minister, may I alert you that, unfortunately, it looks as though we will be interrupted by a vote at, we estimate 15.42, and we will proceed as we are. I welcome the opportunity to say a few introductory words about UK relations with the Gulf. As the Committee will be well aware, there is a rich and deep relationship between the UK’s national security and prosperity, and has been for several generations. We depend on the region for the security and stability of the global energy market. We look to them to help us in the fight against terrorism at home and overseas. A significant number of British jobs depend on the contracts won in what, taken collectively, is one of our larger export markets globally, and should remain so, given the abundance of the infrastructure projects in need of British expertise. The region is also home to over a quarter of the world’s sovereign wealth, a significant portion of which is invested in the UK. That is to say nothing of the over 160,000 British nationals for whom the Gulf is also home. We depend on Governments in the Gulf to help us deliver our foreign policy priorities in Libya, Syria, Yemen, Afghanistan, Iran and even Somalia, to pick just a range of examples. I notice from the transcripts of earlier sessions that you have been interested to understand whether we have the correct balance between our interests and values. Let me start by reiterating the Foreign Secretary’s belief that human rights are at the heart of our foreign policy. Our values are a thread that runs through all our foreign policy decisions. The UK Government is very clear in its condemnation of violence and its insistence on upholding the rule of law and individual rights, but it is also clear that there is no blueprint for legitimately governing a country and no one-size-fits-all model. Getting the balance right in our relationships overseas strikes me as one of the key responsibilities of the FCO, but also one of the most difficult.

To outside observers, whether or not we have that balance right often depends on their subjective view of what might be the most important UK interest. In truth, there will be a different relationship with each Government concerned. We need to establish what depends on the nature of our relationship with the Gulf concerned. We need to establish what would be the most effective way to achieve our ends. With some Governments, all we can do is make public criticism: we simply do not have the level of relationship that would make private discussions meaningful. On other occasions, we consider a detailed private discussion will enable us to make more of a difference.

In all our relationships, particularly with our friends in the Gulf, we ensure that, as the Prime Minister has stated, no issue is off limits. They understand that we are speaking to them as a friend, but one with their interests, as well as ours, at heart. Our relationships with both Saudi Arabia and Bahrain are informed by our interests and our values. The values of these countries will never completely mirror ours and we cannot expect that. We respect their traditions and histories, seeking areas of common interest where we can co-operate, and where we disagree, making this clear. We are clear that stability is based on legitimacy and the consent of the people. Finally, our priorities are closely interlinked with those of our partners in the Gulf: achieving security and stability in the region, based on legitimacy and consent, and increasing our prosperity to benefit us all, particularly in the current economic climate.

Q380 Chair: Minister, thank you very much indeed. We received evidence, during the course of the various sessions we have had, that the Gulf felt neglected up to 2010. Do you think that was fair comment? Have you got a view as to why they felt neglected?

Alistair Burt: I am sure all those who were engaged in the Gulf in past years were giving absolutely 100% of their best and fulfilling the relationship between us and Gulf states absolutely as they would have wanted to. What the Foreign Secretary felt when he was in opposition was that we could simply do more—we could be more engaged.

Since we came into office, we have been able to make use, for instance, of simply physically having an extra Minister in the Department to make sure that, physically, Ministers could get out more often. I notice that one of your witnesses said that, always, one of the usual problems is making sure there is a Minister free to be able to go out and go on a visit, and visits matter. I think we felt that there was more we could do by way of visits, and more we could do to give a sense that traditional partners were as important now and in
the future as they had been in the past. Without
dwelling on the romance of the relationships, some of
which go back hundreds of years in the Gulf, we could
say, “It’s the relevance now that’s really important.”
Then, of course, there are the regional strategic
matters, which have become even more important in
the last two or three years.
What we try to do with the Gulf Initiative is recognise
that we could deliver more by being more active, and
our sense is that we have been noticed for doing this.

Q 381 Chair: Had any of the Gulf rulers expressed
dissatisfaction with the relationship?
Alistair Burt: We picked up anecdotally, when we
started to increase visits and contact, that the word
“neglect” just popped up, but I would not say that it
was anything like a concerted campaign from states
or anything. People do notice if you go on more visits,
if you pay more attention. I think there have been 230
outward visits to the Gulf since 2010, and that is not
just FCO Ministers. What we have been able to do
through the initiative is involve Ministers right across
a series of other Departments—Health, Education,
Business and Energy—to emphasise the breadth of the
relationship with the United Kingdom. We think it has
made a difference, and I think the Foreign Secretary
was right to have recognised that there was more we
could do to put more energy into this relationship.

Q 382 Chair: Thank you. Turning to the relationship
with the Gulf Cooperation Council as a whole, in the
written evidence to us at the end of last year, the
Government said that they wanted to have “a more
formal mechanism for taking forward UK-GCC
partnership.” Why was it felt that there was a need for
such a formal mechanism?
Alistair Burt: First, we recognised also that the GCC
could itself be rather more effective. There had been
a sense that it had not operated as a particularly
cohesive body. The relatively new Secretary General,
Secretary General Al Zayani, who came into office
around the end of 2010, beginning of 2011, I think
shared that sense. That was demonstrated very quickly
by the way in which the GCC operated over the
difficulties in Yemen, where it was quite clear that the
GCC initiative—encouraged by a number of
ambassadors, including our own, who were working
very hard in Yemen to seek a peaceful transition of
what looked to be a very nasty situation developing—
made a significant difference.
Accordingly, moving on to a more structured
relationship, whereby the Foreign Secretary now sees
GCC Foreign Ministers twice a year on a formal basis,
I will be going next week to the meeting of the GCC
with EU Foreign Ministers. It was our way of
recognising that the GCC could be more effective
itself. If that was to be the case, we wanted to be
more engaged.

Q 383 Chair: Would that be described as a meeting
of the UK-GCC strategic dialogue?
Alistair Burt: I am not sure it formally comes under
that heading.

Q 384 Chair: When is the next meeting of the
dialogue, and what would be on the agenda?
Alistair Burt: The GCC dialogue is certainly taken
forward by the Foreign Secretary and me in a rather
informal way. It is rather different from what we have
across the region in a series of taskforces and working
groups and the like. The relationship at the moment is
a more informal one, followed by the Foreign
Secretary and me, particularly by him in his two
meetings. They will be well structured and will cover
a range of issues.

Q 385 Chair: We hope to develop a joint action plan.
In the light of what you have just said about being a
bit more informal than originally envisaged, did the
joint action plan ever get up and running?
Alistair Burt: We have not developed a joint action
plan with the GCC at this stage.
Jon Davies: Mr Chairman, as you say, when looking
to put the encounters between the UK and GCC on a
more formal basis, it has been proposed that there
should be a joint action plan. That is still on the table.
There has been some discussion at official level of
whether that is a useful tool or not, and to what extent
it supplements the bilateral UK relationship and
working group or strategic dialogue with each
country.
At the moment that is a work in progress, but it is
something that we would expect when the Foreign
Secretary meets his GCC counterparts again in
September in the margins of the General Assembly in
New York. It would be looked at again then, but it is
not something that has been formalised or finalised
yet.

Q 386 Chair: Thank you. Minister, turning to trade,
in your business plan we have a lot of commercial
goals of doubling trade here, there and various places
around the Gulf. Do you think it is wise for us to
be engaging in such high-profile visits to promote the
British defence industry so soon after the Arab
Spring?
Alistair Burt: I think the short answer is yes. Let’s
be up-front about the UK defence industry. It is very
important and very good. We have a clear belief that
those states that feel themselves under potential threat
should have the ability to protect and defend
themselves. That is particularly so in the Gulf where
not only is there concern among some states that they
might be at risk with others, but they join with us in
a very important strategic partnership. It makes sense
to us to invest in that. It makes sense for those states
to look to see what co-ordination they can have and
whether they can buy the same kit, so that there is
 interoperability among them. Yes, it does make sense.
I do not think there should be the sensitivity that you
mention in relation to the Arab Spring and Arab
Awakening, which I am sure we are going to come to.
The ramifications of the Arab Awakening are yet to
be felt everywhere, but a certain amount has clearly
been internal as states have looked at themselves, their
system of governance and the relationships between
civil society and Government and the like. While this
has been going on, states have also had an interest in
particularly in some of the higher-growth economies, the Foreign Office, it has always been a challenge, In the 25 years or so that I have been in cuts?

Q387 Mr Roy: that difficulty has nothing to do with the deep budget to that, and the United Kingdom Government should Kingdom defence industry does a great job in relation peace, keep people safe and avoid conflict. The United to the United Kingdom’s prosperity and stability, it highest quality of equipment, which will preserve the for those legitimate needs with the very criteria are not invoked, because a state is looking to defend itself legitimately against those from outside. It is clearly important to keep those relationships going, and for such a set of key strategic partners, whose region will always be of great importance to the United Kingdom’s prosperity and stability, it seems to me entirely correct that we are able to keep providing for those legitimate needs with the very highest quality of equipment, which will preserve the peace, keep people safe and avoid conflict. The United Kingdom defence industry does a great job in relation to that, and the United Kingdom Government should not be dissuaded from supporting that.

Q 387 Mr Roy: M inister, in evidence to us the M iddle East A ssociation, a respected trade body, described the “deep budget cuts” that are going on at the moment. Because of those deep budget cuts, they are finding it hard to recruit and retain good local staff, which has affected the service that they have provided to United Kingdom business in the Gulf. Is that true? If it is true, what are you doing to address the problem?

Alistair Burt: S orry, was this a concern that they had about U K T I? M inister. M inister? M inister. M inister. M inister.

Mr Roy: T his is in evidence to us, Minister.

Alistair Burt: Y es, from the M iddle East A ssociation, but what was it about?

Mr Roy: O n this inquiry.

Alistair Burt: Y es, I know, but when they were talking about difficulty of recruitment— for whom? For themselves?

Mr Roy: F or yourselves—for local staff.

Alistair Burt: N o, the provision of local staff is really important to the United Kingdom and, as I think people are aware, we have been using more local staff over the past couple years.

Mr Roy: T he question is whether you are finding it hard to recruit and retain local staff. M inister:

J on Davies: I f I may, it is not a new problem. It is not always easy for us to recruit and retain, particularly in markets such as the United Arab Emirates, where there is a lot of competition for skills. In some places, yes, it is not always easy to recruit and retain. That is a challenge for any embassy and any public sector employer. It is a challenge to compete either for the local Emirati nationals, for example, in that case, or for third-party nationals who might be in the country. In some places, it is a challenge.

Q 388 Mr Roy: S o are you saying, M r Davies, that that difficulty has nothing to do with the deep budget cuts?

J on Davies: I n the 25 years or so that I have been in the Foreign Office, it has always been a challenge, particularly in some of the higher-growth economies, to ensure you had and could retain the best staff. That is a challenge, but it is a familiar one.

Q 389 Mr Roy: S o how are you addressing the challenge?

J on Davies: W e try to make sure, as with any recruitment and retention problem, that we have a package of rewards that makes people want to work for us. Part of it is about what you pay and part of it is about making it a good place to work. Quite often people will choose to work, or look to come and work, in environments such as the British embassy, because of the prestige of the work, the nature of the work and the quality of terms and conditions in the embassy. W e would look across the whole package of what we offer as an employer to recruit and retain the best people. Again, that is not new, but it is what we try to do.

Alistair Burt: M y experience in talking to local staff— plainly, M inisters, particularly from the FCO, try to make it a point of their visits to talk to embassy staff; granted, in what is termed a town hall meeting you do not always get everything brought up to you and you have to look at staff surveys and everything— is that it has been the package around employment that has made a difference. There is a degree of loyalty to the United Kingdom for those who have been employed long-term. They do look at comparative pay rates—that is right—but they feel in most cases that belonging to the United Kingdom through the work they do is an added something, which they like as part of their employment. W e have to be competitive in terms of pay rates for those abroad, but look at the wider range of benefits that local staff get in working for the UK seems to matter to them as well.

Q 390 Mr Roy: D oes that mean, M inister, that you do not agree with the M iddle East A ssociation, which says that deep budget cuts are causing a problem? Are you saying that you do not agree with that?

Alistair Burt: I am saying that I have not noticed a lack of effectiveness of our local staff or of the work we can do attributed to what the M iddle East A ssociation has said. S o no, I do not agree with that.

Q 391 Mr Roy: W e have started with staff, but can I just ask this, on the British ambassadors: is the ability to speak Arabic no longer considered to be as important as it was for an ambassador in an Arabic speaking country?

Alistair Burt: A ctually, we think it is steadily getting more important. The Committee will be aware of the reopening of the language school by the Foreign Secretary and the determination to have more people who speak Arabic. A s far as our ambassadors are concerned, 70% of our heads of mission in Arabic countries speak Arabic. A cross the Gulf, it is not uniform, but where Arabic is absolutely essential to do the job, as in Saudi Arabia, there is a very fluent Arabic speaker in post. It is less necessary in Bahrain, and therefore there is not an Arabic speaker as head of mission in Bahrain, but across the Gulf the majority do speak Arabic and we are increasing the number of those who are capable of speaking it.
**Mr Roy:** But in Sudan, Qatar and Algeria, Minister, they do not speak Arabic.

**Alistair Burt:** Well, our Algerian head of mission speaks fluent French, which is probably what he needs more in Algeria. It varies from place to place. Where we need an Arabic speaker, there is an Arabic speaker. By reversing the trend of being less interested in local speech, which was present some years ago—

Q392 **Mr Roy:** Is that below A2 grade or above it, Minister, for the Arabic speakers?

**Alistair Burt:** I think it is right across the board: 60% of our staff in speaker slots have reached target level in speaking Arabic. Of course, the locally engaged staff will all naturally speak the local language in any case. This is UK-based staff, who tend to be the higher grades.

**Mr Roy:** Is that right, and is that going to be improved on?

**Alistair Burt:** That is right.

**Mr Roy:** Will it be improved on?

**Alistair Burt:** The view taken is that in Bahrain it is not essential to speak Arabic, so that has not been a consideration, no.

Q394 **Mr Baron:** When one is recruiting as head of mission or at any level, language skills are an important thing, but just one important thing that I would look at. I am interviewing, coincidentally, for a head of mission post in our region tomorrow and languages will be one thing that we will look at in the mix. But I don’t necessarily want to appoint a brilliant linguist if they don’t bring with them the rest of the things that are needed for leadership of a post. However, it is part of what we would think of these days as diplomatic excellence. I think it always has been, but it is getting more attention, as the Minister has said. It is certainly part of what we look for when we recruit and what they looked for when our posts were recruited.

**Alistair Burt:** Once our trained speakers are in place we will have 40% more speakers of Arabic in our posts overseas than in 2010. So that is a measure of the step change that we think we needed.

**Sir Menzies Campbell:** Like others, I welcome the fact that the language skill has been re-established. Many of the statistics you have given us have been very encouraging. But if I can put it this way, we would not send anyone to Paris to be ambassador who could not speak French. Why? Because we know what the impact of that would be culturally and the extent to which respect would be extended. May we take it, then, from what you have said, that the objective is to ensure that all those who head missions, as soon as they can and most certainly in the future, will be fluent Arabic speakers as a mark of respect to those kingdoms and emirates to which they are sent?

**Alistair Burt:** I entirely take your point. Probably my answer would be that we are seeking to increase the pool of those who will be in position for the senior positions of Arabic speakers. Clearly this process will
work through time. You cannot come from a standing start and suddenly convert all your senior people.

Sir Menzies Campbell: I quite understand that.

Alistair Burt: But your point is fair. I would go back to something that I said earlier and have to repeat. Where we believe it is absolutely necessary to do the job—there are some places where it is absolutely necessary—we have the Arabic speakers in place. But there are other Arab states where that has not necessarily been the case and other skills have been necessary for the ambassadors. Accordingly, provided the language is covered elsewhere, then we have believed it has been appropriate to have someone who did not have that language. Plainly, if there are more Arabic skills available to the FCO, it makes a bit of a difference when you have a wider pool, which in many ways I wish we had.

Q397 Sir Menzies Campbell: These are all countries with which in some cases we have very close relationships. They are strategically important, particularly at this time. Would you accept the general principle that we should do everything in our power to ensure that at the highest level in our representation there is effective communication, so that for example, if the ambassador goes to call upon the king, the emir or someone of that kind, that communication is not affected by the fact that there has to be simultaneous translation, which we all know from our experience is never as good?

Alistair Burt: No, it is not. Clearly it is something that a Minister notices because almost inevitably for most of us—

Sir Menzies Campbell: We’ll send you to language school.

Alistair Burt: Well, it would be great. Actually, all of us need to go to language school, and we should have done it many years ago. Most of us are trading on the fact that everyone speaks our language, so it ill becomes politicians to poke fingers at others. We could all have done better ourselves.

Your central point is absolutely right. What I have seen, by way of observation, is that there is always someone present who speaks the language, even if it is not the ambassador. In significant meetings involving a Minister and a senior representative of the other state, there is always someone from the UK side who is able to pick up the nuances and everything else. The simultaneous translators do a good job. Your point is well made. Of course we should be looking as much as possible to ensure that those who represent us have the appropriate language skills in the places where they are serving, together with the other skills they need to be an effective ambassador. The wider the pool the better. We are addressing that, and we are picking it up from where it was. That pool will be wider in future.

Andrew Rosindell: Good afternoon, Minister.

Alistair Burt: Hi, Andrew.

Q398 Andrew Rosindell: Does the British-Saudi Arabian two kingdoms dialogue still exist?

Alistair Burt: No. We’re looking for—Sorry, I saw that it had been tossed around in your discussions before. It was there in the background, but it has not been rekindled, for all sorts of reasons. You will be aware that, for the first couple of years of the coalition Government, relations with Saudi were slightly difficult because of illnesses and ill health in Saudi Arabia. One or two of the things that we would have liked to have got off the ground were not possible. The two kingdoms dialogue is not there, but there is still talk about how to work up a strategic dialogue in ways not dissimilar to the one the Chairman started with, with the GCC. As Tom Phillips said, it was on the table when he left, and it is still on the table now.

However, it does not get in the way of the relationship or anything else. It is perhaps terribly easy to think that because we have created the taskforce in the UAE and the working groups in other states, that is now how the relationship must work. No, not at all. The relationships are good across the board, but different states want different things and have formal or informal structures as suits them. We would like to pursue this, because we think it would help to give an extra bit of structure, but it has not got in the way of the relationships or anything else up to now.

Q399 Andrew Rosindell: Has there been any other formal agreement, such as a full strategic partnership, a joint working group or a steering committee? Has anything been formally agreed between the two countries?

Alistair Burt: No. As I have said, that is always the risk of setting up something like that somewhere else. Everyone thinks, “Well, we’ve got to have one.” In actual fact, you look at what is being achieved, what the relationships are, and what you are able to do state-to-state. Do you need a formalised structure? We thought it would be a good thing, so we set up the taskforce with the UAE that I chaired with Dr Gargash over a period of time. Others have said, “Well, can we formalise our relationship?” But it is not necessary for all, so with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia we have the informal but regular bilateral contact of which you are aware.

Q400 Andrew Rosindell: Minister, in terms of increasing trade with Saudi Arabia, we have specific targets with Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates but not with Saudi Arabia. Why is that?

Alistair Burt: We have a general target of doubling our bilateral trade across the region between 2009 and 2015, and we are well on track with that. I have not seen a particular reason why we have not pinned one down in Saudi Arabia as such. I am looking at Jon.

J on Davies: No, I think in each case it will be a reflection of what is on offer. I should say that the Saudi market is more mature and is already extremely healthy for the UK. Looking to guarantee a doubling of that market over the period would therefore have been more challenging. If we can, we will, but that is why we are not committing ourselves as formally as that.

Q401 Andrew Rosindell: The USA has also managed to agree a reciprocal visa arrangement. Have we considered that? Have we tried to do the same with Saudi Arabia?
Alistair Burt: Have you spent a lot of time talking about visas, Mr Chairman? I ask because you have put your finger on one of the hottest topics: Any of us who pay visits to the region will find that visas are brought up very quickly.

Chair: It has come up regularly in our visits to a number of countries.

Alistair Burt: It does. As I am sure you are all aware, the Government have been proceeding on a border security assessment for some period of time, looking at the visa arrangements across the Gulf, and are still considering the outcome. Visas are incredibly sensitive, but they are not just for business and prosperity purposes; they have a security implication and the like. We believe that the visa service we operate right across the Gulf is very good. In each of the states, regular visitors to the United Kingdom know exactly what it is that they need to do. They are able to get multiple or long-term visas and they know what they need to get them. Everyone would always like the easiest possible visa system, and they look at what each other is getting.

My honest assessment is that even though this is raised a lot by all the states in the Gulf, it does not desperately get in the way of people’s visits here, and we are extremely conscious of any risk that that should be the case. We want people to travel, we want business people to be able to stay and invest, and we want students to come here, but the security side of it remains equally important. Where there is a threat or risk that states could be used by those who wish to enter the United Kingdom, we have to be incredibly careful, and we obviously work with the Home Office in relation to this.

The visa system is constantly revisited to see whether we can make it easier for regular visitors and those we know and are able to identify. That is what all the work on biometrics has been about. We have refined the processes to ensure that they are quicker. We will continue to do that, but the bottom line has to be security as well as prosperity.

Chair: Thank you. I hope that completes the answer to Mr Rosindell. We will reconvene in 13 minutes at 1.55 pm.

Alistair Burt: Thank you. I hope you would say that. We continue the questioning with Ann Clwyd.

Q402 Ann Clwyd: May I just ask you specifically, do you make enquiries about the sources of information and their treatment?

Alistair Burt: Yes, but there is a limit as to what I can say about CT operations, as the Committee will be aware. The standards that we have to work to and the standards that we can use for evidence or anything like that are clearly extremely important to the United Kingdom.

Q403 Ann Clwyd: Minister, the Foreign Office has acknowledged concern about Saudi Arabia’s counter-terrorism programme, which has been responsible for human rights violations, torture, solitary confinement, and the detention of political opponents. How does the UK handle counter-terrorism information supplied by Saudi Arabia?

Alistair Burt: The CT relationship is extremely important to us, but we are very clear about what information cannot be accepted. The Prime Minister has been absolutely clear that the United Kingdom cannot use any information that may have been produced by torture or anything like that. All those we work with in counter-terrorism activity know and understand that very well. However, an awful lot of work goes on where nothing of that sort is engaged in.

Q404 Ann Clwyd: May I just ask you specifically, do you make enquiries about the sources of information and their treatment?

Alistair Burt: Yes, but there is a limit as to what I can say about CT operations, as the Committee will be aware. The standards that we have to work to and the standards that we can use for evidence or anything like that are clearly extremely important to the United Kingdom.

Q405 Ann Clwyd: We are just trying to explore your statements about your concern for human rights. You say that human rights are at the forefront of the Foreign Office’s approach to everything. I want to explore that issue more deeply. If you get counter-terrorism information and it comes from sources who may have been tortured or ill-treated, what enquiries do you make?

Alistair Burt: Hold on, I am not privy to some of this information. If there is an inquiry going on—I let say the Saudis have concerns that a bomb is on its way to the United Kingdom through Yemen—I do not know anything about that operation until we find out that something has been done with some success. I am not in a position to make any inquiry about any information that is part of any current ongoing investigation. It is not part of my part of my role; I would not be involved in that sort of investigation. Are you saying that after, say, the discovery of something like the Yemen bomb, I go back to the Saudis and say, “How did you find out about that?”?

Q406 Ann Clwyd: No, I am asking the question in general, because you made a generalisation about human rights and respect for human rights.

Alistair Burt: Correct. But as far as CT operations are concerned, as I say plainly, I am not aware of the passing of information at an operational phase—that simply would not be exposed to Ministers.

I understand the point of your question, but I cannot say that, in every case, a Minister is looking at a piece of information supplied to the United Kingdom and saying, “Where did it come from?” That has never been brought to me.

Q407 Ann Clwyd: Has the promise given to you that the embassy would be able to attend a CT trial actually been fulfilled?

Alistair Burt: The specified promise that the ambassador would be able to attend a CT trial has not been fulfilled, but I can assure the Committee that we have a firm commitment from the Saudi Arabian authorities that the ambassador will be able to attend the trial.
Chair: Does Ms MacIntosh have the answer to that?
Sarah MacIntosh: No, I do not; I am sorry.

Q408 Chair: Ann Clwyd: May I ask you in general about human rights and values? What human rights concerns did you raise on your last visit to Saudi Arabia, and did you raise specific, named cases with the Saudi Ministers? If so, which ones?
Alistair Burt: I did not raise named cases with Saudi Ministers. The engagement I had, both with Ministers and with the Human Rights Commission, was about the way in which human rights were being treated in Saudi Arabia at the time, the work of the commission, and the steps forward that were being made. I did have an opportunity, when the Minister of Justice came to the United Kingdom, to talk about reform in the police and court system. We have made known our concerns about the detention of people and trials, so I had an opportunity to engage on that as well as in relation to the death penalty and women’s rights.
Chair: I think that you have wandered into someone else’s group of questions. I have got Mike Gapes down for this with you coming in on the back of it.

Q409 Ann Clwyd: We mentioned the steps forward that were being made. I did have an opportunity, when the Minister of Justice came to the United Kingdom, to talk about reform in the police and court system. We have made known our concerns about the detention of people and trials, so I had an opportunity to engage on that as well as in relation to the death penalty and women’s rights. We also indicated that that did not interfere with the rest of the relationship, which he certainly was not, and he also indicated that that did not interfere with the rest of our relationship.

Q410 Ann Clwyd: Human rights organisations have complained that the FCO appears reluctant to press Saudi Arabia on human rights issues, possibly because it has prioritised other interests.
Alistair Burt: That is not correct. It is always an easy charge to throw and level, but it is not right. We engage with Saudi Arabia on a whole variety of issues. If you look at the statements I made after a couple of the death penalty cases last year—the execution of the armed robbers and the execution of the young lady of Sri Lankan background—you will see that we made very strong and condemning statements in relation to those. We do not allow other issues to cloud our judgment in relation to that. Also, when you were talking to Sir Tom Phillips, I think he made it clear that he was under no instruction to downgrade human rights in relation to other parts of the relationship, which he certainly was not, and he also indicated that that did not interfere with the rest of our relationship.
We have what is called a frank and robust relationship with Saudi Arabia in terms of human rights. As I said in my opening statement, its human rights values are not ours, and we are absolutely right and free to make our comments about them—and we do; we do not hold back on that. I do not give you any guarantee that, in response to our representations, great or sudden changes are made. But we do make it clear that we believe that stability in any state comes from adherence to human rights values, together with a whole series of other things that are building blocks of stability, and we do not hold back from discussing that with Saudi Arabia.

Q411 Ann Clwyd: Some recent cases have appeared in the western press. For example, two of the most prominent human rights activists in Saudi Arabia, members of the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association—Abdulla al-Hamid and Mohamad al-Qahtani—were jailed for 11 years and 10 years respectively. Are those the sorts of cases that you might have raised?
Alistair Burt: I repeat the point I made earlier. The case that I was referring to was a young girl of Sri Lankan origin who was a nanny for a child. She was accused of murder, convicted, and subsequently beheaded. I made the strongest possible statement of condemnation about the process, because we believed that it was highly likely that the woman would have been underage, or under a reasonable age, and still a child when the offence was committed, if it had been committed. We objected to both the principle of the death penalty and the manner of it, so in terms of condemning the process, the sentence and the manner in which it was carried out, I am not sure that I could have done very much more. So do we take those cases up? Yes, we do.

Q412 Ann Clwyd: There are several reports about foreign maids. One, at least, has been executed.
Alistair Burt: We made the statement here because the events were happening while we were here. It was happening contemporaneously with my being in London. To believe that the Saudi authorities did not see a statement from the United Kingdom just because it was made in London is not correct. Were the Government of Saudi Arabia made aware of the United Kingdom’s deep distress at the sentence and our belief that it was wrong? Yes, they were.

Q413 Ann Clwyd: Did you do that in Saudi Arabia?
Alistair Burt: We made the statement here because the events were happening while we were here. It was happening contemporaneously with my being in London. To believe that the Saudi authorities did not see a statement from the United Kingdom just because it was made in London is not correct. We made the statement here because the events were happening while we were here. It was happening contemporaneously with my being in London. To believe that the Saudi authorities did not see a statement from the United Kingdom just because it was made in London is not correct. Were the Government of Saudi Arabia made aware of the United Kingdom’s deep distress at the sentence and our belief that it was wrong? Yes, they were.

Q414 Mark Hendrick: Minister, going back to counter-terrorism, you made it quite plain earlier that the Government are not happy to receive any intelligence that may have been extracted through the use of torture. However, when information is provided, is it taken at face value or are direct inquiries made by your officials to check the source of that information?
Alistair Burt: I look for some guidance on this, because I am not involved operationally in CT activities or anything like that. What I referred to was a very clear statement from the Prime Minister in relation to torture, which he made at the beginning of this Government, to say that the United Kingdom was not involved and would not receive information associated with it. Where this tends to come, of course, is when either issues go to trial and evidence is being relied upon or not, or in incidents relating to
the past, where the United Kingdom is brought to book legally for things that Governments might have been responsible for in the past. That is why, first, it is not in our interests to receive information that may have been obtained illegally, and why we would currently sort of wish to reject it, because we do not want to be in those situations.

Where information is being gathered during an investigation—in order, say, to stop an incident, as opposed to dealing with the legal consequences afterwards—genuinely I am not involved in that process. I do not know what safeguards are introduced.

Q415 Mark Hendrick: But you are responsible for your officials who may be involved in that process.

Alistair Burt: Well, we are, of course, responsible for our officials, but again, my operational knowledge is not such as to know, in the middle of an operation, whether people are pressed as to where a bit of significant information should come from. All I would say is that, as we know, information has to be tested for its reliability. Time and again, there have been concerns that information gathered illegally is not necessarily the most reliable, so I have to work on the basis that professionals must get the most accurate information in order to make their judgments, but every British official knows the stance of the Government in relation to the obtaining of information and evidence illegally.

Q416 Mark Hendrick: But what you are not saying, then, is that any evidence extracted illegally would necessarily be disregarded as to its value?

Alistair Burt: I cannot answer the question, Mr Hendrick, because I genuinely do not know. In the course of an investigation into something that might turn into a plot or a threat against us, I do not know how every piece of information is adjudged in those circumstances—I really don’t. I know that we cannot place any reliance upon information extracted illegally for evidentiary purposes. It does not help us in court. We know also that in dealing with the return of prisoners abroad and in handling them, if there is any risk of torture it affects the way in which the United Kingdom can be involved and the way in which we can be involved with other intelligence agencies.

I am sure that the Committee will be aware of the circumstance in Afghanistan of trying to create what we call a compliance mechanism, which is being sure about how people are treated to make sure that there is a proper relationship for any individual caught by the United Kingdom—by UK forces—and handed over. We have to be confident that handing them over to a process will be appropriate, legal and the like. I cannot say in relation to CT operations is, in the midst of them, what processes are gone through? All I would say is that every officer working for the United Kingdom in CT operations knows the rules that we have to abide by and what ultimately can be relied upon or not relied upon in court.

Q417 Mark Hendrick: Would you say that the counter-terrorism relationship between ourselves and Saudi Arabia is equally important to both states, or would you say that we need them more than they need us?

Alistair Burt: No, I think it is important to both states. The Committee will be aware that Saudi Arabia suffered a very serious threat of terrorism a decade ago and in subsequent years. Dealing with that was extremely important to them. They are aware that they have people within their state who can be attracted to radical or extremist ideas, a number of whom, of course, are already outside Saudi Arabia and may be operating in different countries. They know of the concerns about Yemen, for example. It is therefore a matter of great interest to them that they are able to deal with these issues, and it is to us—I go back to the discovery of the printer plot against the United Kingdom and the work of the Saudi authorities in relation to that.

I think, quite genuinely, that this is a mutually beneficial arrangement. It is in all our interests that we are able to tackle terrorism and prevent its effects, but an important part of that, which is at the base of the argument, is how it is done. That is why the United Kingdom maintains the standards that it does, and is in the position of both opposing and paying damages when it has not adhered to those standards. The fact that it is written in to what we try to do is in our interests, and there is not a state that we co-operate or work with that is not aware of that.

Sarah Macintosh: May I add one sentence? I am afraid that I cannot answer the question around operational CT cases—I am not responsible for those—but I can say that in the relationship on CT with Saudi, a number of institutions in the UK, including the MOD and the Metropolitan police, are involved in training around how to conduct CT operations and the policing that surrounds them. Part of that is a forensics training programme for the Saudi police, which is specifically designed to reduce the reliance on confessional evidence for human rights-related reasons, so improving the skills elsewhere reduces your reliance on that.

Q418 Mike Gapes: Minister, in an answer to Ann Clwyd, you said that we robustly raise human rights issues, and I think you denied the accusation that we look the other way on these matters. Given the importance of counter-terrorism, defence, security and trade, if it comes down to a choice between human rights issues and those other issues, which you regard as important, is it not true that we actually give a greater emphasis to security and trade than we do to human rights?

Alistair Burt: I think, Mr Gapes, that this question has been raised with other witnesses and I think that the responses you have had were uniform: the answer is no. As I say, the former ambassador was asked quite specifically whether he had been instructed to go easy on human rights if there was a risk to commercial operations, and he said no. It is complementary: they are both important to us; it is not an either-or. Even if I do not think the Committee has had any evidence from anyone to suggest that our speaking out on issues has cost us any big contract or anything else.

There is an understanding in the states that we visit that our adherence to human rights, and the
importance we attach to it, is very important to us. There is also an understanding that they do not do things necessarily in the same way as we do in the UK, but they know why we will raise it, and they know why it is important. It is important not just because it is part of our value-base system, but because it is part of everybody’s. International human rights obligations matter to all. We make the point about security and stability in states being associated with a legitimacy of Government based on consent, in which human rights play an enormous part and abuses affect that. We will make this point to Saudi Arabia. There is no evidence that it does not carry the same significance with us as in talking to others, but it is part of the overall relationship and it is not an either/or.

Q419 Mike Gapes: Can I then press you? Do we send diplomats to any of the trials of human rights activists that are taking place in Saudi Arabia?
Alistair Burt: We have sought to monitor trials.

Q420 Mike Gapes: Do we actually attend the trials?
Alistair Burt: I am just trying to recall if there are any presently going on. We have certainly in the past where it has been possible to monitor trials. It is not always possible to do. Not every state allows those from abroad to take part and observe, but where we can, and it has been important, we have sought to do so. Jon, I don’t know whether you have any more.
Jon Davies: I can’t give you a definite yes or no answer, but we will check that.

Q421 Mike Gapes: Perhaps you can write to us and tell us if there are any examples where you have.
Jon Davies: If it was a possibility and we also think that it would be positive to do so, we would normally look to do so. It is also the sort of issue that is raised by, for example, our head of the Human Rights Department, who recently visited Saudi Arabia to discuss these issues with her opposite numbers. So we are trying to find other ways of raising our concern other than that.

Q422 Mike Gapes: You are not aware of any specific cases when diplomats, whether ambassadorial or lower level from the embassy, have attended trials in Saudi Arabia?
Alistair Burt: We would need to write. I know that we have—and do—attend trials across the region. I cannot give you a specific answer on Saudi Arabia.

Q423 Mike Gapes: Perhaps you will write.
Alistair Burt: But I do know it is something we look to do, when it is right to do so. There is certainly no bar or suggestion that we shouldn’t.
Jon Davies: The question was about Saudi Arabia specifically?

Q424 Mike Gapes: Specifically about Saudi Arabia, and on Saudi Arabia, the final question from me is about the United Nations Human Rights Council’s universal periodic review, which is due later this year. The human rights report from the FCO said that you were “committed to the success of the Universal Periodic Review process”. Are we intending to make a robust contribution to this process with regard to Saudi Arabia? On what topics are we likely to focus?
Alistair Burt: First, let me say that we do, of course, have Saudi Arabia listed as a country of concern. In a way, that rather belies the sense that we go easy. You will know, of course, that Bahrain is not a country of concern under the FCO; it is a case study. If there were any suggestion that the United Kingdom would go soft on Saudi Arabia, it would not be a country of concern. But it is, and it is under a whole series of headings, whether it is the death penalty, whether it is human rights, whether it is representation. From memory, running through the list that we have in the Home Office report, it details those areas where we are most concerned. They include trials and detentions. You may safely assume that what we have in this year’s human rights country of concern listing for Saudi Arabia, which is quite a fair number of paragraphs, forms the basis of our concerns and would form the basis of the concerns that are taken through at the UN.

Q425 Mike Gapes: But you haven’t yet decided specifically what?
Alistair Burt: No, it is a bit early. I come back to that because it is an important process. For those who do say, “Oh well, clearly you don’t press these issues firmly,” that report is pretty important. If the United Kingdom wanted to pull punches on the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, it would not be a country of concern. Why should we put ourselves in that position? We do so because it is the right thing to do. There are different reasons why Bahrain is not in that position and different judgments made in relation to both, but the fact that they are both named and up-front is because we have concerns over human rights. If this was not a matter for the United Kingdom to be concerned about—if we were more concerned about commerce, defence and everything else—why would we put our relationship at risk by doing that? We do so because it is the right thing to do, and we are dealing with people who understand that.

In both Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, we are dealing with countries that are edging, in different ways, towards reform. We have not discussed women’s position in Saudi Arabia yet, and you may wish to or not, but looking at where a very conservative society looking to reform under King Abdullah—you have been there yourselves—it is an interesting but difficult process. Although we will not mirror each other, and we understand the context, it does not lead us to pull punches in our reports, which we don’t.

Q426 Sandra Osborne: A couple of witnesses to the inquiry suggested that Saudi Arabia’s role as a primary partner is overstated, that it does not necessarily represent wider Arab opinions, such as related to Egypt, and that it does not have much policy-making capacity. Do you feel that Saudi Arabia has the capacity and political will to be a reliable partner of the UK in pursuing foreign policy goals?
Alistair Burt: Yes, I think we do. Saudi is looked to by its neighbours; there is no doubt about that. In both
the GCC and, particularly, the Arab League, it is a key player. The Saudis were fully engaged in securing Arab League support for the international military campaign in Libya, for example. Saudi Arabia is looked to by the OIC as well. King Abdullah saw to it that the OIC convened an extraordinary summit in August 2012 in Mecca, which saw the OIC decide to suspend Syria’s membership of the OIC due to the actions of the Assad regime. There is plenty of evidence.

It is different to Egypt. There is no doubt that in North Africa and in the Arab world, Egypt has a special place, but so does Saudi. Saudi is a powerful neighbour. What its foreign policy dictates is of huge importance, obviously, to the other Gulf states that surround it, but it is also of great significance in the Arab membership organisations.

Q 427 Sandra Osborne: You talked earlier about the close working relationship with Saudi Arabia in relation to the various challenges in the Middle East, and you mentioned various countries. To what extent are UK and Saudi goals aligned with regard to Syria, Iran and Bahrain? Do the UK and Saudi Arabia want to achieve the same result with regard to these countries?

Alistair Burt: I think you have hit on a key aspect of the relationship. This will dovetail with some of my earlier remarks. Saudi Arabia is a key strategic partner. For all the reasons that you have looked into and that we know so well, the Gulf will remain an important region of influence. I think that our interests are aligned. Saudi Arabia knows how important it is to keep the trade routes free and away from any conflict. Saudi Arabia is acutely aware of the presence of Iran, for example, and of the risks that both it and we believe Iran poses to the region through its nuclear file and other ways in which it has sought to interfere with its neighbours. Whether it is Bahrain or Syria, that evidence is plain. It is in our collective interest to ensure that states are free to go about their own business without fear of interference or threat. It is clearly in our strategic interest that Iran does not become nuclear-capable, thus leading to the risk of proliferation in the region. In all such areas, our interests are aligned.

As far as Bahrain is concerned, clearly there is a special relationship between Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, and I am quite sure that that will be something you will want to explore this afternoon. Obviously, I would not think for a moment that Saudi’s relationship with Bahrain is the same as that with the United Kingdom. In so far as we all want to see Bahrain succeed, a national dialogue is being conducted by Bahrainis with Bahrainis, producing a political solution to the complex situation in Bahrain, thereby ending the violence and ensuring greater inclusion and delivery of the BICI recommendations. I think that Saudi Arabia’s interests, to that extent, are the same as ours.

Saudi Arabia does not want to see a change in the monarchy in Bahrain and has made that plain. It believes that the governance of Bahrain is more secure under that umbrella. Anything else is for Bahrainis to decide. That is the United Kingdom’s position. However, we do not see a reason to challenge the assumption made by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. In many of these respects, as I have outlined, we do have similar interests. That is why we are such an important partner, why we share things in terms of counter-terrorism and intelligence, and why there is such a close relationship. It is also why we are prepared to sell very sophisticated weaponry to Saudi Arabia in order that it protects itself and plays its part in the protection of a region that is very important to the United Kingdom.

Q 428 Sandra Osborne: Do you believe that Saudi Arabia could do more in relation to Iraq?

Alistair Burt: Well, that is a good question. I do not know, is the short answer. Let me think it through. The most important thing that would lead to greater stability in Iraq would be for the Iraqi political leaders to recognise their responsibilities and try to play their part in ending the sectarian violence that is now ripping the country apart. There is a sense that there is an influence from Iran in relation to Prime Minister Maliki; certainly he and the Iraqis are very aware of Iran. That would give some sense of nervousness to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, but the issues in Iraq almost certainly need to be settled by those in Iraq. We have had enough experience of people from outside trying to be engaged there. Iraq is going through a difficult time, and it must make its own judgments about what is right. If the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia can be of any influence with Sunni leaders in Iraq by saying, “You must find a way through the polarisation in Iraq and make sure that the political process works to end the violence and provide a political opportunity”, I am sure that that would be time and effort well spent. However, at the moment Iraq’s problems lie first and foremost for Iraqis to deal with.

Q 429 Mr Baron: Minister, can I turn to the pressing issue of Syria and the nature in which our interests—are aligned vis-à-vis Iran? We are very conscious of the rivalry in the region: the sectarian Sunni-Shi’a split, the Persian-Arab split and all the rest of it. In many of these respects, as I have outlined, we do not see a reason to challenge the assumption made by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. However, we have a conference coming up, and it currently looks as though the Iranians are not going to be welcome. The argument seems to go along the lines of, “Well, they don’t agree with us.” There is therefore even more requirement actually to speak to them and discuss the issues at every opportunity. To what extent is that being influenced by Saudi Arabia’s approach to Iran, or is that something very different?

Alistair Burt: Complex stuff, still very much up in the air. At this stage, we do not yet know who will be sitting round a table, and if not sitting round a table, involved in discussions about the conclusion of hostilities in Syria.

Q 430 Mr Baron: But can I just say something? That is absolutely true, but at the same time, the position to date has been that the west is going to have problems with Iran turning up.

Alistair Burt: Unsurprisingly, I am not going to deviate from the answer that the Foreign Secretary
gave to your question, and questions from others, on this subject just a couple of hours ago.

Mr Baron: What a shame!

Q431 Mike Gapes: The position does not change.

Alistair Burt: There are some basics in life that we all have to stick to, and the Minister for the Middle East agreeing with the Foreign Secretary seems to me to be not a bad one.

Q432 Sir Menzies Campbell: Hold the front page! Alistair Burt: Again, as we are among friends, let's talk about it. Iran's influence on what is happening in Syria is immense. We know this. Without Iranian support, it is possible the regime would have fallen by now, because Russia might not have committed troops in the same way. Iran has probably had some people on the ground, and has probably influenced Hezbollah to get involved. Its involvement is very clear. The issue is that they are clearly part of the problem, but to what extent are they part of the solution?

The Foreign Secretary has made it clear that the cast list for the first Geneva seems to be a reasonable basis, but there is much going on at this stage; this is absolutely current, Mr Baron. I think that those who are involved in trying to resolve Syria and end the appalling bloodshed and violence being wreaked by Assad on his people are acutely conscious of the involvement of a whole series of actors. I have no doubt that those in Saudi Arabia are well involved and well engaged. Trying to get an answer to what is happening in Syria is likely to involve as many actors as possible. I do not know, and I do not think it is possible to say this evening, what format would be possible. I do not know, and I do not think it is possible to say this evening, what format would be possible. I do not know, and I do not think it is possible to say this evening, what format would be possible. I do not know, and I do not think it is possible to say this evening, what format would be possible.

Alistair Burt: Yes, but first, I think the opportunities for a revival of the process are as good at the moment as they have been for some time, for reasons we all know very well: there is a second-term President who is prepared to take an interest in it—very seriously, from his speech in Israel—and a new Secretary of State in the United States, who is personally very committed. So perhaps there is a process under way. There is a sort of peace—certainly compared with Syria—between Palestinians on the west bank and Israel. There is a ceasefire peace of sorts even between Hamas in Gaza and Israel, but it is not stable unless we get the settlement.

I understand an Arab League delegation recently saw Secretary Kerry; the Saudis were part of it. The Arab peace initiative, which of course has been a key part of Saudi Arabia's background and involvement in the Middle East peace process for so long, was reiterated as still being a key part of the process looking forward. It was a very important statement that was made. It is a key part of the process. I think Saudi Arabia has every interest, as the rest of us do, in seeing this issue resolved, with so much uncertainty around in the rest of the area, and we are certainly using that. So Saudi Arabia supports the efforts being made by Secretary Kerry and ourselves to see some progress, which is absolutely vital in the issues between Israel and the Palestinians.

Q435 Mr Roy: Minister, on Bahrain, a year after the 2011 uprising, the Government created the joint working group and signed a defence accord with Bahrain in 2012. Was that intended as a signal of support?

Alistair Burt: It represents a very supportive relationship between the United Kingdom and Bahrain, which we make no secret of. We see Bahrain as an important partner for the United Kingdom in the region—an important historic partner, a partner who plays a key part in our strategic defence, has given the United Kingdom support with basing rights and
helped us in relation to Afghanistan. The joint working group, as we discussed earlier, is one of the evolutions of the Gulf Initiative. Bahrain was looking to formalise the bilateral discussions that we have right across the board. We have chosen to do it through the working group and the defence accord. I think you may have discussed with Defence Ministers that there is a strong relationship. That you could take both those items as evidence of that strong relationship seems to me perfectly reasonable.

**Q436 Mr Roy:** The working group first met three months ago. What was achieved?

**Alistair Burt:** It got five broad pillars: bilateral issues, reform and assistance, security and counter-terrorism, trade and investment, and regional issues. I will discuss each of those headings. On reform and assistance, we continue our efforts to support Bahrain in implementing the BICI recommendations, of which there were 26. The Crown Prince recently indicated that there were some 17 separate projects that he could count where the United Kingdom was giving technical assistance. To implement some in relation to implementing recommendations, others wider capacity building assistance. So, it is reform and assistance—us encouraging the national dialogue as a key part of the working group.

On regional issues, as you would imagine, we discussed what was happening in the Gulf and the strategic partnership that we have. On trade and investment, we continue to look for opportunities to increase the trade between us. There was a 39% increase in trade between 2009 and 2012. The current total bilateral trade of goods and services is £884 million.

**Q437 Mr Roy:** But what was achieved. Minister?

**Alistair Burt:** What was achieved was the opportunity to discuss under each of those headings the current issues where we could do more. For instance, in terms of reform and technical assistance, sitting across the table from those responsible for implementing BICI, I can say, “How is this going? Why have some parts stalled more than others? What are you going to do about such and such? Why aren’t we making progress on that?” The working group gives the opportunity to do that.

**Q438 Mr Roy:** On doing that face to face, if you thought, for example, there were no signs of reform or improvements in Bahrain’s protection of human rights, would you then ultimately suspend that group?

**Alistair Burt:** No, because I do not think that is the point and the purpose of it. We are committed to assisting Bahrain in delivering on the BICI recommendations, because we believe that, together with the efforts being made at political dialogue, they form the best opportunity of stability for Bahrain in the long term. I do not think that a relationship based on a sort of “or else” principle would do the job at the moment. It is clear that we have made a big commitment to Bahrain; I make no bones about that. Look at the work that we have done and the efforts of our ambassador there. We have taken a view that we believe that by engaging with opposition and Government, working through these recommendations, the very complex governance issues in Bahrain that spilled over into tragic violence in February 2011 have the best chance of being dealt with.

I do not think we would help that relationship if I were to go in to the working group and say, “Unless you do X, Y and Z, that’s it.” I do not think we have reached the stage where it is appropriate for me to talk in those terms. Where we do not think progress is being made, we are prepared to say so, as we have done through various statements.

**Q439 Mr Roy:** Can I just ask about progress? I want to take you to what may be a need for a united front between the United Kingdom and the United States in relation to Bahrain. We heard the Crown Prince in November 2012 speak glowingly of the United Kingdom, but at the same time totally ignore the United States. I am tempted to ask you whether you think the United States has been too critical of Bahrain, but I suspect you would not give me an answer.

**Alistair Burt:** I would say it is a matter for them.

**Q440 Mr Roy:** Exactly, that is what I thought. Do you agree that there is potential for a united front, if the United Kingdom and the United States are as one in relation to human rights or anything else with Bahrain? Or does it just not matter?

**Alistair Burt:** I think probably it is more a situation of nuance than anything else. I appreciated what the Crown Prince had to say. I would not have wanted it to be seen in opposition to anyone else. Others are trying to encourage Bahrain in their own ways. The United States will speak with a different voice, because they believe that is an effective way to communicate. We believe that ours is a different way, perhaps because we have a different type of engagement.

I do not necessarily want to see our support for Bahrain counterpointed with anyone else’s. Are our interests the same of those of the United States in wanting to see reform in Bahrain? Absolutely. Clearly, I have met and discussed with US officials the situation in Bahrain and our common aim of seeing recommendations followed through for the stability of Bahrain.

**Q441 Mr Roy:** Can I take you to a subject of criticism from the opposition, and that is the British advisers in Bahrain, such as John Yates and Daniel Bethlehem? Are those advisers a help or a hindrance in relation to the opposition’s perception that the UK backs or supports the regime?

**Alistair Burt:** I don’t know. Clearly, that is a matter of opinion for them. They are independent advisers, as you know; they are not UK Government advisers. They were chosen because of their operational experience and the help that they could give, which I certainly support. As we know, throughout the region one of the difficulties is in controlling large numbers of people. Incidents in the past often occurred due to a lack of training in security forces who made a misjudgment about how to handle the crowd.
Q442 Mr Roy: So you don’t think there is any potential reputational damage to the United Kingdom from the perception of those advisers.

Alistair Burt: No, I don’t think so. I have held conversations with the major opposition party in London as well as Manama. Had the opposition at any stage in my conversations with them brought that issue to me, I hope I could have reassured them. I think those offices there are trying to do something of benefit to the people of Bahrain and the political process. I would seek to reassure them. If they take a different view, that is a matter for them. I would hope to reassure them that that is the purpose of their being engaged there. If people are worried about how Bahraini forces reacted in February ’11, then they would have just been left alone to their own devices and we would not have been engaged in trying to improve and make their responses safer. I would say that our involvement is a good thing and seek to persuade others that that was the case.

Q443 Mike Gapes: Minister in the written evidence from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office that you sent us, paragraph 42 refers to the follow-up to the independent international commission’s recommendations, and states that “all charges relating to freedom of expression have been dropped” with regard to individuals who have been detained. However, I understand from Human Rights Watch that in fact 13 defendants remain in jail on long-term sentences relating solely to their right to freedom of expression. I got that information this week, and I am therefore interested to know which is true—what Human Rights Watch is telling me or what your written evidence to us says.

Alistair Burt: My understanding of this—and clearly if it is a matter of dispute then we will need to check it—was that charges relating to freedom of expression were indeed dropped, but there were other serious charges relating to a number of the defendants. My understanding is that they have been held on those charges. We do not have access to all the evidence, so we are not in a position to make a judgment as to whether we think that is fair, but my understanding is that their convictions are related not to freedom of expression but to other serious offences.

Q444 Mike Gapes: So in that sense, the memorandum we received was insufficient, as it did not go into all of the aspects. Perhaps you could send us a note to update it.

Alistair Burt: I can certainly update it. It is honest and accurate in relation to freedom of expression, but plainly if people are charged with other offences—

Mike Gapes: Okay. Fair enough.

Alistair Burt: But we will check that. Jon, was that your understanding—am I correct?

Jon Davies: My understanding was as yours, Minister, but we will double-check.

Q445 Mike Gapes: Can I take you on to the statement in which the FCO said that it was “disappointing”—you yourself were quoted, Minister, with regard to “the importance we and the international community place on the visit”—that the visit of the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture has been cancelled?

Alistair Burt: We have pressed them in private, and, as this is not a private occasion, I can say that we can press them in public, because your question is entirely correct; we think it does no good to the Bahraini authorities not to allow the Special Rapporteur to visit. We think if the Special Rapporteur was able to visit it would help validate the efforts that Bahrain is making in this respect. We press upon this and it is a perfect example of me being able to do that publicly.

Q446 Mike Gapes: Do you think that there is some internal politics going on in Bahrain that means that invitations are made but then rescinded because of a struggle between different parts of the political system?

Alistair Burt: There is a lot of internal politics going on in Bahrain, and this gives an opportunity to touch on that, although again I think by now you will be well versed in it. I have taken the view for some time that, in essence, although there is a more complex picture, we are talking about four particular groupings. Within the Sunni minority and those in government, there are a group of those who see reform as very important, and clearly the Crown Price has a lead role in that. There are others in the Sunni community who are hesitant: they are worried about change and they have been less forward in terms of reform. That is a matter of dispute and discussion within the Sunni community. In the Shi’a community, there are clearly those—such as the leaders of al-Wifaq, who I have met on a number of occasions—who believe, according to the Manama dialogue, that a political settlement that recognises the al-Khalifa monarchy is something they can work towards. It will involve a great deal of representation and their engagement in national dialogue is an expression of that. There are others who are maybe influenced outside but also may just feel that that is not enough, and there are some on the edge of violence connected with the February 14 movement. Each of those different blocs puts pressure on the others. Will there have been difficulties inside each of those blocs, particularly in the Sunni community, on the Rapporteur? I do not know, but it is perfectly possible.

Q447 Mike Gapes: Final question. In passing you touched on the attitude, when you were talking about Saudi Arabia and relations in regard to Syria and Iran. Do you share the fear that many people— including many in Bahrain—have, which is that the wider conflict in Syria, and potentially in Iraq and elsewhere in the region between Sunni and Shi’a, could have knock-on consequences on and hold back the efforts to build some kind of national consensus for a new way forward?
Alistair Burt: It is a very good question, to which I could not possibly give an answer. I will just do my best with an opinion. It is very clear that the whole region has a heightened state of tension because of the events of the past two and a half years. You see that reflected across the Gulf in a number of different ways. The reaction to the Arab awakening in North Africa has been far from uniform. Some have responded quickly and generously. You could argue that in Saudi Arabia, for instance, the $130 billion package of support to the people and efforts in the eastern region to provide financial support to ease tensions were one reaction to the situation.

That everyone is apprehensive and worried about where conflict can lead is clear, but the issues affecting Bahrain clearly go back before the Arab awakening or anything like that. In a sense, it is an unresolved issue of reform dating back more than a decade to when the King, as soon as he came into his position, started seeking to make some changes and found, as we have just discussed, difficulties within the Sunni community over how far those changes should go.

Events in Syria or anywhere else will have heightened worry, which will certainly have increased because of Iran's activities in Syria. Concerns that even though Iran might not have instigated recent events in Bahrain, they are certainly in a position to exploit them, will not have helped the situation. Hence our determination. We have frequently said, "Let the Bahrainis solve this."

Each state is different, so it is trite but correct to say that it is a unique situation, so there must be a unique Bahraini solution to the problem. It will help if people allow the Bahrainis to do that. My sense is that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia wants a stable Bahrain and is supportive of the national dialogue process and how it has been taken forward. Would they be afraid of more Iranian involvement in Bahrain? Yes, they would, and so would Bahrainis, because the Iranians should not be involved. Everyone has a vested interest in seeing the Bahrainis make the decisions here, but you are right to highlight fears and apprehensions, although I do not think they are stopping anything. Hopefully, they should drive a Bahraini settlement.

Q448 Sir John Stanley: Minister, will you confirm for the record the evidence that has already been received by the Committees on Arms Export Controls from the Government that British-made armoured vehicles exported to Saudi Arabia were sent by the Saudis across the causeway into Bahrain to guard key infrastructure installations during the demonstrations in Bahrain following the Arab Spring?

Alistair Burt: I think that is true.

Q449 Sir John Stanley: Thank you. Will you also confirm what is in my belief a statement of the obvious, which is that that deployment made it unnecessary for Bahraini security forces to provide for the security of those key installations and enabled those Bahraini security forces to be used for internal security operations?

Alistair Burt: There is an inevitable logic in your question. I am sure that that must be correct, yes.

Q450 Sir John Stanley: Thank you. Could you also acknowledge that the conduct of at least some of the Bahraini security forces, in the degree of their use of violence against essentially peaceful protesters—we all saw on our television screens Bahraini security vehicles simply mowing down peaceful protesters, substantial numbers of those demonstrators being put into jail, the abuse of those demonstrators when they were in jail and the use of torture, rape and threats of rape, on which the Committee has received abundant evidence—was totally unacceptable by the benchmark of international human rights standards?

Alistair Burt: That is all correct, and I do not think it is a matter of contention with the British Government. That is why we criticised the Government of Bahrain. It is why we revoked, as you know, certain licences in terms of arms exports for Bahrain. It was also the starting point for the remarkable independent commission of inquiry instituted by the Government of Bahrain. Uniquely in the region, the commission of inquiry ended up criticising the Government and setting out a series of recommendations to ensure that nothing like that happened again. Your description of events is one that would be accepted by all of us. It was the starting point, we hope, for change.

Q451 Sir John Stanley: Given your acknowledgment of the three points I have made, will you take the opportunity of this final ministerial evidence session at the conclusion of the Committee's inquiry to offer an expression of regret that British armoured vehicles exported to Bahrain indirectly facilitated extreme violence against civilian demonstrators and very serious human rights abuses?

Alistair Burt: No, Sir John. I can see exactly where you are going, but there is no connection between the work done by the Saudi authorities to protect certain places in Bahrain and the behaviour of Bahraini security forces subsequently. That the Bahraini forces were able to go off and do their job is clear, but they could have handled it in a completely different manner. They could have handled it in the manner demanded by the international community. They could have handled it in the manner expressed by BICI when they looked into it. They could have handled it in 101 different ways, and they should have done.

There is no logical connection between what the Saudi authorities were asked to do by the Government of Bahrain and the GCC, namely to come in and provide protection and do what they did—there is no connection between any of those vehicles and any human rights abuses. It would have been entirely open to the Bahraini security forces to do their job properly, so there is no connection between the two. Had there been, the point of your question would have been absolutely valid, but I do not see it.
I have felt for some time that it is a position with Bahrain to Russia's with Syria. What is perception in Britain of Bahrain is becoming rather think that Burlington should be given every
settlement, which is highly likely to encompass the al-
Bahrainis, which will seek their own political
through the successful national dialogue process by
Bahrainis, that were accepted by their own Government and
examined by the commission of inquiry, a number of
which were accepted by their own Government and
by the forces themselves as having been wrong.
I see no evidence that the Saudi authorities condoned
or, by their presence and by using British vehicles,
played any part in encouraging that behaviour. I think
it is an unfair connection to make, and I think it is
way too tenuous. Could the Bahrainis have done it
entirely without any Saudi Arabian forces on the
island at all? Yes, probably they could have done. So
I think it is unfair to search for some British
collection to spread over the knuckles for supplying
equipment to Saudi Arabia.
Let me be absolutely clear: the regret is the way in
which the Bahrain security forces handled what happened in February 2011. I accept, as we all do,
your description of events that were appalling. That is
what is in the process of being corrected, but I think
it is too tenuous to say that, somehow, British-made
vehicles made this possible. These were Bahraini
judgments that were made, and they were wrong.
Alistair Burt: I do not think so. The connection you
make is one that is too tenuous. Plainly, what happened in Bahrain was wrong. We have all said so and those who were involved have said so. There were immense repercussions, but trying
to draw the link that the supply of equipment led
inevitably to the behaviour, rather than the
deployment, is not correct.
Chair: Are you concerned by reports that the
perception in Britain of Bahrain is becoming rather
negative? One witness rather likened the UK’s
position with Bahrain to Russia’s with Syria. What is
your reaction to that?
Alistair Burt: I have felt for some time that it is a
complex situation that is not always faithfully
recorded. I do not wish to criticise the press because
they report what they see, but anyone who has been
to Bahrain and been engaged for a period of time
knows that this is not a simple situation. They know
that there are people working for reform and change,
and they know that there are still things that go on
that are wrong.
The United Kingdom has set out its stall: I make no
apology for this and I will be totally up front: we
think that the best chance for stability in Bahrain lies
through the successful national dialogue process by
Bahrainis, which will seek their own political
settlement, which is highly likely to encompass the al-
Khalifa leadership and the structure of Bahrain. We
think that Bahrainis should be given every
couragement to proceed with this and do all the
BICI recommendations and the like.
We do not ally ourselves to all the opposition to the
Bahraini Government, because that varies. There is
some opposition that we deal with, work with and
listen to because we believe that they are part of the
solution. There are others that we think have taken to
violence that we will not sanction and not support.
I have seen, as you must have seen, the evidence of
those who assault some of the security forces—the
people who get fire extinguishers, stuff metal rods in
them and fire them at the police. That is unacceptable;
it cannot be justified and it cannot be excused. I would
want to see absolute condemnation of that sort of
violence, which does not help in the process. At the
same time, it is absolutely essential that the security
forces adhere to the highest possible standards.
I think that that is a justifiable position for the United
Kingdom. If people look at the situation in Bahrain,
they will see that it is complex, and the more you go
into it, the more you understand the layers and issues
reflected. For instance, the coverage of the grand
and the protest leading up to that tended to wait for
the protest to be violent, which was usually at the
end of a Government-allowed protest which was
conducted peacefully by opposition forces. At the end,
it tended to get hijacked by a few and that was what
was reported, not the fact that peaceful protest was
made and handled perfectly properly by those wanting
to protest as well as the Government authorities that
allowed it. The impression was gained of a population
against the grand prix, with the violence and
everything else. I did not think that that told the
whole story.
That is my position. We are very clear about what we
are trying to help achieve in Bahrain for all Bahrainis.
Sometimes, the full picture is not displayed. I do not
mind facing up to the criticism for supporting the
Bahraini authorities in trying to see through reform,
and I am prepared to criticise them when they do not.
That is the appropriate position for us to take.
If we take a reputational knock fairly, that is fine, but
sometimes it is a bit unfair. We do see opposition
group; the ambassador is meticulous in relation to
that. We do not see people connected with violence,
but we see the opposition at the embassy in Bahrain
and we see them here. We are trying to work through
and be fair to all.
Chair: You say that the embassy in Bahrain
meets opposition groups. We have had evidence that
the British embassy is less accessible for opposition
groups and human rights activists than other
embassies. Is that a fair comment?
Alistair Burt: I have picked up one expression of
concern in the witness statements and we are not sure
that we have actually had a request from that
particular group to come to the embassy, but I would
look at any of them. I have seen opposition groups in
the embassy. I obviously know the ambassador very
well and I know that he would want to see and does
see those involved in the opposition, because their
involvement in the process is vital. The people he has
said that he will not see and play a part with clearly
are those who have supported or endorsed violence. I
think the Committee would think that that was fair. I am very keen, however, to ensure that our embassy is open to all political groups, because that is where an embassy draws its information from that can inform us. We will look very carefully at that, but my sense was that the particular group that had expressed concern has not formally asked to see the ambassador there, but we will do what we can.

Q456 Chair: This is the last topic before we wrap it up. In answer to a question from Mr Gapes, you mentioned Iran. Do you think that Iran is interfering in the internal activities in Bahrain at the moment?
Alistair Burt: Yes, but I do not think that is a complete answer to all the issues. I am very conscious that there are some in Bahrain who would like to see Iran as the source of all the problems, but I don’t think that is fair or correct. After the events of February 2011, our evidence has tended to suggest that the Iranians were not active in Bahrain in instigating them, but they were well placed to exploit. The media that are beamed across from Bahrain are very significant. They play into the Shi’a villages and some of the material is not designed to be helpful or conducive to peace. We have had evidence more recently of some more active involvement on the ground. As I am not able to share that evidence, my overall impression remains that Iran can and does exploit the situation, but there are many issues in Bahrain that can be settled by Bahrainis between themselves. It is not an excuse for the Bahraini authorities to say that there is some engagement or involvement with the Iranians. The Iranians should leave off and allow Bahrainis to do their job, but the Government and the authorities have to do their job in seeing through this reform process. That is the most likely counterbalance to anything the Iranians might wish to do.

Q457 Chair: So you don’t think that Iran poses a serious security threat to Bahrain?
Alistair Burt: I think Iran poses a serious security threat to everybody, frankly, and if they are allowed to run on with their nuclear threat and everything, that threat to everybody, frankly, and if they are allowed to run on with their nuclear threat and everything, that is certainly true.

Chair: So you think they do pose a serious threat to Bahrain?
Alistair Burt: They could do. I don’t believe at the moment that there is any evidence to suggest that they do—I look to both colleagues. Could they in the future? Yes, they could. Have they been engaged? Yes, they have. I am very keen to stress, however, that I am not blaming the Iranians for what is happening in Bahrain. I think the Committee has that sense, too. There is plenty that the Bahraini Government can and should be doing to follow on the extraordinary track that they set themselves, which is unique in the Gulf, and they should concentrate on that. Have I got the Iranians right?

J on Davies: I think you have. We have seen elsewhere Iran’s willingness to intervene and interfere. They have done so to a limited extent, as the Minister describes, and they may well do it again. They can, should they choose, pose a significant threat. As of today, they are not threatening the existence of Bahrain.

Q458 Chair: There is no sign of activity there as of today?
J on Davies: I hope that is not what I said, Chairman. There is evidence of activity, yes, but it is not to the extent that we have seen Iran do in other countries, which would make it a more significant threat.

Q459 Mike Gapes: But you will confirm that Iran still does not recognise Bahrain as an independent state and believes that Bahrain is Iranian territory. Is that not the case?
Alistair Burt: And also about other bits of the Gulf as well. There are other islands that they lay claim to. They are quite free in their expression of where their territorial range lies, but let us all hope that recent events might just move things in a different direction. Insha’Allah, as they say.

Q460 Ann Clwyd: On a point of clarification, you mentioned national dialogue taking place in Bahrain. I understood that the national dialogue had actually broken down.
Alistair Burt: That is not the latest information that I have. It has been a bit of a stop-start process. We have impressed upon all who have been involved—a little like Northern Ireland—that there will be good days and bad days. I am not aware and have not been given a signal that it has broken down. That there may be a pause is not unnatural in the process, but I have not seen anything—unless it is absolutely right-bang immediate. It is a process and it is not easy to get the parties to talk about what they need to talk about. It may take some time, but we are working really hard with both sides to keep them engaged.

Chair: Minister, thank you very much indeed. You have been very good with your time—more than two hours—so I thank you and your colleagues very much indeed.
Alistair Burt: It has flown by, Chairman. Thank you.
Written evidence

Written evidence from Sir Roger Tomkys

The Author


Summary

This submission is primarily about Bahrain and British-Bahraini relations. It is a personal assessment: I have not rehearsed, for example, the findings of the UN Human Rights Council’s Universal Periodic Review or the Bahrain Government’s response. These are available to the committee; how they are assessed is disputed between the Bahrain Government and the Opposition.

The points I wish to make are:

1. The historic relationship between Britain and Bahrain is exceptionally close and positive, with benefits to both parties.
2. Despite limited oil and other natural resources, Bahrain has prospered under the Al Khalifa, to the benefit of all parts of its society. It is relatively liberal and open. The Human Development Index has recognised its qualities: education, public health, freedom of worship and the status of women are among the best in the region.
3. Bahrain has a long term structural problem. The Ruling Al Khalifa family are of Sunni, Arabian tribal origin; the majority population (the Baharna) are descended from indigenous, sedentary Arab Shia stock. This problem is exacerbated by Iranian pretensions to Bahrain and trouble making at every opportunity.
4. Bahrain is economically and politically dependent on Saudi Arabia. So long as the House of Saud rules in Saudi Arabia there is no good alternative in Bahrain to Al Khalifa rule.
5. The need for reform is recognised on all sides. The divide between regime and opposition is not simply sectarian. There is a lively civil society. The role of Bahrain’s friends should be discreetly to encourage and support reform, not to grandstand as though the “Arab Spring” validated attempts to overthrow existing regimes throughout the region; each Arab State is unique. Britain’s close links with Bahrain and its rulers are not something of which to be ashamed.

1. Britain in Bahrain and the Gulf

Bahrain with Kuwait, Qatar and the UAE emerged as Independent States in the modern era because of the protection extended by Britain under Treaties going back to the first half of the 19th century. These commitments effectively prevented encroachment by the major powers of the region, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Iraq (earlier the Ottoman Empire). Britain was still engaged militarily in this commitment in the 1950’s (Abu Dhabi under pressure from Saudi Arabia), and 1961 (Iraqi threat to Kuwait). Saddam Hussain’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990 challenged the integrity of the system we had helped establish when we withdrew from East of Suez in 1971. The 1991 operation under UN auspices to expel Iraqi forces and restore Kuwaiti sovereignty was substantially orchestrated by Britain with the US.

Bahrain was, of the Gulf Shaikhdoms, the closest to Britain from at least the 1920’s when, in addition to a Political Agent, a Political Adviser, Sir Charles Belgrave, employed by the then Ruler Shaikh Hamad Al Khalifa, helped develop the infrastructure, modernise the legal system and improve education (including secondary education for girls in 1928). Bahrain became a hub for the Gulf, including early Imperial Airways services. After the Second World War the British Residency in the Persian Gulf was transferred from Bushire to Bahrain; Both the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force had important facilities in the country.

In this process the Bahraini population became accustomed to working with the British. Bahrain had limited resources and the pearling industry, the principal source of wealth, was virtually wiped out in the interwar years by recession and the development of cultivated pearls in Japan. Although oil was discovered in the 1930’s, the quantity was very limited. Bahrain, therefore, learned to live on its wits and the skills of its relatively advanced and educated labour force to provide services to the region and the British presence in the Islands.

This close association has proved durable. The then Ruler, Shaikh Isa, father of the present King, tried to prevent British withdrawal in 1971. After Independence, with the British military presence and the British Residency gone, the British community in the Eighties when I was Ambassador was still, at some 10,000, far larger than any other Western nationality, and enjoyed a special prestige in the eyes of the Bahrain Government
and ordinary Bahrainis. The Bahrain Monetary Agency (now the Central Bank) was set up under the tutelage of the Bank of England; telecommunications were established in partnership with Cable and Wireless. British Banks had a privileged position. Personal relations between Bahrainis and the British community were exceptionally close, socially as well as in business and commerce.

Today, with the development of Bahrain as an international financial centre and the vastly increased numbers of Western and other high level expatriates throughout the Gulf, these links have become less exclusive, just as Bahrain’s position as a hub for the region is greatly diminished. On the other hand many more Bahrainis now have residences in Britain and regard London as a second home.

Bahrain is a small country with no more than 600,000 nationals and total population of some 1,200,000. But the relationship with Britain is not at all one way. When Saddam invaded Kuwait in August 1990 I was called at once to see the Bahrain Prime Minister, Shaikh Khalifa, who happened to be in London. While other GCC leaders were hesitating Shaikh Khalifa said simply: “this must be stopped and we look to Britain to play its part; whatever facilities you need in Bahrain, we will provide". Bahrain was as good as his word, and so were we.

2. Bahrain Under the Al Khalifa

Bahrain is not an oil rich state but has earned relative prosperity by provision of services and industry in an oil rich region. The formula has been an alliance between the ruling (now Royal) family, aligned with Britain and the West but close to the House of Saud, an active entrepreneurial merchant class, majority but not exclusively Sunni and of diverse origins around the Gulf, and a labour force, predominantly Baharna Shia with substantial numbers of Indian Subcontinent expatriates. The Al Khalifa have kept overall control, and especially administration of Foreign Affairs, Defence and Internal Security. Economic Development is achieved through cooperation between the Government and the merchant community. Infrastructure projects and agriculture are largely in Bahraini hands. All are represented in Cabinet. Generally the Shia are not discriminated against but the Royal Family and their allies are favoured.

The outcome is a close knit and relatively open society made up of disparate elements who are not segregated but remain separate. They rarely intermarry (the Al Khalifa marry almost always within their own family). While there are many rich Shia, the bottom of the social pile are the poorer, working class, Baharna, many of whom live in Shia villages with few of the amenities of Manama. Responsible Bahrainis of all backgrounds are conscious of the need to provide employment opportunities for this working class, especially its young men. This has always been a principal preoccupation of the Government.

Among Arab States, Bahrain has rated highly on the Human Development Index. Education, public health, the status of women and freedom of worship are all advanced for the region. It is a notable liberal and tolerant society. Prior to 2011, although periodic discontent among the Baharna with their position and Al Khalifa rule was of long standing, the atmosphere was notably relaxed. Both Western expatriates, with their families, and other Arabs found Bahrain an agreeable base for work or leisure. International Financial Institutions operate in a well regulated environment, to the economic benefit of all sectors of Bahraini society.

To put in perspective the prevailing image of Bahrain as a society divided on antagonistic religious lines, where Sunni rulers and oppressed Shia never meet, let me record my own experience in the 1980’s. It was my practice as Ambassador to attend the family mourning assemblies whenever any prominent figure died. On several occasions at mourning for a member of the Shia community, I found the then Ruler or his brother the Prime Minister, present on the same errand to pay his condolences; there was no pomp, circumstance or security. In some respects it was still like a small village community, with much of the mutual respect that implies.

3. The Systemic Problem

Nevertheless, there is a long term systemic problem which is simply that the Royal Family, with their close adherents took over Bahrain in the eighteenth century as incomers from the tribal, nomadic society of Arabia, and have ever since ruled over the indigenous, sedentary Baharna majority. That the Al Khalifa are Sunni and their subjects Shia makes matters worse but is not the prime cause of friction, which is the natural dissatisfaction of a majority permanently excluded from supreme power, together with resentment at the privilege of the ruling class. Over time the level of discontent has fluctuated and for long periods the Al Khalifa have coopted the support of the majority. But it was natural that events in Tunisia and Egypt should trigger (not cause) a crisis in 2001.

This systemic problem is made worse by historic Iranian claims to sovereignty over Bahrain. This claim, withdrawn by the Shah in 1971, was reactivated by the Islamic Revolution in 1979, with the added factor of Iranian aspirations to defend Shia communities throughout the region. The Gulf Arab response was to establish the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) as a common shield against Iranian (and in another context, possible Iraqi) encroachment. Even so, there was a failed assassination/ coup attempt in December 1981, shortly after my arrival; the background was never clear but the Government blamed Iranian subversion.

By no means all Bahrainis are opposed to Al Khalifa rule and not all opposition activists are Shia. In an older generation young men from all backgrounds might be Nasserite or Baathist firebrands and later became pillars
of the establishment. Now their successors are Salafist Sunni, whose wish to end Bahrain’s liberal ways threatens the economy but this is a wider issue for the Islamic world, not endemic to Bahrain. Meanwhile, a substantial educated middle class are keen to see better, more accountable Government, but are fearful of Islamic enthusiasm and its implications.

4. Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the GCC

Solidarity within the GCC and support from Saudi Arabia are not cost free. With close family and social links, Bahrain is economically dependent on its major neighbour but they are very different societies. While liberal, inclusive, religiously tolerant Bahrain has turned these differences to its economic advantage, Saudi financial support and access to Saudi oil at a preferential rate remain essential. This comes at a price.

Saudi Arabia has its own problem with a Shia significant minority in the Eastern Province. This minority and the Baharna are historically close. Their situation is exacerbated because for the religiously hard line Wahhabi Saudis, Shiism is anathema; and because the despised Shia live and work in the oil producing region. There is no way the Saudi Government would allow the Al Khalifa, even if they so wished, to introduce full Western style democracy power in Bahrain; the risk of knock-on to the Eastern Province would be judged unacceptable and some form of Saudi takeover of Bahrain would almost certainly follow.

There is also the Saudi attitude to the “Arab Spring”. Setting aside the proxy war in which Saudi Arabia and Qatar are covertly engaged in Syria against Iran (which is about regional power, not religion, let alone Democracy or Human Rights) Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE have set their faces against any but the slowest, incremental change in their form of Government. They are already alarmed at the difficulties faced by Kuwait consequent on democratic advance in one Gulf State. Saudi Arabia will insist on caution in Bahrain, and will have the tacit support of Qatar and the UAE.

Bahrain has done well to retain its independence and liberal way of life. In my time the Ruler resisted pressure from the Saudi religious establishment to close Bahrain’s churches. With the causeway to facilitate access, Saudi influence in all fields has become much easier to apply.

5. Implications for British Policy

There is no realistic alternative to Al Khalifa rule that would improve the lot of the Baharna, so long as the House of Saud rule in Arabia. Radical democratic reform in Bahrain would not be tolerated by Riyadh. If direct Saudi control were asserted there would be little economic role for Bahrain without its liberal “unique selling point” and all Bahrainis would suffer. The best outcome from the recent crisis would, of course, include real reform measures to improve government accountability and to prevent abuse of police powers. The Bahrain Government accept this; King Hamad began his reign with democratic advances and 2011 saw an impressive list of commitments entered into in response to the crisis.

It is vital that there should be credible interlocutors on the side of the opposition if reform is to succeed. Not all the opposition is Shia and not all the Shia want the fall of the Al Khalifa. Past unrest has been Nasserist; more recently Sunni political Islamists have tried to hijack the infant democratic institutions and to end Bahrain’s liberal customs. Moderate voices need to be heard.

The Bahrain Government get a bad press. The excellent report by Edward Mortimer commissioned by the BBC following criticism of its coverage of the “Arab Spring” is essential reading. The “Arab Spring” became one story of the rise of people power against arbitrary Government and the differences between what was happening in Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain and now Syria could become lost as correspondents rushed from one crisis to another, caught up in the excitement of another Tahrir Square. The opposition everywhere got its story across best, and in Bahrain this was widely resented by expatriates and Bahrainis alike. Most of us share a bias for democracy and freedom, but the media (not only the BBC) got carried away.

HMG are not responsible for media coverage. In Bahrain they have rightly given support for police reform etc. I have no doubt that they offer advice and help both to the Government and to responsible opposition figures on the need for reform but also for realism. Britain still has a special status in Bahrain which carries responsibilities in times of need. When the Press run the story of Royal invitations withheld or declined, or when the Bahrain Ambassador is excluded from the Labour Party Conference, no Minister stands up to say out loud that we have good strong bonds of friendship with Bahrain, that Bahrain’s future depends on the stability of the Monarchy, and that we will do all we can to help that stability as well as the process of reform to which the King is committed.

HMG were prepared to declare that Qaddafi and Assad must go; they should make it equally clear that Bahrain’s Monarchy must stay.

2 November 2012
I was an Arabist in HM Diplomatic Service from 1971–2007 and served in a number of Arab countries including Saudi Arabia (Jeddah, 1979–82; Riyadh, 1985–87) and Bahrain where I was HM Ambassador from 2003–06. I do not have a continuing professional association with either country (although I was involved in establishing a Bahrain British Business Council in 2007) but remain in occasional contact with friends in Bahrain. I am a member of the Bahrain Society. My evidence will focus on Bahrain and aims to set current events in the context of recent history.

**Summary of Evidence**

**Detail**

1. I was appointed HM Ambassador to Bahrain in 2003. At that time, King Hamad had succeeded his father in 1999, lifted the State Security Law, granted an amnesty to opponents of the government, secured wide support in a referendum on a National Charter, introduced a new Constitution (disappointing opponents who had hoped for restoration of the 1973 Constitution) and held an election, in 2002, to the lower House of a new bicameral parliament. Some dissidents returning from overseas had accepted Ministerial portfolios. Critics of the government focused on the need to redress past wrongs and transfer more authority to the new parliament but found little fault in the current state of human rights.

2. Before taking up my post, I asked the Foreign Secretary, Jack Straw, what he wanted me to achieve in Bahrain. He instructed me to support Bahrain’s continuation as ‘a paradigm of Arab democracy’. The political reform programme, including the upholding of human rights, was clearly, therefore, my priority. But the positive reform story meant that there was little difficulty in reconciling our support for continued development in governance and human rights with our other interests in defence, commerce, energy security, counter-terrorism and human rights.

3. I therefore approached support for reform through public endorsement and private discussion, the promotion of parliamentary contacts, endorsement of police reform (from ‘colonial policing’ to community policing, with the advice of UK police advisers and training in UK), sponsored visits in both directions, courses for prospective parliamentary candidates (especially women), contacts with political societies and others. We drew on the support of an FCO programme budget called Engaging with the Islamic World (and the regional coordinator of the programme was based in my Embassy).

4. The key opposition movement, Al Wefaq (which commanded the broadest support among the Shia community), had boycotted the 2002 election. I judged that their self-imposed exclusion from the parliamentary process would hold back progress. The absence of the principal opposition movement devalued parliament and excluded the main demandeur for reform. Concessions to an extra-parliamentary opposition would have diminished the elected parliament. I therefore made this point consistently in occasional meetings with Al Wefaq representatives, suggesting that the prospects for reform, Al Wefaq’s own status and the achievement of its political objectives would be enhanced by its participation in the parliamentary process.

5. I was also concerned that a parliament dominated by MPs representing the Sunni community faced by an extra-parliamentary opposition primarily representing the Shia community would institutionalize inter-communal differences. This concern was strengthened by my four months temporary duty as HM Consul General in Basra over the summer of 2006 (leaving my Deputy Head of Mission as Charge d’Affaires in Bahrain). During the few remaining weeks of my tour in Bahrain after my return from Basra, I urged Bahraini interlocutors on both sides not to let sectarian differences reach the violent pitch they had in Iraq.

6. I was glad, therefore, when Al Wefaq contested the 2006 elections, shortly after my departure at the end of my tour. They won the largest single bloc of seats (hard line members who rejected participation left Al Wefaq to form their own group, Al Haqq). But before long, it became apparent that the reform process had stalled and by the time of the 2010 election, confidence in the parliamentary process and the standing of Al Wefaq with its own constituency had reportedly atrophied. The government had apparently underestimated the importance of continuing reform, not least in order to sustain public support for the process and the parliamentary opposition. Had I remained longer in Bahrain, I would have impressed this upon the government and warned them of the likely radicalization of political opposition if the parliament provided an inadequate forum for building consensus and further reform. I would have urged continued progress on the latter. I believe that my successor did so but without success.

7. When protests began in Bahrain in early 2011, therefore, the government was left with a weakened parliamentary institution and a parliamentary opposition unwilling or (more likely) unable to control the street.
If the reform process had progressed after 2006, it could have been otherwise. In tennis terms, this was an
unforced error on the part of the government.

8. There are a number of reasons why it may have made this mistake. In introducing reform, King Hamad
had to balance a number of competing domestic and regional forces against his apparent conviction, formed
during the 1990s when he was heir apparent, that repression provided no long-term solution to Bahrain’s
systemic internal divisions. His solution was a managed transition to a constitutional monarchy. Some members
of his own family were opposed to this and Bahrain’s Sunni community are largely content with the status quo
in Bahrain and support the Al Khalifa. Indeed, the current situation in Bahrain is not so much a confrontation
between King and people as one between the government and the large Sunni minority on the one hand and a
Shia majority on the other. King Hamad also had to be careful not to get too far out ahead of the rest of the
Arab Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia (a point wrongly dismissed at the time by my Shia interlocutors).

9. Bahrain is directly dependent on Saudi Arabia for the largest part of its oil revenues (from the shared
offshore Sha’ib Sa’ayd oilfield), for crude feedstock for its export refinery and for over 90% of the foreign visitors
who support its hotel and tourist industry. The relationship with Saudi Arabia is vital to Bahrain’s financial
services sector (which generates around 25% of GDP) and Saudi Arabia is a significant shareholder in some of
Bahrain’s key non-oil industries, such as Aluminium Bahrain (ALBA), Gulf Alumining Rolling Mill Company
(GARMO), the Arab Ship Repair Yard (ASRY) and Gulf Petrochemicals Industries Company (GPIC). Saudi
Arabia is also the key guarantor of Bahraini sovereignty. Although I doubt that the Saudi government micro-
manages Bahraini policy, the Bahraini authorities will be finely attuned to Saudi concerns (not least contagion
from Bahrain to Saudi Arabia’s own Shia community in the Eastern Province—but perhaps also if Bahrain
diverges too far from more traditional systems of government in other GCC states) and highly responsive
to any expression of Saudi dissatisfaction.

10. The entry of a (principally Saudi) Peninsula Shield force across the 'causeway' on 14 March 2011 was
interpreted as a signal variously to the Iranians and to the US of the end of Saudi tolerance of political unrest
in Bahrain. But whatever else it may have been (and the force took no direct part in internal security operations),
it marked the abrupt (and at least temporary) end of the Al Khalifa’s attempts to retrieve the situation through
negotiation. It seems likely that the advocates in the family of a tough security and political approach took
control of policy.

11. Whatever the cause of the interruption of reform and then of a negotiated solution to the confrontation
of early 2011, the result has been a radicalization of Bahrain’s politics and deep polarization of its society.
Political dissent has been criminalized and opposition has been expressed through escalating and indiscriminate
street violence posing a threat to the security and safety of all sections of the population (including members
of the Shia community).

12. The establishment and report of the Bahrain Independent Committee of Inquiry (BICI) and the
government’s acceptance at the UN Human Rights Council in September 2012 of most recommendations of
the Universal Periodic Review suggest that the government still includes members who see the need to balance
hardline policy. It is to be hoped that their influence will be restored (and accompanied by fuller implementation
of the BICI recommendations) but if it is, the challenges they will face will have been exacerbated by a long
period of confrontation. It will be an uphill task to win back lost trust and rebuild a political process to which
distinguished between political critics and the violent perpetrators of direct action if a political process and
dialogue are to replace the current politics of confrontation. The opposition have reciprocal responsibilities
and their recent Declaration of Principles of Non-violence is a welcome step.

13. Until 1971, the UK was the key strategic partner. Today, the UK’s ability to project power is much
reduced. Only the US has the military, political, financial and diplomatic muscle to guarantee the security of the
Gulf states. That said the UK can, when invited, demonstrate engagement through the temporary deployment of
aircraft or a ship to supplement our diplomatic assets. The UK can also make an input to much of Coalition action
against Iraq in 2003 and complained later that his contrary advice had not been considered).

14. Gulf countries are generally familiar with the UK and respect (if they do not always wish to embrace)
the way we do things. At times, the fact that we are not the US superpower, with all the baggage and attitudes
that brings, has worked to our advantage. But the FCO’s careful best efforts can be blown off course in an
instant by regional events or reaction to manifestations of the UK’s transparent and democratic society. This
happened in 1980, when I was a junior officer in the British Embassy in J edda and the bilateral relationship
was temporarily derailed by the ‘Death of a Princess’ TV programme.

15. Bahrain has been an helpful partner to the UK in the recent past by providing a staging post for air
communications to Afghanistan and Iraq (although the Bahraini Prime Minister was privately highly critical
of Coalition action against Iraq in 2003 and complained later that his contrary advice had not been considered).
Bahraini Special Forces have served in Afghanistan.
The Foreign Secretary’s statement after his meeting with the Crown Prince of Bahrain on 11 October 2012 is a good example of reinforcement of the importance of progress in public and rational argument and debate in private. It should benefit the relationship with Saudi Arabia will be a factor in the extent of UK influence in Bahrain and by using positive works to build consensus through influence (which it must therefore retain, with both communities).

(V) How the UK can encourage democratic and liberalising reforms in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain

18. Western response to the “Arab Spring” caused concern in Saudi Arabia over a perceived deficit in Western loyalty to friendly regimes following the removal of Egyptian President Mubarak. Saudi Arabia will be sensitive to any indication that UK policy demonstrates a similar lack of commitment to our relationship with itself or Bahrain.

19. Our commerce, counter-terrorism, defence, energy security and regional policy interests with both Saudi Arabia and Bahrain are significant. The Bahraini government’s response to the escalation of the country’s internal political divisions has complicated balancing these interests with upholding British values. But this is an issue which affects our policy with many countries around the world and in a nation highly dependent on international trade, the government has a responsibility to uphold our national values without damaging our material interests. These objectives need not be mutually exclusive if our diplomacy, as an external actor, works to build consensus through influence (which it must therefore retain, with both communities).

(VI) The long-term trends and scenarios in the region for which the FCO should prepare, and the extent to which it is doing so

22. Some trends have become familiar, such as the political role of Islam, the youth of Gulf Arab populations, the implications of higher educational attainment and access to modern communications technology and the pressure on all but a few oil exporting states (Abu Dhabi and Qatar) of maintaining traditional fiscal policies and state services in the face of growing populations and increased domestic demand for energy. These factors have stimulated a requirement for job creation, economic diversification and more and better education. A generational shift has been bringing in younger leaders in several Arab countries (eg Egypt) and is in prospect in Saudi Arabia. Gulf governments, businesses and investors are increasingly looking eastwards for opportunity and supply, away from their traditional markets in Europe and the US. We will have to work even harder to compete successfully for their business and respect for our policies. It would be a pleasant surprise if Scottish independence did not undermine our prospects of success.

23. All these trends are familiar to the FCO and will influence current strategy and policy. The FCO also needs to consider other scenarios which may—or may not—develop. If it has not yet done so, it should consider the implications for US regional policy of a redirection of US priorities away from MENA to the Far East, the

2 The Foreign Secretary’s statement after his meeting with the Crown Prince of Bahrain on 11 October 2012 is a good example.
The development of US energy self-sufficiency by 2020 and increasing domestic energy consumption by Gulf producers, reducing the share of Gulf oil available for export and the revenues they will therefore earn for domestic expenditure and imports of goods and services (these factors should reinforce the importance of economic diversification noted above). If these prospects are borne out, they could impact on the amount of attention the US will give to the region and have implications for the extent of US engagement to balance its commitment to Israel’s security.

(VII) The extent to which the FCO has the resources, personnel and capacities required for effective policy in the region

24. I take part in periodic meetings at the FCO chaired by the Director Middle East & North Africa and attended by a number of former Ambassadors to the region. We discuss issues and policy but not personnel. I also know a number of current Heads of Mission and I respect their abilities as I do those of the Director, his Deputy, other senior officers dealing with Arab countries and the Research Analysts who support them. We are fortunate to have able people in the Service.

25. The FCO as a whole has been under resource pressure for many years and I am not currently in a position to know how far that has eroded its ability to deliver the goods. In general terms, a judgement as to whether the FCO has the resources it needs should take account of its global responsibilities (vital to a country dependent on international trade, maintaining Permanent Membership of the UNSC and delivering on Government determination to play a significant role in international events), range of functions (political, commercial, consular, management etc) and effectiveness. As one of the smaller Departments of State (the major expense for which is its personnel), it has less room for manoeuvre before it reaches a level of expenditure at which effectiveness can no longer be assured. A percentage reduction in budget will therefore have a larger impact on its capability than the same reduction to a larger budget.

26. Many considerations will affect resource decisions and allocations. I will mention two concerns. Firstly, there will be a temptation to cut junior posts (and “push down the level of responsibility”) to prioritise expenditure. This could turn out to be a false economy because it will impact on the future effectiveness of senior officers if they have not had the opportunity to build experience. This implies that it should be recognized that some jobs will have a training element in their purpose.

27. The second issue is the long-running argument about the importance of Arabic-speaking officers in Middle East posts. It is true that Ministers and senior officials in many Arab countries now speak English and that bilateral business can often be conducted in English. However, this ability is not universal and is less likely to be found outside the capital and in Ministries or other walks of life which do not have regular international dealings. Even where Arab officials are fluent in English, they will often prefer to have documents in Arabic (if only for speed of assimilation). Moreover, learning a language also helps cultivate an understanding of how other peoples think. As an Arabist, I have always found Arab interlocutors warm when they know I speak Arabic. It shows an interest in them and their culture which an exclusively English speaking officer will find harder to match. In a profession where influence and other soft power tools are the only ones at a diplomat’s disposal, this matters.

18 November 2012

Supplementary written evidence from Chris Doyle Caabu

This note is to supplement the oral evidence I gave on 29 January 2013. It represents the personal views of the author.

Key Points

— The UK RELATIONSHIP WITH GULF is massively important to us but it has to be managed in increasingly tough circumstances.
— REGIONAL CHANGE: Huge changes in region have caused regional and Gulf unease. After the downfall of Mubarak, many states are nervous that the West will abandon them, in particular the US. They want reassurance from UK.
— DECLINE OF US INFLUENCE: The decline of US influence in the region has had implications. It is a declining influence but is still crucial. Other powers also matter. All Gulf states remain key policy partners.
— NO LONGER ISOLATED: Gulf countries cannot remain immune to regional trends—they are not as isolated as they were in the past.
— YOUTH: Young people form the majority of the population, but there are not enough jobs; the region has double the global level of unemployment.
— OPPOSITION GROUPS ASSERTIVE: There is an increased confidence and assertiveness from opposition groups.

2 file:///Users/robinlamb/Documents/MENA/iea13nov12.webarchive
in Saudi Arabia, yet Saudi women typically point to other broader issues of concern. A significant change has
have acknowledged this to me. Nevertheless, if Gulf States wish to be covered fairly then there should be
some media to cover the Gulf because the politics of oil—whilst important—does not sell. Several journalists
at times the Gulf is misunderstood is both a reluctance to let journalists in, combined with a reluctance of
subscribe to tired stereotypes of camels and see the Gulf solely as a large gas station. One of the reasons why
Image of the Gulf
British politicians.
in calming the protests they faced. This is a message that should be continually repeated to our friends by
biggest trouble with their own people. Those that took greater care as in Jordan and Morocco have succeeded
those governments that deployed lethal force against their own people in 2010–2012 got themselves into the
innocent civilians should know that normal relations cannot follow. It is noticeable that across the Middle East,
be a red line in terms of how Britain reacts. Any government anywhere in the world that deliberately targets
We must be realistic as to whether we will be listened to but the point must be
there are many in the Gulf who still feel let down at the way
in which Britain left—or in their eyes ‘abandoned’—the Gulf in 1971.
But now the relationship is heading the other way, where we increasingly need them more than they need
us. They have alternative options, other states willing to fulfill similar roles. The question is—does the UK
have alternatives?
There is massive competition from other states. The GCC has developed successful links with new markets
and other states may not be so vocal about democracy, corruption and human rights. For this and other reasons,
we have constantly to work on the relationship and should never take it for granted.
In Britain, the new generation of politicians and diplomats are less familiar with the Gulf and has less access
to the rulers than in the past. Britain has to adapt to losing that in-depth diplomatic experience we once had.
Given that Britain is seen as closely allied to the US, the decline of Washington’s influence in the region
will surely affect Britain’s standing. Arab states routinely hope that Britain and other European partners will
act as a moderating influence on the US. However, in the last decade it has been regional powers such as
Turkey, Saudi and Iran that have been increasingly calling the shots and acting independently. The new
Egyptian leadership appears to be doing likewise.
The UK-Gulf relationship has benefited from increased ministerial visits, especially the Prime Minister and
Foreign Secretary. The Gulf Initiative that started in summer of 2010 has clearly been helpful. It has
understandably emphasised the importance of the human relations rather than institutional links. The fact that
many ministers dealing with the region have not changed since 2010 has lent consistency to these personal
relationships and allowed them to develop. Pre-2010, it was a frequent comment from Gulf ministers that they
barely got to know one British minister before he or she was changed. Personal long-term relations matter in
the Gulf.
The Foreign Office will claim, perhaps with some merit, that great ministerial involvement will allow tougher
messages to be delivered.

All the states agree that criticism is best done in private (this is true of any state—nobody likes to be
criticised in public). However, it is vital that Britain act as a candid friend giving sound advice in the interests
of our friends as well as UK’s. We must be realistic as to whether we will be listened to but the point must be
made that lack of reforms and major human rights abuses have consequences, most of all for the states
themselves. Positive change when it happens must clearly be encouraged.
The use of lethal force against peaceful protesters also arouses huge anger. If nothing else this at least must
be a red line in terms of how Britain reacts. Any government anywhere in the world that deliberately targets
innocent civilians should know that normal relations cannot follow. It is noticeable that across the Middle East,
those governments that deployed lethal force against their own people in 2010–2012 got themselves into the
biggest trouble with their own people. Those that took greater care as in Jordan and Morocco have succeeded
in calming the protests they faced. This is a message that should be continually repeated to our friends by
British politicians.

Image of the Gulf
The rulers and the people of the Gulf tend to know Britain, its people and culture better then we know them.
In Britain, there is a lack of understanding of the differences in Gulf states. There are also many who still
subscribe to tired stereotypes of camels and see the Gulf solely as a large gas station. One of the reasons why
at times the Gulf is misunderstood is both a reluctance to let journalists in, combined with a reluctance of
some media to cover the Gulf because the politics of oil—whilst important—does not sell. Several journalists
have acknowledged this to me. Nevertheless, if Gulf States wish to be covered fairly then there should be
consideration to improving access to journalists and relying less on public relations firms.
Frequently there is a media focus on issues that are presumed to be vital such as women being able to drive
in Saudi Arabia, yet Saudi women typically point to other broader issues of concern. A significant change has
been Qatar, which has moved from being a country that most Britons knew nothing about even ten years ago to one that now arouses huge interest.

The agenda of the huge Gulf Sovereign Wealth Funds arouse suspicion not least in the media. More can be done to explain the benefits to Britain of such investment by all parties.

The image of the Gulf is also affected by differing approaches to issues of public morality. The Gulf is a very conservative society. There have been “kissing” incidents in the Emirates for example, involving UK citizens. Emiratis despair of what they consider inappropriate behaviour while visitors feel that the punishments are too harsh and the local customs had not been made clear. Is enough being done to ensure that British visitors do not fall foul of this? Are the mechanisms for sorting out such issues working?

Above all, the image of the Gulf is damaged by the clear abuses of human rights. Those states that carry out public beheadings, flogging and amputation of limbs will rightly only attract negative reactions.

Image of the UK in the Gulf

Britain still has a largely positive image with the Gulf. Many Gulf Arabs visit Britain, want to study and even work here. There is admiration for our brands and a residual sense of British fair play. However, my impression in talking at schools in the Gulf is that we are not known for our modern design expertise or cultural scene, and more can be done to challenge this stereotype.

Some public relations firms, including ones based in the UK, have also attracted criticism principally from Bahrainis. A lit too often the hired defenders have become the story. They cause resentment amongst much of the broader population at the huge costs expended that has little obvious to the people themselves.

A nother issue that has been raised with me is that conservative Gulf Arabs do look at the West as being somewhat immoral, lax and sex-obsessed. At one girls school in Ras El K haimah (UAE) they were amazed about Page 3 of the Sun and how semi-nudity could be permitted in our papers. Hence, whilst overall it is positive that Gulf students come to Britain to study, it can also reinforce negative feelings about Britain. Some have told me they do suffer culture shock here. I would question whether there is enough done to prepare them for this.

Visas

The visa system is also a consistent irritant for Gulf nationals. UK visas are expensive and for many take too long to process. It is a frequent complaint that there is no reciprocal visa policy.

Migrant Workers in Gulf

This is a huge issue in every state of the GCC, where many of the states have a majority of workers from abroad. As more and more workers from Asia and elsewhere have come to the Gulf, their treatment has attracted greater focus. There should be a frank dialogue with our friends in the Gulf as to how their work and living conditions can be improved and why it is in the interests of all parties. It is noticeable that the US makes more of an issue of this, so perhaps Britain could make more joint representations.

Use of Arabic

I fully support those that argue that Arabic is an essential tool for British diplomats in the region. An understanding of the language helps British officials to understand grassroots movements, youth, and the marginalised as well as follow the increasing volume of social media in Arabic.

A rabic language training should be encouraged. Top level posts in Arab countries should go to Arabists. Will young upcoming FCO civil servants study Arabic if there are no Arabic posts as Ambassador? At present, most GCC ambassadorial positions are not filled by Arabists.

The study of Arabic should be viewed far more positively. Camel corps and going native are seen as extremely offensive by many Arabists. Does anyone object to a French speaker being Ambassador in Paris or a Mandarin speaker in Beijing?

Change in the Gulf

All the GCC states have undergone rapid and deep-rooted changes in the last half a century or more. Such changes are ongoing and British government must keep abreast of them. The changes that may be the hardest to judge will be how far some people from the Gulf have radicalised, the growth of identity politics and the attitudes amongst youth. It should be remembered that some surveys show that the Gulf population will double in the next 30 years.

It is clear that the foreign policies of all GCC states will reflect more the wishes of the people, as public opinion in the region becomes a more powerful force. Rulers and elites are far more aware of this. The GCC positions on Syria were in part influenced by huge outrage amongst the local population. For this reason it is even more important to follow closely public opinion and different sectors of society.
I would ask how able the UK is to predict major seismic changes in any place in the Gulf. How sophisticated are our warning mechanisms? Are they any better than in North Africa in 2010–11 or indeed in Iran in 1979? Moreover is there as Sir Anthony Parsons suggested over Iran in 1979, a failure of imagination to conceive of the Arabian peninsula without the House of Saud? Though this may not be likely one wonders what risk assessment has been made of this.

The regional issues

The Gulf is also very much affected by its regional environment. Any conflict with Iran whether launched by Israel and/or the US would have huge implications long after any conflict was over. It would also impact on Britain massively, not least on how to repatriate 160,000 nationals in the Emirates alone or at least secure their safety.

Other regional crises also have their repercussions, not least Iraq, Syria and Palestine. Overall, the international community has had a lamentable record in conflict resolution in recent years in the region and great investment of time, energy and resources for this are critical.

15 February 2013

Written evidence submitted by the Middle East Association

The Middle East Association

The MEA promotes trade between the UK and MENA Region. It was set up in 1961 to re-build relations, post-Suez, through trade. It is a private sector organisation, working closely with Government Departments, and is not-for-profit. It has around 300 active members representing a wide cross-section of British companies with commercial interests in the MENA region. SMEs in the manufacturing and service sectors account for the majority.

The Association organises a variety of in-house and external functions during the year which include trade missions to all open MENA markets; VIP lunches which include British Ambassadors home on leave/duty visits from the Region, Arab Ambassadors in London and other ME experts; seminars; workshops; and other targeted events for visiting business delegations.

I should like to say, if I may, that it is a great pleasure to be sharing this short evidence session with Sir David Wooton. Successive Lord Mayors of London have led high profile business delegations yearly to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States, which have included various of our Directors General and MEA board members. And one of our key annual events is a formal lunch in October for 200 senior business people at Mansion House where the Lord Mayor graciously presides and speaks.

The Market Place

Our trade connections with MENA countries are underpinned by regular mission visits. We cover all countries from Algeria and Mauritania in the west to Northern Iraq (Kurdistan Region) and Turkey in the east. We also included Iran until UN and EU sanctions came into force.

Historically, our delegations are horizontal, ie non-sectoral. The sort of MEA mission mix on any visit will include: educators and trainers; specialised manufacturers; oil and gas experts; engineering consultants; law firms; financial services providers; infrastructure specialists. Since 2000, the MEA has introduced over 400 SMEs to the Saudi market, the majority of which have worked hard and patiently to establish themselves and to contribute steadily to the UK balance of payments. Most of them have a success story to tell; a number of them are led by some very determined business women. Education and training are probably the top priority in Saudi Arabia and British institutions have much to offer. Currently there are some 14,000 Saudi students at British universities.

Of all our markets, Saudi Arabia is by far the largest and offers the greatest business opportunities. We take two trade missions a year there. As the largest member of the GCC, the Kingdom is also the least easy with which to conduct business, if only because of a very bureaucratic and inefficient visa regime. To the extent that other GCC countries are readily accessible, including Bahrain, the MEA deploys more resources to assisting potential UK exporters to establish themselves in the Saudi market. Our mission format is especially helpful to newcomers and those on follow-up visits.

The value of our trade Jan—August 2012 to Bahrain in goods was £186.9m; and to KSA for the same period £2.1bn, representing respective increases over the same period in 2011 of 35% and 4%. Double those figures to include invisibles. The year-end 2012 figure for Saudi Arabia was in the region of £8bn. The UK’s share of the Saudi market puts us in about 8th place. The total value of UK exports of goods and services to other GCC states for 2012 will have been in the region of £11bn.
Bahrain suffers from a 'split personality': competing factions are pulling the state in conflicting directions.

A stable and functioning Bahrain exposes the hollowness of Iranian claims to regional leadership; an Britain has no coercive power in Bahrain, but its brand gives it a power of suasion it should not

Bahrain is an ally, and not merely of convenience; Britain should not reduce Bahrain to a caricature by

Summary

Written evidence from the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI)

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Bahrain is an ally, and not merely of convenience; Britain should not reduce Bahrain to a caricature by

Bahrain has no coercive power in Bahrain, but its brand gives it a power of suasion it should not underestimate. This gives the UK an important role to play.

A stable and functioning Bahrain exposes the hollowness of Iranian claims to regional leadership; an unstable Bahrain empowers Iran and destabilises its neighbours.

Bahrain suffers from a 'split personality': competing factions are pulling the state in conflicting directions. Consequently, merely applying pressure is likely to do little.
— A abandoning Bahrain would permit hardliners to steer it closer to Saudi Arabia and further from any prospect of reform— to the region’s ultimate detriment and Britain’s.
— If Bahrain fails to reform, other Gulf monarchies are unlikely to overcome their own inertia. If it succeeds, it will offer its neighbours evidence that the task is not impossible, and so contribute to greater regional stability.

Authors
Matthew Willis is a Research Associate in International Security Studies.
Dr Jonathan Eyal is the Director of International Security Studies and has overall responsibility for RUSI’s Qatar office.

Annex


Introduction
1. The relationship with Bahrain is among the most intimate the UK entertains with any Gulf country; it may also be its least well understood, largely because of a perennial failure to grasp the wider strategic implications of the turmoil engulfing the island. This turmoil, a product of longstanding internal dysfunctional pressures, is now doing double damage: it is exposing Bahrain to the effects of the region-wide sectarian malaise long fomented by Iran but lately exacerbated by the war in Syria, and it is further undermining the stability of a region already being rocked by the forces unleashed during the ‘Arab Spring’.

2. The UK has an important role to play in the country. The US is unpopular, and Saudi Arabia is often regarded as part of the problem rather than the solution. Britain, on the other hand, is respected by most Bahrainis and instinctively knows more about the country and region than it often realises; it should not underestimate the value of the cards it holds. It cannot resolve Bahrain’s crisis, but it only needs to continue offering support. King Hamad has the will to find a way out of his country’s current impasse that does not involve renewed repression, and that alone puts Bahrain ahead of almost all its neighbours. If Bahrain gets back on track—by which we mean that the reforms announced last year are finally carried out, however slowly—it will set the other monarchies an example to follow; if it founders, expect to see a domino political effect on other Gulf states.

The Bilateral Relationship is more than Mere Convenience
3. The British-Bahraini relationship goes beyond mere interests, something the ubiquity of the English language in Bahrain encourages. A disproportionate number of the Bahraini elite pass through the British higher education system, where they are acculturated to British attitudes, values and ways of thinking. The same holds in the field of defence instruction and training, which has created a cadre of Bahraini military leaders attuned to British methods and standards. Indeed, many members of the Bahraini royal family, including King Hamad and the eldest son of the crown prince, have attended Sandhurst. King Hamad is also the patron of the Sandhurst Foundation, a charity that supports trainees. The closeness of the royal families provides the countries’ governments with an added channel for diplomatic communication. The Bahrain Society, established in 1971 to help maintain the ties of friendship established between Britons and Bahrainis, is another important link. What all this means is that although there is much about Bahrain that is foreign, the cultural divide one might expect to encounter between political classes is not that wide. There is a tendency among British analysts to assume that these historic links skew or hinder the UK’s relations with Bahrain. We believe that the reality is the opposite: that such links are not confined to just elites or the royal family, and that they are an asset which can be harnessed.

4. The diplomatic and political dimensions of the bilateral relationship act as its anchor. During the protectorate era, from the mid-nineteenth century until 1971, Britain’s role as arbiter of the treaties with the Gulf sheikdoms occasionally involved it in Bahrain’s domestic affairs. Since 1971, however, it has consistently treated Bahrain as an independent country to be supported and guided, and its engagement has been at the request of the government or the king. Bahrain has justified Britain’s support by adopting genuinely progressive policies in a range of areas (economics, civil freedoms, gender equality...) and demonstrating the ambition to go further. The resulting bond of trust is not something to be lightly dismissed. Not only is it, from an elementary foreign policy perspective, the root of the UK’s influence in Bahrain, it is also what sets Britain apart from the other Western countries attempting to bring the government and the opposition together.

The UK Brand: an Asset to be Used Carefully
5. The UK must therefore not abuse its power. British backing can legitimise Bahraini actions; conversely, its withdrawal can delegitimise (at least internationally) in a way which few other foreign nations can accomplish. That is the reason the government resisted calls to speak out against Bahrain’s F1 race in April. The Grand Prix is the product of efforts by Crown Prince Salman to bring a high-profile sports event to the
There is an alternative to the traditional liberalising, democratising monarchical model that can work in the Gulf. To its neighbours, it offers reassurance that Bahrain affects, and is affected by, the stability of the region. When Bahrain is stable, it is evidence that a slowly more robust than that.

We may also have done more harm than good. Domestically, it failed to appease those who said the government was too indulgent; in Bahrain, meanwhile, it provoked dismay, confusion and a sense of abandonment. It is impossible to make someone see the validity of reasoned arguments at the same time as he is being hung out to dry, so to speak, yet that is exactly what the UK seemed to be doing. Although the episode did it no long-term damage, the UK must appreciate that the stock Bahrain puts in its opinion magnifies the weight of its statements. There is no use crushing Bahrain’s trust when both sides need to work together.

UK Interests in Bahrain: Real but Widely Misconstrued

7. The British government has been criticised for treating Bahrain as an important client whose business is too valuable to lose. Leaving aside the fact the British government actually came down harder on Bahrain than most people acknowledge—there was a sense the UK needed to get the public messaging on Bahrain ‘right’ after fluffing its lines in Tunisia and Egypt—the notion that Britain depends on Bahrain commercially is simply incorrect. The UK derives massive financial benefit from its relations with several of the Gulf States, notably the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, but the same is not true of its relations with Bahrain. As an illustration, the agreement BAE Systems signed in May 2012 to supply Saudi Arabia with Hawk trainer jets, worth £1.9 billion unto itself, was almost quadruple the value of all the UK’s exports to Bahrain the previous year. Bahrain’s commercial value to the UK is low.

8. On a related note, the British government’s defence sector exports and continued provision of training to Bahraini security forces have been portrayed as endorsements of Bahraini’s more questionable actions. Most of the exports, however, be they patrol boats, aircraft components, artillery or even sniper rifles, relate not to Bahrain’s internal security but to its external defence. The training courses for Bahraini defence personnel, for their part, have some applicability to the civil unrest. But there is little doubt that training received from the UK is more likely to promote a measured and discriminating approach to crowd control—something in line with British policing standards—than training received from Saudi Arabia or any number of other providers. Suppressing dissent is not something most countries have problems with; it is doing so in an acceptable manner that poses the challenge, and that is where the UK’s efforts in Bahrain can help.

9. In contrast to the commercial relationship, the defence relationship is crucial to the UK’s pursuit of its national strategic aims. Bahrain welcomes British naval vessels into its waters and port facilities, allows the RAF to use its airfields, and routinely waives the sorts of protocols Britain would have to follow before entering the national territory of certain of its neighbours. Bahrain also supplies the UK with intelligence, in particular though not exclusively in connexion with counter-terrorism. In a sense, the kingdom is a substitute for an aircraft carrier permanently stationed in the Gulf. Without its co-operation, the UK’s strategic flexibility would be curtailed. The assistance Bahrain gives the UK does, therefore, give it a degree of leverage, but one must not jump to the conclusion that British access concerns dominate policy-making. The relationship is much more robust than that.

Implications of Bahrain’s Regional Strategic Significance

10. Bahrain’s strategic importance goes far beyond the national interests of the UK, or indeed of the US. Bahrain affects, and is affected by, the stability of the region. When Bahrain is stable, it is evidence that a slowly liberalising, democratising monarchical model can work in the Gulf. To its neighbours, it offers reassurance that there is an alternative to the traditional rentier state model, that in the face of growing internal pressure to accommodate demands for freedoms, jobs and political enfranchisement, there is a viable ‘middle way’. Never has evidence of that possibility been more valuable than now, as the Arab Spring reverberates throughout the region and the Gulf States struggle to respond. The Bahraini model is from perfect, of course, and its flaws do not need iterating here. But when it is working, Bahrain is among the Gulf’s most functional, modern and stable countries.

11. By belying the schism on which Iran’s pretensions are based, Bahrain’s considerable success also countervails Iran’s attempts to cast itself as the leader of an oppressed people. A strong and functioning Bahrain offers a firmer—and, in the eyes of the Shia world, more credible—rejection of the Iranian agenda than anything London or Washington can come up with. It thus has the potential to export stability regionally. Unfortunately, and this is the case at present, an unstable Bahrain does the opposite, validating Iran’s claims and putting neighbouring countries on edge. The most obvious example is Saudi Arabia, where the persistent unrest in the Eastern Province waxes and wanes in parallel with the situation in Bahrain.

12. Bahrain is also ‘importing’ instability from Iran. Though the Bassiouni Report did not turn up evidence of direct Iranian meddling, there can be no questioning the Islamic Republic’s efforts to destabilise Bahrain
using state-sponsored media propaganda. That propaganda, internet-, radio- and TV-born, amplifies Bahrain’s civil strife by vilifying the government and the security forces, exaggerating casualty figures, fabricating outrages against Shias and generally inclining sectarian hatred. By siding with the Bahraini opposition, Iran’s media in fact discredit societies like Al-Wifaq by exposing them to attacks from Bahraini pro-government media outlets which accuse them of ‘sedition’ and Iranian sympathies. The Iranian media’s wider practices have been deemed obnoxious enough to warrant the suspension of TV and radio broadcasting permits in France, the US and the UK. Iran is by no means the cause of the strife in Bahrain, but by sowing confusion and exacerbating the distrust that already exists, it is making an already-trying situation more intractable.

13. The conflict in Syria, which is drawing leading countries of the Gulf and Middle East into a sectarian proxy war, is a further strain. The conflict’s confessional dimension is becoming harder to ignore. For those in Bahrain who feel a part of a persecuted transnational Shia community—the kind Iran speaks of, Gulf governments’ support for the rebels is liable to fuel the sense of domestic victimisation.

Britain’s Advantages vis-à-vis the United States and Saudi Arabia

14. Britain, on its own, is not going to resolve the Syrian civil war or the crisis in Bahrain, but it is probably better-positioned than the US to play a part in Bahrain. Comparative newcomers to the Gulf, the Americans are seen both as lacking Britain’s regional knowledge and as being untrustworthy. The notion that Washington is out to redraw the boundaries of the Arab world for its own gain has strong currency at the highest levels. Controversy surrounding the current US ambassador, Thomas Krajieski, has undermined the Bahrainis’ trust further, and Krajieski is now deemed unable to do his job—ie speak to members of the opposition—without being accused of ‘interference’. Flag-burnings and protests outside the US embassy show that the antipathy towards Washington is deepening.

15. British disengagement from Bahrain would loosen the ties that have kept it from drifting further into Saudi Arabia’s sphere. The Bahrain-Saudi merger—an undertaking mooted for the May 2012 GCC summit but happily shelved—is the most recent illustration of a trend fuelled by Bahrain’s economic reliance on its neighbour. Although most Bahrainis aspire to a society more closely resembling Britain’s than Saudi Arabia’s and leading Bahraini officials share those aspirations, there are also elements in the country’s upper echelons that would happily steer it in Saudi’s direction. The future Britain represents is one whose appeal these elements cannot hope to match, but were Britain to remove itself, they would not have to. That said, Britain’s power must not be exaggerated; it lacks the leverage to challenge Saudi Arabia directly, as does the US.

A Way Forward for UK Policy

16. The UK must not abandon Bahrain—a wayward ally, but an ally nonetheless. It is the lone country in the Gulf that has openly admitted its shortcomings, announced its intention to address them, and adopted a roadmap—the Bassiouni Report—for doing so. In a Gulf context, that report is a truly exceptional document. Granted, it is only a small map and the end of the road is quickly reached: its recommendations relate to the acute problems exposed by the unrest in 2011 and not to the chronic ones that generated it; nevertheless, as an agenda for change whose recommendations provide verifiable markers of progress, it is unique in the region. (Incidentally, Bahrain is in this regard well ahead of Egypt and Libya, where it is unclear what the government believes, where it is going or who will take it there.)

17. What is more, the government has accepted the Report’s recommendations and vowed to implement them. This statement of intent gives the UK the leverage it needs to sustain its pressure on Bahrain without overstepping the bounds either of reasonable foreign policy or of friendship. In areas in which the Bahraini government has made progress, its efforts should be recognised and applauded. That in no way precludes the UK from demanding proof that the formal reforms translate into genuine change. Nor does it prevent it from making an issue of Bahrain’s failure to tackle other parts of the plan.


Iran: A Nuisance that can only be Mitigated

19. As long as the Bahraini government views Iran as an immediate threat, it will be loath to abandon its security-oriented approach to the crisis. Unhelpful measures, such as the recent banning of demonstrations, will continue to be deemed necessary to restoring a climate conducive to negotiations. Those in the government resistant to political compromise and favouring the current socio-economic order will take advantage of the need for security to entrench their sectarian discourse, exaggerate the threat posed by dissenters and continue casting even moderate Shias as Iranian fifth-columnists. Opposition hardliners will take their cue from the establishment and up the ante (the early-November bombings in Manama being just the latest in a spate of terrorist attacks) inviting further retaliation from the government.

20. Since Iran is not going to go away, however, British efforts should be devoted to persuading the Bahraini government to take the initiative. There is no credible Iranian threat to Bahraini territory, nor does Iran have a
sizeable constituency in Bahrain. Its bark is far worse than its bite. There is, however, a real risk that the longer the impasse lasts, the more receptive Bahraini Shia will become to assistance that Iran may proffer—not because of Iran’s attractive power but out of sheer anger and desperation. A change of strategy is Bahrain’s best defence against Iran.

**Policy Recommendations**

21. The first step Britain should advocate is a toning down of the government’s sectarian rhetoric. The next should be to call Al-Wifaq’s bluff by putting enough on the table that it cannot refuse to make a counter-offer. The government needs a negotiating partner, but sitting back and waiting is simply not enough. Al-Wifaq’s leaders recognise they erred last summer in walking away from the Crown Prince and will not wish to repeat the mistake. In return, the government could demand of Al-Wifaq that it clarify its loyalties and objectives. The longer the government waits, the more complex the domestic political arena will become; already, Sunni groups are beginning to organise themselves and demand to be taken into account.

22. Bahrain refuses to involve external mediators in any negotiation process. It also affirms, however, that it is determined to be open and transparent about proceedings. The UK might therefore propose not that outside moderates be invited in, but that a panel of outside observers be assembled to witness the negotiations, precisely as a way of guaranteeing the good faith of the participants. The government and opposition might each be entitled to select three of their choice, and the six would monitor proceedings on camera, away from the talks themselves.

23. As observed earlier, Britain’s clout lies in its ability to legitimise and delegitimise. The government may wish to consider whether it can husband this resource more effectively. It might, for instance, make senior ministers less accessible than usual when Bahraini officials known to be obstructive request a meeting. It might also limit its own ministers’ visits to those officials it views as making a positive contribution to resolving the crisis. Discreet support offered by the British royal family to King Hamad, and the opportunity for further private dialogue, might not be amiss either. A co-ordination of British strategy with the US, Germany and other friends of Bahrain could assist the progressives in easing certain hardliners out of the way.

24. Finally, Saudi Arabia must be induced to co-operate. That may not be as difficult as it seems. Continued unrest in Bahrain does it no good, and there is a point at which the advantages of immediate stability outweigh the longer-term disadvantages. Saudi Arabia will naturally have reservations about the extent of any concessions the Bahraini government may be tempted to make to the opposition, but that stage is still far off. For the time being, the Saudi government is likely to favour measures that contribute to its own peace of mind.

**Conclusion**

25. British policy must be made in a post-Arab Spring context: without reform, the region is almost certain to experience intensifying unrest in the coming years. The Gulf monarchies realise that the status quo has changed, but have yet to overcome their own inertia. Paradoxically, despite its shortcomings, Bahrain is furthest ahead. It is already mired in a process likely to repeat itself in Saudi and Kuwait (and which may have begun in Oman), but its relatively liberal society and progressive government are more resilient than its neighbours’ and its government acknowledges the need for change. Now is not the time for the UK to let go, but rather to redouble its efforts to help Bahrain pull through. The process will be slow, but provided it is also steady, it will be less destabilising than one that goes too quickly. If Bahrain succeeds in extricating itself from the morass, it will be stabler and a model to the region. If it does not, it will without doubt be among the first to be overtaken by the next regional crisis.

21 November 2012

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**Supplementary written evidence from Sir Tom Phillips**

I note that the issue of resources in the three UK missions in Saudi Arabia (Riyadh, the Consulate General in Jeddah, and the Trade Office in Al Khobar) has come up during the FAC evidence sessions.

Had it been raised with me during the 5 March session I would have said:

— I am aware that there have been significant changes in the staffing pattern over time eg in the number of UK-based section engage on commercial work.

— It should not be assumed that such changes mean a reduction in the level of service offered: we have some very capable local staff in the UKTI teams and other parts of the missions in Saudi Arabia, often with the relevant language skills, and there has been a worldwide trend towards greater localisation.

— The in-country resources over which I had oversight while Ambassador comprised about 25 UK-based staff and about 115 local staff, with an annual budget of £6.4m. I also had an overall coordination role in relation to the Arabian Peninsula network of UK missions.
— On the trade/commercial front, I made a point of being available for senior British businessmen when they visited Saudi Arabia, and frequently hosted or attended trade-related events/receptions eg in relation to visiting trade missions including visits by delegations led by the Lord Mayor of London. On occasions I accompanied such missions in their calls on Saudi interlocutors, as I did during the mission led by HRH The Duke of York and Lord Green in September 2011.

— Specifically on the trade issue, if I had a worry on the resource front it was that the UKTI effort as a whole might not do as much as possible to encourage ‘new entrants’ particularly SMEs to enter the Saudi market, which can look quite daunting from the outside. I assume that part of the reason for the OMIS discount scheme now on offer is to address this issue. But what such companies need is not just market/sector intelligence, but political/cultural briefing to give them a real feel for a country such as Saudi Arabia.

— Looking at the issue of FCO resources deployed in the Middle East, Middle Eastern posts were as I recall excluded from the first tranche of the ‘network shift’ exercise because of the uncertainties of the Arab Spring. And when they were subsequently looked at, we received additional resources in Saudi Arabia and, as I recall, elsewhere in the Arabian Peninsula network. That is not to say that good use could not have been made of further additional staff/resources, but only that in a time of resource cutbacks the priority of the work done by posts in the Gulf region was recognised, although I understand that unlike other high growth markets such as China and Brazil, the Gulf region has not benefitted from any additional FCO ‘prosperity’ resources.

— Any study of changes in the pattern of resources over time also needs to take account of the increasing use of new technology. While this has in some ways created additional demands, it has also enabled faster and more effective ways to achieve results. As one example of the new possibilities, I would point to the initiation during my time in Saudi Arabia of joint reporting by posts in the Arabian Peninsula, to achieve what was called ‘network effect’ in terms of enhancing London’s understanding of particular issues. A classified VTC link between posts was essential in enabling rapid coordination, and discussions over this system with London and others in the wider network represented in my view one of the ways in which more effective working patterns need to be weighed into the resource equation.

— New technology was also important in the pursuit of greater savings and efficiencies by ‘hubbing’ some of the administrative functions common to posts in the Arabian Peninsula network.

7 March 2013

Written evidence from Human Rights Watch

A submission from Human Rights Watch to the UK Foreign Affairs Committee (FAC) as part of its inquiry into the “FCO’s foreign policy towards Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, in the broader context of relations between the UK and the Gulf States”.

Human Rights Watch welcomes this FAC Inquiry. It is long overdue for the UK parliament to examine and debate UK relations towards these important countries. The main focus of our submission is FCO policy on human rights concerns a sufficiently high priority in their bilateral relations, regularly subordinating them to trade or security concerns.

Summary

— Human Rights Watch believes that the FCO and other parts of the UK government often downplay the serious and systematic human rights abuses taking place in these countries and they fail to make human rights concerns a sufficiently high priority in their bilateral relations, regularly subordinating them to trade or security concerns.

— Because the UK has taken a strong stance on human rights abuses elsewhere in the Middle East and North Africa, its failure to do so with these states is a worrying example of double standards, which undercuts the UK’s influence and credibility on human rights across the region and towards other parts of the world, a point also made by the FAC in its recent report on the Arab Spring.

— Although the FCO does include Saudi Arabia in its “country of concern” section in its annual report on human rights and democracy, the FCO appears very reluctant to press the Saudi authorities on human rights issues and it rarely makes public statements of concern about the rights situation within Saudi. In the course of 2012, the Saudi authorities stepped up arrests and trials of peaceful dissidents and responded to demonstrations by Shia citizens with lethal force. Authorities frequently prosecute peaceful dissidents before Specialized Criminal Courts, set up to try terrorism suspects.

— Saudi authorities continue to treat Saudi women as second class citizens, where the male guardianship system requires women to seek the written permission of a male relative—father, husband or brother—to take up employment, access some forms of medical care or move around the country. There are also widespread and systematic abuses against the country’s 9 million foreign domestic workers.
requirements for women continue to be publicly enforced and women remain banned from driving. London Olympics, women and girls remain effectively banned from sports within the kingdom. Strict clothing requirements for women continue to be publicly enforced and women remain banned from driving.

— It is indefensible that the FCO continues to exclude Bahrain from its “countries of concern” section in the annual report on human rights and democracy. Despite serious ongoing abuses in Bahrain and a failure on the part of the Bahraini authorities to hold rights abusers accountable, the FCO continues to talk up the reformist credentials of the Bahraini government, when the evidence for this is lacking.

— The FCO has said little about the serious human rights abuses being committed by state authorities in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and in Oman.

— Although rarely articulated publicly, the FCO’s reluctance to be more critical or assertive about human rights abuses in these countries is assumed to be linked to concerns that pushing their leaders too hard might be destabilising, as well as the UK’s large economic interests in the region— as a source of oil and as a market for exports, especially military exports. However on the issue of stability, there is a strong case that it is the unwillingness of the existing Gulf states to liberalise politically and to permit peaceful opposition and dissent which creates the greatest risk of social instability and tension. The FCO should be pressing the case more assertively for reform, including respect for basic international human rights standards, especially the rights of women and ethnic and religious communities.

Recommendations

— The FCO should make human rights concerns a significantly higher priority than at present in its bilateral relations with all the countries of the Gulf. It should take a strong and consistent position on rights abuses in these countries in forums like the UN Human Rights Council. It should press all of these countries to allow regular and unfettered access to UN special rapporteurs and for these countries to accede to and comply with key international human rights agreements. The FCO should make a particular effort to highlight the situation facing human rights defenders in these countries. Trade and investment agreements with the countries of the region should be consistent with the UK’s international human rights obligations, including a requirement on UK companies investing there to undertake appropriate due diligence, so as not to be complicit in rights abuses. UK military or police training for the security or police forces of the Gulf states should be approached with great caution. Where it occurs, it should comply fully with international human rights standards. UK assistance should not be provided to forces known to engage in rights abuses. The FCO should also ensure that the UK government does not permit the export of military equipment to Gulf states that might be used for repression or the abuse of human rights.

About Human Rights Watch

1. Human Rights Watch is an independent, international human rights organisation. We document the denial and abuse of human rights in some 90 countries around the world. We use our research to draw attention to rights abuses and press governments to adopt policies to better respect, protect and fulfil these rights. We also press for those guilty of serious human rights abuses to be held accountable for their crimes.

2. We have worked on Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the Gulf for more than two decades. We have published numerous in-depth reports on these countries documenting serious human rights violations including systematic torture and ill-treatment, due process violations, suppression of peaceful demonstrations, and prosecution of human rights defenders and activists.

UK Policy Towards Saudi Arabia

3. Saudi Arabia has an extremely poor record on human rights, but the FCO’s response to these abuses is generally weak and any FCO criticism is very rarely made publicly.

4. The Saudi authorities impose severe and unrelenting restrictions on freedom of expression, belief and assembly. In the course of 2012, Saudis have been arrested for peaceful criticism, human rights activism and for disobeying clerics by calling for the release or fair trial of detainees. Saudi authorities arrested and prosecuted human rights activists including Mohammed al-Bajadi, a founder of the Saudi Association for Civil and Political Rights. Charges including "being in touch with international organizations" have been made against other activists including Abdulla al-Hamid, Mohammed Fahd al-Qahtani, and Walid Abu al-Khair. Authorities frequently prosecute peaceful dissidents before Specialized Criminal Courts, set up to try terrorism suspects.

5. Under the discriminatory Saudi guardianship system, women are treated as second class citizens—forbidden from travelling, conducting official business or undergoing certain medical procedures without the permission of their male guardians. A recent example illustrates the cruelty and absurdity of this policy. In July 2012, after a car chase by the religious police left the driver dead and his wife and daughter in a critical condition, the hospital authorities in Baha postponed amputating the wife's hand because she had no male legal guardian to authorise the procedure.

6. In the course of 2012, the Saudi Ministry of Labor issued a number of decrees regulating women’s work in clothing stores, amusement parks, food preparation, and as cashiers; but the decrees reinforced strict gender segregation in the workplace, mandating that female workers not interact with men. Although public pressure (including from Human Rights Watch) persuaded the Saudi authorities to field two women in the team for the London Olympics, women and girls remain effectively banned from sports within the kingdom. Strict clothing requirements for women continue to be publicly enforced and women remain banned from driving.
7. The Saudi system also permits major rights abuses against the 9 million foreign domestic workers present in the country, who constitute half the workforce. Many suffer multiple abuses and labour exploitation, sometimes amounting to slavery-like conditions. The kafala (sponsorship) system ties migrant workers’ residency permits to sponsoring employers, whose written consent is required for workers to change employers or leave the country. Saudi employers regularly abuse this power to confiscate passports, withhold wages and force migrants to work against their will. Domestic workers, usually women, also frequently endure forced confinement, the denial of food and psychological, physical and sexual abuse.

8. Saudi Arabia does not tolerate public worship by adherents of religions other than Islam and systematically discriminates against its Muslim religious minorities, in particular Shia and Ismailis. Authorities in 2012 arrested and prosecuted Hamza Kashgari and Mohammed Salama for their peaceful expression of opinions on religious matters that differed from the views of Saudi religious authorities.

UK Policy Towards Bahrain

9. Human Rights Watch has been particularly critical of UK policy towards Bahrain over the last year and more. Although the FCO does criticise human rights abuses in Bahrain, including in public statements, it tends to do so in general terms and in a context of talking up progress in Bahrain and commending Bahraini authorities for their purported commitment to reform. For example, in the box on Bahrain in the most recent FCO annual report on human rights and democracy, the FCO mentions approvingly the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) but there is no reference to its conclusions that torture by the Bahraini authorities was systematic or that abuses occurred within a “culture of impunity”.

10. The FCO report does not mention that the Bahraini authorities have failed to date to investigate or prosecute more than a small number of security officers for serious rights abuses such as torture and unlawful killings, almost all of them low-ranking and non-Bahraini. Nor is there any reference to the key BICI recommendation to review military court sentences and free those convicted purely for calling for substantial political change—a category that includes the 20 protest leaders sentenced to lengthy prison terms, some of them for life. On September 4, 2012, a civilian appeals court upheld the military court’s convictions and long sentences of the 20 protest leaders.

11. There is also reference to “an independent National Commission to oversee implementation of the BICI report” and to the National Human Rights Commission. The members of the first were handpicked by the King, so it is hardly independent, and the second has done almost nothing since it was established.

12. The Bahraini authorities continue to seriously limit freedom of assembly and peaceful protest. In the course of 2012, the authorities have routinely rejected permit requests to demonstrate from opposition groups, and riot police have often used excessive force to disperse protests. While abuse in detention appears to have declined, police routinely beat protestors, in some cases severely, at the time of arrest and during their transfer to police stations. Human Rights Watch has documented serious and systematic due process violations in trials of Bahraini opposition leaders and activists before Bahrain’s civilian as well as special military courts. Violations included denying the right to legal representation and failure to investigate credible allegations of torture and ill-treatment during interrogation.

13. On August 16, Nabeel Rajab, President of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights, was sentenced to three years imprisonment for calling and participating in peaceful demonstrations without permits between January and March 2012. Rajab was earlier sentenced to three months in prison for tweets that called for the Prime Minister to step down. On August 23, a court of appeal overturned the Twitter conviction but at this point he remains in prison on the “illegal assembly” charge, pending appeal. The courts’ verdicts provided no indication that Rajab had called for or participated in violence.

14. The Bahraini authorities have largely failed in respect of accountability. Although the BICI noted that abuses “could not have happened without the knowledge of higher echelons of the command structure” of the security forces, the few prosecutions of security officials for serious rights abuses have included none from the senior ranks. In effect, most members of the Bahraini security forces who carried out abuses have so far suffered no detriment for doing so. The FCO has failed to press this issue with sufficient vigour with the Bahraini authorities.

UK Policy Towards UAE and Oman

15. The FCO and the UK government as a whole has said little, and even less publicly, about human rights abuses in other Gulf states like UAE and Oman. The FCO talks of “ambitious plans to expand our existing cooperation with the Gulf states across the Board: in culture, defence and security, trade and investment, and foreign policy cooperation”. They go on to say, “we aim to re-energise the relationship, focusing on culture, business and defence relations”. In his recent trip to the Gulf, Prime Minister David Cameron also placed very heavy emphasis on UK defence sales to the countries of the region. Human rights are conspicuously absent from this list of FCO and UK government priorities, although human rights concerns are growing in both UAE and Oman.

16. The human rights situation has deteriorated significantly in UAE over the last 12 months, with an intensified government effort to silence critics of the ruling elite. 63 dissidents with ties to a non-violent
Islamist group have been detained without charge in 2012, and human rights defenders, lawyers and political activists have been subject to harassment, intimidation and deportation. The whereabouts of 61 of the detainees, who include human rights lawyers, law professors, judges and student leaders, remains unknown and there are concerns about ill-treatment. Human Rights Watch has publicised credible allegations of torture at state security facilities. The UAE also continues to resist reform of a wholly inadequate legal and regulatory framework governing the country’s migrant workers, who make up 80% of the population and who are subject to ongoing abuses. In addition, the UAE has produced a new federal decree on cyber crime. Passed on November 13, the law criminalizes a wide range of non-violent political activities carried out on or via the internet, from criticism of its rulers to organising unlicensed demonstrations. To their credit, the European Parliament recently passed its first ever resolution on the UAE, expressing profound concerns about the country’s human rights record. It is important that the European Union as a whole should provide a strong and common position on rights abuses in UAE, and the FCO should back this.

17. There are serious human rights concerns in Oman, which the FCO seems most reluctant to address or to criticise. Omani authorities have made unprecedented use of criminal defamation laws to circumscribe freedom of expression, sentencing over 30 pro-reform activists to between a year and 18 months imprisonment and substantial fines on the charge of “defaming the Sultan”. The UK provides significant economic and military assistance to the Sultanate and maintains a sizeable military presence there, which may account for their reluctance to push harder on human rights concerns.

Recommendations
— The FCO should make human rights concerns a significantly higher priority than at present in its bilateral relations with all the countries of the Gulf and not subordinate these concerns to trade and security issues.
— It should take a strong and consistent position on rights abuses in these countries in dedicated forums like the UN Human Rights Council. It should press all of these countries to allow regular and unfettered access to UN special mechanisms (rapporteurs, for example) and international human rights organisations.
— It should press the Gulf states to accede to and comply with key international human rights agreements in particular the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Convention against Torture, and the Optional Protocol to the latter.
— The FCO should make a particular effort to highlight the persecution and harassment of human rights defenders in Gulf states.
— Trade and investment agreements with the countries of the region should be consistent with the UK’s international human rights obligations, including a requirement on UK companies investing there to undertake appropriate due diligence, so as not to be complicit in rights abuses.
— UK military or police training for the security or police forces of the Gulf states should be approached with great caution. Where it occurs, it should comply fully with international human rights standards. UK assistance should not be provided to forces known to engage in rights abuses.
— The UK should support efforts to arrest and prosecute, including in the UK, officials from Gulf states against whom there is evidence of involvement in serious human rights abuses like torture.
— The FCO should also ensure that the UK government does not permit the export of military equipment to the Gulf that might be used for repression or the abuse of human rights.

19 November 2012

Written evidence from Amnesty International

Amnesty International

1. Amnesty International is a global movement of more than 3 million supporters, members and activists in over 150 countries and territories who campaign to end grave abuses of human rights. Our vision is for every person to enjoy all the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights standards. Our mission is to undertake research and action focused on preventing and ending grave abuses of these rights. We are independent of any government, political ideology, economic interest or religion.

Summary

2. This submission addresses some of the key questions asked by the committee concerning the UK’s foreign policy priorities in its relations with Saudi Arabia as a “strategic ally” in the region and its influence on current and future trends and makes recommendations for the UK government to follow in its relations with the country. In doing so, it focuses on Saudi Arabian government violations of human rights and international humanitarian law linked to the UK arms trade with Saudi Arabia, human rights violations in the name of security and counter-terrorism, crackdowns on activists, the death penalty, cruel and inhumane corporal punishment, violence and discrimination against women and migrant workers, and repression against members of the Shi’a community.
3. Amnesty International recommends that the UK government, in addition to investigating the use by Saudi Arabia of UK fighter-bombers in violation of international humanitarian law, urges the Saudi Arabian government to safeguard the basic rights of its citizens and migrant workers in relation to all of the below mentioned specific issues.

4. It should be noted that Amnesty International has been asking for many years for access to Saudi Arabia to research human rights concerns but has never been granted such access by the authorities. This submission is based on information divulged to Amnesty International by people in Saudi Arabia and Saudi Arabians or foreign nationals, including former prisoners, who have left the country. It is also based on government statements, where they exist, local and international media reports and other research carried out despite the obstacles.

**Introduction**

5. The human rights situation in Saudi Arabia is dire, but the country has largely escaped any pressure from its allies to improve it. Since the mid 2000s, the Saudi Arabian government has repeatedly announced that change will ensue, yet they have so far failed to commence a results-based reform process that meets the demands and aspirations of the country’s citizens. Moreover, the human rights situation in Saudi Arabia has been further exacerbated by repressive counter-terrorism measures. Patterns of human rights violations include the detention of peaceful critics of the state, extensive use of the death penalty, corporal punishments such as amputations and flogging, a justice system which continues to be secret and summary in nature, widespread torture and other ill-treatment, severe discrimination faced by women in law and in practice, discrimination faced by religious and other minority groups, violations of the rights of migrants, and violations of the rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly.

6. Saudi Arabia has been able to shield itself from direct pressure because of its influential global and regional status and primarily because of its strong position in the oil market and its status as an important player in the Middle East region, Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) and the Islamic world at large, due partly to the location of the two holiest shrines in Mecca and Medina.

7. Regionally, Saudi Arabia continues to play a significant role in peace initiatives, in regional forums such as the Gulf Co-operation Council and the League of Arab States, and in the future political prospects of such countries as Bahrain, Yemen, and Lebanon. Globally, Saudi Arabia is an important actor in stabilizing the oil market, at the same time that it exercises much power on and through the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC) and other multilateral forums, together with its role in the G20, in encouraging interfaith dialogue and providing emergency aid. All these factors, in addition to Saudi Arabia’s large purchase of arms from Western countries, make it an important ally to countries such as the UK.

8. Only pressure from strong allies and actors as well as internal pressure may make Saudi Arabia address its dismal human rights record and heed the calls for reform. However, it is feared that the UK and other Western allies of Saudi Arabia have for decades attached disproportionate weight to their strategic and economic interests and have chosen to disregard the gross human rights violations that the Saudi Arabian Government carry out with impunity.

**Human Rights Violations and Foreign Policy Recommendations**

1. UK Arms Trade with Saudi Arabia and Violations of International Humanitarian Law

9. Saudi Arabia has been the recipient of record-breaking arms deals involving the UK, yet these have been highly secretive and there has been little or no follow-up over how the weaponry was used.

10. There is concern that Saudi Arabia has been responsible for most of the alleged indiscriminate and disproportionate attacks on civilians in the war between the Yemeni government and rebels known as “Huthis” in the region of Sa’ada, north Yemen, between August 2009 and March 2010.

11. These attacks typically took the form of aerial bombardment of civilian areas using UK-supplied Tornado fighter-bombers. Additionally, the nature of the UK’s ongoing in-country military personnel support in Saudi Arabia and during the below mentioned instances remains vague and in need of clarification.

12. In November and December 2009, the town of al-Nadir in Razih, north Yemen, became a casualty of intensive Saudi Arabian air strikes. Hundreds of photographs and witness testimonies acquired in February and March 2010 describe large parts of the town as completely destroyed. Among the damaged or destroyed civilian buildings are market places, mosques, petrol stations, small businesses, a primary school, a power plant, a health centre, and dozens of houses and residential buildings.

13. On 23 or 24 December 2009, a first bomb hit the house of Muhammad Jaber, who was involved in the mediation efforts to stop the conflict. When people rushed to help those trapped in the house, a second strike directly targeted the building killing 38 people, 13 of whom were children.

14. During another of these bombing campaigns in the early hours of 30 December 2012, Saudi Arabian planes allegedly bombed and destroyed two residential buildings killing 33 to 45 members of the Abu Taleb family.
15. International humanitarian law requires that all parties to an armed conflict treat civilians and non-combatants humanely, minimize unnecessary civilian casualties and destruction of civilian property, and take effective measures to minimize incidental civilian casualties.

16. Selling arms to countries like Saudi Arabia should only be considered if there are absolutely watertight guarantees over them not being used to commit human rights violations.

17. Amnesty International has called on the UK government to investigate whether military aircraft, other weapons and their ongoing in-country military support to the Saudi Arabian armed forces have been used in violation of international humanitarian law but the organization is not aware of any such investigation.

18. Furthermore sales of arms to Saudi Arabia appears to continue without adequate disclosure as to the nature of the sales, possible or intended use of weapons or indeed what guarantees are in place to ensure non repeat of past violations.

1.1. Recommendations

19. The UK government should investigate without delay whether military aircraft and other weapons together with their ongoing in-country military support to the Saudi Arabian armed forces have been used in violation of international humanitarian law, as well as whether UK support personnel have been involved in such violations, knowingly or not.

20. The UK government should take strict measures to ensure that UK military supplies and assistance are conditional upon the establishment of rigorous operational safeguards, including training and accountability systems, designed to prevent the commission of serious violations of international humanitarian law by the Saudi Arabian armed forces.

2. Human Rights Violations in the Name of Security and Counter-Terrorism

21. Saudi Arabia has seemingly convinced the outside world that its counter-terrorism measures are a success. In fact in the past decade, thousands of people have been detained on security grounds, many of whom remain behind bars. Most have been held initially in prolonged incommunicado detention without charge or trial for years and without any means of challenging their detention. Torture and other ill-treatment remain rife and are used extensively to extract forced “confessions”, which are all too readily accepted by the courts. In recent years hundreds charged with security-related offences and brought to trial have faced grossly unfair and in many instances secret proceedings before the Specialized Criminal Court, which was established in October 2008.

22. In their desperation, families of detainees have since 2011 resorted to staging protests calling for the fair trial or release of their male relatives held in detention without charge or trial—some had been held for up to 10 years. The Saudi Arabian government responded by beating and arresting family members, many of whom are women and children. Most of these family members were released after signing pledges not to protest again. In March 2011 the government reissued the long-standing ban on protests.

23. A draft anti-terror law, a leaked copy of which Amnesty International published in July 2011, effectively criminalizes peaceful dissent as a “terrorist crime” and permits extended, potentially indefinite, incommunicado detention without charge or trial. If the law is passed without being amended, “terrorist crimes” would include “endangering... national unity” and “harming the reputation of the state or its position”. Questioning the integrity of the King would carry a minimum prison sentence of 10 years. The proposed anti-terror draft law would entrench and make legal the very worst practices Amnesty International has documented.

24. Saudi Arabia has also used counter-terrorism as a pretext to crack down on activists, critics of the state and those calling for reform, and charged activists with terrorism-related offences. For more information on this and other issues mentioned in this submission please see the attached report Saudi Arabia: Repression in the Name of Security, issued in December 2011.3

2.1. Recommendations

25. The UK government should urge Saudi Arabia to provide information on the progress of legal proceedings against the hundreds of detainees who, according to the government, are currently being tried on terrorism-related offences, including their names and the details of the charges against them.

26. The UK government should urge Saudi Arabia to either release the hundreds of people apparently detained without charge in the context of counter-terrorism or charge and promptly try them in legal proceedings meeting international fair trial standards.

27. The UK government should call on the Saudi Arabian government to respect the peaceful exercise of its citizens’ rights to freedom of expression and association.

3 This report is not reproduced here but is available on Amnesty International’s website
3. Crackdown on activists

28. The Saudi Arabian state and its justice system operate largely in secret, and the media is severely censored and otherwise constrained. Independent human rights organizations and other NGOs are not permitted to operate freely, protests are banned, and civil society remains weak because of government repression.

29. Activists in Saudi Arabia have been increasingly vocal about the human rights situation in the country. The Saudi Arabian government has met activism with repression.

30. Regular victims of the sweeping repression are an unknown number of human rights defenders, peaceful advocates of political reform, and many others who have committed no internationally recognized offence. At least some of them are prisoners of conscience. Methods of repression used include, arrests, incommunicado detention, torture or other ill-treatment, prolonged detention without charge or trial, and in some cases charging activists with vague security-related crimes such as “disobeying the ruler”.

31. Recommendation

31. The UK government should urge Saudi Arabia to halt its repression of activists and allow peaceful dissent. Anyone detained in connection with his or her peaceful activism must be released unconditionally and immediately.

4. Death Penalty

32. Since the beginning of 2012, Saudi Arabia has executed at least 70 persons, including 25 foreign nationals. Twenty-three out of the at least 70 were convicted on drugs-related offences. In 2011 Saudi Arabia executed at least 82 people, of whom 28 were foreign nationals and five were women. This was three times the figure for 2010, when at least 27 people were executed, of whom six were foreign nationals. Hundreds are currently believed to be under the death sentence.

33. Saudi Arabia applies the death penalty for a wide range of offences, including some with no lethal consequences and some not recognized internationally as crimes, such as apostasy, sorcery and blasphemy. Two people were executed for “sorcery” in 2011: in September, a male Sudanese national was beheaded following an unfair trial and in December a Saudi Arabian women was beheaded for “witchcraft and sorcery”. Saudi Arabia also sentences to death and executes juvenile offenders, those convicted for crimes committed when they were less than 18 years of age despite being a state party to the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

34. Those executed in Saudi Arabia have invariably been subjected to grossly unfair trials in which they have not had adequate—or any—legal representation. Generally they have been convicted on the basis of confessions, which are often extracted under torture or duress, and have been denied a right of appeal consistent with the requirements of international fair trial standards. Often, poor foreign migrant workers are convicted and sentenced to death following trials in which the proceedings are not translated into a language that they understand.

4.1. Cases

35. Rizana Nafeek, a Sri Lankan domestic worker, was sentenced to death in June 2007 for the alleged murder of her employer’s baby. She was 17 years old at the time of the alleged crime and had no access to lawyers either during interrogation or at her trial and it is believed that she confessed to the murder during police questioning, only to later retract her confession. The Supreme Court upheld the death sentence in October 2010.

36. Suliamon Olyfemi, a Nigerian national, was sentenced to death in 2004 following an unfair trial, in which he had no access to a translator (he did not understand Arabic, the language in which court proceedings are conducted) or a lawyer. He was detained during a mass arrest of African nationals in September 2002 after a policeman died in an alleged dispute with migrant workers. He has always maintained his innocence.

37. Siti Zainab Binti Duhri Rupa, an Indonesian domestic worker, was sentenced to death after she reportedly confessed to the murder of her employer in 1999 while mentally ill and did not have any legal representation.

4.2. Recommendations

38. The UK government should call on the Saudi Arabian government to immediately impose a moratorium on executions with a view to abolishing the death penalty, as called for by UN General Assembly resolutions 62/149, 63/168 and 65/206.

39. The UK government should urge the Saudi Arabian government to stop imposing the death penalty on anyone under the age of 18 at the time of their alleged offence, in accordance with Saudi Arabia’s obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.
40. The UK government should urge the Saudi Arabian government to remove from their law any death penalty provisions which are in breach of international human rights law, such as for crimes which do not meet the threshold of “most serious crimes”.

41. The UK government should urge the Saudi Arabian government to publicize on an annual basis comprehensive statistics on the death penalty and facts around the administration of justice in death penalty cases.

42. The UK government should urge the Saudi Arabian government to halt planned executions and commute without delay all death sentences to terms of imprisonment.

5. Cruel and Inhumane Corporal Punishment

43. Corporal punishment is used extensively in Saudi Arabia despite it being a state party to the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.

44. Flogging for instance is mandatory in Saudi Arabia for a number of offences and can also be used at the discretion of judges as an alternative or in addition to other punishments. Sentences can range from dozens to tens of thousands of lashes, and are usually carried out in instalments, at intervals ranging from two weeks to one month. The highest number of lashes imposed in a single case recorded by Amnesty International was 40,000 lashes. They were imposed in 2009 in a case of a defendant convicted on murder charges.

45. Punishment by amputation is also enforced in Saudi Arabia for certain offences. They are mainly limited to cases of “theft”, for which the sentence is amputation of the right hand, and “highway robbery”, which is punished by “cross amputation” (amputation of the right hand and left foot). Only a few days ago, on 21 November 2012, a Nigerian man had his right hand amputated for theft.

5.1. Recommendations

46. The UK government should urge Saudi Arabia to abolish all corporal punishments which amount to torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, such as floggings and amputations, in accordance with Saudi Arabia’s obligations under the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.

47. The UK government should also call for planned amputations and floggings to be halted and sentences to corporal punishment to be commuted.

6. Violence and Discrimination Against Women

48. Women in Saudi Arabia remain subjected to severe discrimination in both law and practice. They must obtain the permission of a male guardian before they can travel, take paid work, enrol in higher education, or marry. In addition, Saudi Arabian women married to foreign nationals cannot pass on their nationality to their children, unlike the case for Saudi Arabian men in a similar situation.

49. Discrimination has fuelled violence against women, with foreign domestic workers particularly at risk of abuses such as beatings, rape and even murder, in addition to non-payment of their salaries. The rates of domestic violence in Saudi Arabia are high, with little judicial recourse for victims, and often accompanied by impunity for perpetrators. There has been concern that discriminatory rules relating to marriage have caused women to be trapped in violent and abusive relationships from which they have no legal recourse.

50. Women’s rights activists in Saudi Arabia petitioned the King to allow women to drive vehicles. The ban on women driving has been challenged by a campaign called “Women2Drive”, which made online appeals to women who hold international driving licences to start driving on Saudi Arabian roads from 17 June 2011 onwards. Scores of women have taken to the roads and some have been arrested. Most have been released without charge shortly afterwards after pledging not to drive again, but several are reported to be facing charges as a result. At least one was sentenced, but the sentence has recently been commuted.

6.1. Recommendation

51. The UK government should raise with the Saudi Arabian government the ban on driving with a view to it being overturned. Saudi Arabia must also ensure that women are protected from violence and that discrimination against them is lifted.

7. Migrant Workers

52. Migrant workers make up approximately one third of the population of Saudi Arabia. They are subjected to abuses by the state and private employers including detention without trial, physical and psychological ill-treatment and non-payment of salaries.

53. Migrant domestic workers in the Saudi Arabia are commonly subjected to such abuses as restrictions on their freedom of movement, discrimination, and harassment. They are often not given access to legal advice or adequate language interpretation, and are often unable to obtain protection or redress under existing labour laws.
54. Employers commonly retain the passports of their domestic workers, which may result in detained domestic workers being held at deportation centres for weeks or months, while their paperwork is being completed. Some domestic workers are not allowed to leave the house where they work without permission from their employers. They are often required to work excessive hours for inadequate pay.

7.1. Recommendation
55. The UK government should urge Saudi Arabia to reform its labour laws with a view to ensuring that migrant workers have adequate protection against abuses by employers and the state.

8. Repression against members of Shi’a Community
56. Sunni Islam is the main denomination of Saudi Arabia and discrimination against members of the Shi’a community has exacerbated a tense situation in the Eastern Province. Members of the Shi’a community have been targeted for practising their faith and have been subjected to harassment, intimidation and detention without charge or trial. Since February 2011 members of the Shi’a community have taken to the street to protest against these violations and Amnesty International has seen a new wave of repression as authorities have cracked down on protesters. Hundreds of people have been arrested for demonstrating, as protests are banned in Saudi Arabia. Many have been released often after pledging not to protest again, but over a hundred men and about 19 children remain detained in connection with recent protests.

8.1 Recommendation
57. The UK government must urge Saudi Arabia to put an end to discrimination, intimidation, harassment and detention without charge or trial of members of the Shi’a community and allow peaceful protests.

Conclusion
The situation of human rights in Saudi Arabia, is, as we have stated above, dire. The Saudi Arabian state treats its citizens and those it plays host to, in a way that is nothing less than shocking. For many years, the UK government has chosen to prioritize strategic and economic interests in its relations with the country above the interests of human rights. Nonetheless, this UK government has repeatedly stressed how it “puts human rights at the heart of what it does”. Amnesty International has called many times on the UK government to make this assertion real. We ask the UK government to acknowledge that there are abuses, such as those carried out by the Saudi Arabian government, that cannot, any longer, be overlooked.

26 November 2012

Written evidence from Al Wefaq National Islamic Society, Liberties and Human Rights Department

EXTREME BRUTALITY AND COLLECTIVE PUNISHMENT
1. After the release of Bassouni Report in which it pointed to the extensive use of force by the security forces.
2. “The forceful confrontation of demonstrators involving the use of lethal force and resort to a heavy deployment of Public Security Forces led to the death of civilians. This caused a marked increase in the number of persons participating in protests and led to a palpable escalation in their demands.”
3. After Geneva recommendations, which the government pledged to implement we would like to prove with evident that nothing of that have been achieved on the ground, and all the government claims of implementing the pledges or holding accountable the policemen whom been involved in violation is only used for media consumption and the methodology have not been changed before or after Bassouni report and after Geneva recommendations, the violations are continuing in a systematic daily bases.
4. Hence what does it mean for a police security force vehicle to stop and a policeman steps out of it, throw a teargas inside a women saloon and get back in calmly.
5. And what does it mean to close all primary and secondary roads and prevent people from going to pray even on foot, or arrest and torture anyone who tries to go to pray and pursuit them, which resulted in martyrdom of a young man who was chased by police forced and got hit by a car.
6. And what does the decision of preventing peaceful protesting which been recently released under lame excuses that narrowed freedom of expression and peaceful protest.
7. Despite all that, the British Foreign policy report have stated on 30th September 2012 that the government have made a significant progress in implementing the recommendations of the National Committee.
8. “Assistance in the judicial sector and on improving human rights in areas such as freedom of expression and torture prevention. The BICI Follow Up Unit also published a report in july updating on progress on implementation following the closure of the National Commission in March; the report is available online”.
9. That significantly contract with reality, for example we will cite a collection of events that happened and is happening continually and considered a flagrant violation of human rights.

10. Note that we have only focus on the recent period (the second half of 2012) and did not report all the evidence due to their huge number.

11. Below is a summery of information in respond to the report of the British Foreign Office.

**Freedom of Expression:**

I. Preventing the opposition protest in Bilad Alqadeem on 22/06/2012 and use of extensive force to crowd disperse, which includes leaders of the opposition parties and injuring the Secretary General of Al Wefaq party, as well as one of the leaders in the Democratic National Assembly party and causing a serious injury that caused a permanent disabilities for the companion of AlWefaq Secretary General (Ali AIMuwalli), and the arrest of 6 citizens.


II. On 7th September 2012 preventing the opposition parties from protesting in the capital and arresting participants:

http://alayam.com/newsdetails.aspx?id=94285

III. The public security chief Tariq Alhassan has announced that Alwefaq party has send a notification to the Capital Police Governance that they will organize a march from Bab-AlBahrain to Ras-Rumman in Manama on Thursday morning (19th July 2012) and it is decided not to approve this protest in the time and place specified.

In an issued statement on Thursday 19th July 2012 the opposition parties have said “Preventing rallies and marches in the Capital Manama is a precedent that doesn’t exist in any other country”, as well as “The peaceful demonstration have been prohibited under the current situation of excluding and not willing to listen to any different opinion in each area in Bahrain including the capital, which contrary with the slogans and the statement by the authorities, which is a clear violation of all international charters and treaties as well as a violation of the law which permits the right to demonstrate”


IV. On the 6th July 2012 the MInistry of Interior have announced on their Twitter account that it have been decided to prevent the marched called by AlWefaq party after tomorrow on Friday in the area of Demistan. The Security General Tariq al-Hassan said that the invitation to the march and participate in violation of the law.


V. On 7th July 2012 the Ministry of Interior banned licensing a march called by AlWefaq party on Friday afternoon in Janosan area, as stated by the head of the General Security Major General Tariq al-Hassan. Chief Alhassan has said that Alwefaq has submitted a notification to the Northern Governorate Police Department to organize a march from roundabout Janosan area to Diraz area roundabout on Friday, July 6, 2012

Source: http://www.alwatannews.net/NewsViewer.aspx?ID=bv1DeFk4FB76K5riUZ733337Q93339333339

VI. On 09/06/2012 Interior Ministry prevent an opposition rally and announced that in their account on Twitter and official newspapers

Source: http://www.alwatannews.net/NewsViewer.aspx?ID=Fjxos0DCE5dwQuoMgldnUw_939_939_&item=

VII. On 29th October 2012 the Minister of Interior announced to stop all the marches or gatherings and participation or call to any march is considered against the law


VIII. On 9/11/2012 people where prevented from freedom of worship and practice Friday prayers in Duraz area as well as preventing the media from entering the area plus the use of excessive force to prevent people from reaching the prayer


Torturing, abusing spitting and insulting man just because he was in his way to pray. The press has raised the subject of this person which was going to be accused of assaulting a security patrol and was released thanks to the video that proves what he suffered and that he was peaceful: http://www.alwasatnews.com/3718/news/read/714979/1.html
12. Extensive use of Force:

1. 20 October 2012, Collective punishment on the residents on AlEker village putting the whole village under a siege for a 5 days, and suppress the supporters and people who tried to break the siege, as an excuse of an alleged and suspicious incident of a death of a policeman who died after the vehicle he fall in a sewer pit which was reclaimed later by security forces.

II. The Human Rights violations in Bahrain. In spite of that Bahrain authorities signed many Human Rights agreements and accepted Human Rights Council recommendations in Geneva they continues their abuses against people by raiding people’s houses and vandalizing private properties:

III. Security forces throw a gas grenade deliberately inside a women’s salon in the village of Sitra, September 2, 2012.

IV. 23 July 2012: Deliberately throwing a teargas inside a house in Diraz Village:

V. 15 July 2012: Throwing a teargas inside a house in the village of Sitra after security forces tried to raid it.

VI. 30 September 2012, throwing toxic gases inside a house, which lead to the suffocation of one family in the area of Nuwaidrat by the regime forces, after that they flood the whole area with gases as they left the area as a collective punishment.

VII. The use of shotgun and injuring the kid Ahmed Alnaham 4 years old in Daire village, who lost one of his eyes.

13. We would like also to point to you that on the 8th of September 2012, the opposition parties have held a conference “What’s after Bassouni Report?” it has been confirmed during the conference and proved by evidence (Video) that “The violations still continue, and the violations of the period after Bassouni have not changed compared to the previous one. Moreover, the policy of systematic collective punishment and the extensive use of force have never changed”:


CASE OF TORTURED PRISONERS

Introduction:

1. Further to your praise for to the Government of Bahrain for signing the convention against torture, we would like to enclose to you in this report some examples to demonstrate the continuity of the torture policy that is committed by the government, also we would like to put in the context the nature of the vocabulary which your government use to push on the steps to develop the human rights situation in Bahrain, by pointing to the following:

2. According to some testimonies, torture is practiced for two main purposes, firstly to extract confessions, and secondly, to obtain any information that may be known by the detainees.

3. Since the beginning of the protests the form of torture have included all age group of both genders.

4. Methods used for torture:
   - Electrocution.
   - Stand for long periods of time.
   - Clubbing.
   - Kicking by armed shoes.
   - Handcuffing.
   - Blindfolding.
   - Other methods.

5. British contribution in the investigations related to explosives:

   We would like to bring to your concern some cases of torture which victims been accused of being related to the case of explosions which is known as the “5 tons”, we would like to point out what have been published by the British medias (BBC) of the presence of a British team to help in the investigation in the same case in which the victims have been subjected to the most horrifying forms of torture and we wonder about the British government involvement into that?

(APENDIX 1: BRITISH TEAM INVOLVED IN THE INVESTIGATION)

Appendix 1:

Alwasat article about the British team that been sent to help in the investigation of the case of “5 tons”: (Alwasat News Paper, Issue No. 3587, dated 3 Jul 2012 )

BBC: A British team helps in Bahrain explosives investigations.
The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) said yesterday that Britain has sent a team of forensic experts from London police to Bahrain to help in the investigations that followed the finding of huge quantities of sophisticated improvised explosive devices.

The BBC also said that Britain apparently took this development very seriously, and reinforced security teams in its Gulf embassies by sending a team of forensic experts from London’s Metropolitan Police.

Human Rights Defenders

1. In the quarterly report issued by the British Foreign Office about the situation in Bahrain, in which it invited activists to make sure that their words and actions do not incite violence and do not conflict with the law, also it expressed its concern over the long sentences of the human rights activists Nabeel Rajab which reached to 3 years on the back of charges relating to freedom of expression which are guaranteed by all international charters and treaties that Bahrain signed a number of them.

2. The imprisonment of human rights activist Nabeel Rajab, upon the background of charges related to freedom of expression and demonstrating is considered a breach of the international obligations and treaties. Moreover, the British Foreign Office response about the sentenced was below the expected level by only expressing concerns, it is also notable that there is no link between the British Foreign Office carried in its report on the subjects of incitement law and between the demonstrating oriented charged against the human rights activists Nabeel Rajab.

3. In additional, on the last trial the defense of Nabeel Rajab has presented a CD containing a collection of speeches by him calling to hold the peaceful approach in demonstrating and renounce violence, as well as a video was played showing a peaceful march attended by Nabil in the capital Manama showing that the traffic was normal and had not hindered commercial movement.

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5. We did not see any clear stands by the British authorities on the targeting of Human Rights activists; unlike the other cases for example the British administration have send a committee to investigate in the claims 5 tons of explosives alleged by the Ministry of the Interior, whereas the call to relieve conditions vary from calling for the release.

6. It should be noted that the British Foreign Office dealt in a negative means with the case of the hunger strike of activists Abdullahi AlKhwaja.

7. The British Foreign Office can pressure the authorities in Bahrain to reform human rights situation that is getting worse day after day, keeping the activists behind bars and the continues of their trails on charges related to giving opinion and assembly gives a clear evidence that there is a lack of sincerity and seriousness of reform.

Illegal killings amidst absence of transparent system of accountability

1. Many illegal killings have occurred since the 14th February, illegal killings that were committed against plenty of Bahraini citizens. Plenty of evidence indicate the involvement of the authorities in the killings as there is not a transparent system for the authorities to be questioned by the judiciary and many cases have been reserved ( the kid Ali Al-shaikh is an example; who was killed due to a thrown object fired by the security forces on the day of Eid Al-fitr, the prosecution’s intention at that time was to accuse the person who brought the martyr to the hospital, no serious investigations have been conducted yet to reach the real criminal.

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he had seen the incidents, the unit replied that their doors are open and no one provided any information, to stick to the same story after a while.

6. Despite all these evidence, the British Foreign Affairs Aclaim the situation in Bahrain.

7. First case: Salah Abbas: martyred on 21st April, 2012, he was found killed in one of farms in Abu Sa'ibe' e village with birdshots effects, the area witnessed a peaceful protest at that night, his brother stated that: he „Salah, participated in a protest organized by the societies and clashes erupted, my brother was being chased and then shot by birdshot- according to one of the people who was with him- and disappeared. On the other day, at 9:00 am they received a call telling them that their brother's body was thrown in one of the farms in Shakhora Village, as it mentioned in Al-Wasat newspaper”. http://www.alwasatnews.com/3515/news/read/657497/1.html

Dr.Ali Al-Ekri and Dr.Nada Dhaif were among those who observed the body.

Despite the fact that all wounds in the martyr's body were clear that he was shot by birdshot, the Public Prosecution did not investigate the matter .

8. Second case: Hussam Al-Haddad, 16-year old, died on 18th August, 2012. His father stated that his son was going to buy some food, at that time the area was witnessing security clashes when he was stopped by a group of security men. He was brutally beaten to be later transferred to hospital, they were prevented from seeing him until they heard that he died.


9. The Ministry of Interior mentioned in a statement that one of its patrols was handling a situation to secure the Al-Khalifa Street which is usually crowded with people in the center of the city of Muharraq and was attacked by a large number of Molotov cocktails at 9:30 pm targeting one of the security man's life who was in the patrol and targeting citizens and residents' lives at the site of the incident which caused casualties among the security men and terrified citizens and residents causing damages to some of the public and private properties, the police handled the situation according to the law as a self-defense and in defending citizens, whereas one of the people who was participating in the terrorist act had been injured and transferred to hospital where he died later.


10. The prosecution justifies the murder of Hussam by the case of " self defense";


The persecution concluded and according to its observation of the photography and the eyewitnesses , that the deceased was masked and was part of a group which attacked a police patrol, they were intending to set the patrol on fire as the police were there, however, the patrol's member took the action of self-defense against those who were gathering by firing warning shots and rubber shots but all firings were in vain, the deceased continued to head towards one of the policemen holding a Molotov cocktail in his hand regardless all the repeated warnings until he approached a close distance of 10 meters with the police who fired the birdshot defending himself, whereas the deceased intended to throw the Molotov cocktail to set him on fire and kill him, the policeman had no choice but shoot him with birdshot weapon which was the only weapon with him to defend his life with and he shot the deceased on shot with it. The coroner reports met the eyewitness's mentioned story, and the persecution conclude that after all investigation's procedures and the behavior of the two sides of the incidents that what the police man did was an inevitable behavior to defend himself from a real danger threatening his life, the prosecution ordered to reserve the case because the legitimate case of self-defense is available which is, according to the law, considered as a permissible reason.

11. While the father of the deceased announced the his son was hit several times in the head by people and that might be causes led to his death.

http://www.mepanorama.com/163331/

12. On the other hand, the footage that was used by the Ministry of Interior was doubtful, because having someone filming from the rooftop on one of the building in such incident was a big question mark. The footage did not show that the martyr was among the group who were throwing the Molotov cocktails, and did not prove that shooting the birdshot was meant to be in self-defense because shooting the birds was so loose in comparison with the story of throwing the Molotov cocktail, if it was correct.

13. The third case: The kid Ali Hussain Ne'ma, 17 years old, was directly target at a close range with birdshots in Saddad area. The kid Ali Hussain Ne'ma was martyred after being shot with birdshot at a close range which led to serious casualties that led to his martyrdom, after leaving him bleeding to death.

14. The Ministry of Interior statement: The Director General of the Police Directorate of the Northen Directorate stated that a security patrol was attacked with large number of Molotov cocktails and iron skewer as it was passing by Zaid Bin Umairah Street in Saddad at 11:20 p.m yesterday Friday evening targeting the lives of the security patrol, the police handled the situation according to the law in such incidents defending themselves, on the people who was participating in the terrorist act had been injured, adding that after the presence of the ambulance and the medical team who observed him that he died .The Director General of the
Police Directorate of the Northern Directorate that the prosecution had been informed of the incident adding the investigations had been conducted to know more about the terrorist attack.


15. The Ministry of Interior statement:

16. On 21st October, 2012 the prosecution stated that there was no accusation for the police of killing Ali Ne' ma in Saddad and the causes of self-defense were available in his death case.


November 2013

### Written evidence from Al Wefaq National Islamic Society

**Overview**

Al Wefaq National Islamic Society is Bahrain’s largest opposition party. Al Wefaq is characterized as the moderate opposition force, looking to reform the current system to create a genuine constitutional monarchy and a democratic civil state.

They call for the establishment of moderate democratic principles such as the separation of powers, free and fair elections, an elected Government and respect for human rights and the rule of law. This is in addition to an opposition to discrimination, corruption and tyranny, all of which damage Bahrain and its people.

Al Wefaq participated in parliamentary elections in both 2006 and 2010, but withdrew their MP’s after the crackdown against peaceful demonstrators in February 2011.

**Background to 14 February Protest Movement**

Calls for democratic reform have existed in Bahrain since at least the 1920’s and have remained constant since. Despite some promises of democratic changes, notably in the 70’s and early 00’s, Bahrain remains an absolute monarchy, ruled by one family.

In line with other movements in the Arab Spring, Bahrainis took to the streets on 14 February 2011 to demand democracy and respect for human rights. These calls were met with a wave of violent repression that is continuing until this day, almost two years later.

Since this movement has begun:

- At least 100 people killed:
  - 13 directly from torture.
  - Dozens as a result of excessive tear gas use.
  - 47 since the BICI (23 November 2011).
- Around 1,950 people arrested.
- 208 sentenced in military courts.
- 4,300 workers dismissed for involvement in protests.
- 38 mosques destroyed.
- 477 students expelled.

The Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry clearly highlighted necessary areas of reform, including in the judiciary, policing and on the subject of impunity. But little has changed since the BICI and on the ground security forces are still treating protesters with the same brutality. The Commissioner of the BICI, Cherif Bassiouni, recently described implementation of the BICI as “inadequate”.

**Current Situation**

A number of recent decisions have reflected a lack of desire for reform in the authorities.

- 30 October 2012—All opposition protests banned.
- 6 November 2012—31 opposition figures have their nationalities revoked.
- 17 December 2012—leading human rights activist Said Yousif Almuafadah detained (held for four weeks without trial).
- 7 January 2013—Final appeals for 13 opposition leaders rejected.
- 15 January—Court sentences Jawad Fairooz, resigned MP, to 15 months in prison.
- 27 January—eight-year-old boy dies from after tear gas attack on his home.
- 31 January—eight medics dismissed from work by Ministry of Health.
Al Wefaq remains committed to engaging in a political dialogue with the authorities in order to return to stability and end the current crisis. We are encouraged by a recent royal directive to resume national consensus talks, but as of yet we have not received a direct offer or clarification of what these talks will be discuss.

**WHAT WE NEED FROM THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY, ESPECIALLY UK**

As a result of historical ties, the people of Bahrain continue to look to UK as a force for good and an ally for reform. At the same time we understand the complex relationships that the UK has in the Gulf in terms of both trade and security.

We are also aware that a large discussion in your inquiry into UK policy will be about what kind of influence the UK can have over Bahrain and whether it will make any difference.

We feel that the current instability in Bahrain proves that dictatorial regimes will not always create stability and ultimately it is in the interests of UK to have stability in Bahrain. At the same time, there is a difference between forcing change upon a country, which cannot work, and encouraging the repression of the will of the people. We call on the UK to be clearer in this regard and to show public disapproval of serious violations committed by the authorities.

There is strong evidence to suggest that UK can have a positive impact in promoting democratic reform and we feel that had the authorities been willing to completely ignore the advice of its allies the situation could be a whole lot worse, with the outlawing of all opposition.

Threats made by Bahrain against the UK for public criticism should be resisted and treated as hostile. The authorities are aware that they cannot isolate themselves from international opinion, giving a clear ground for the UK to play a positive role.

**EVALUATION OF UK FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS BAHRAIN SINCE 14 FEBRUARY UPRISING**

— For the first few weeks of the movement for reform the response from the UK Government was positive. It clearly condemned human rights violations and laid forward the case for reform.

— Since then the condemnation has weakened and diplomatic efforts have failed to halt the abuses of human rights.
  — Systematic abuses outlined in the BICI, UPR and by countless NGO’s and Governments, have continued.
  — With regards to the BICI the UK have focused too much on its existence over its implementation. Of course it is very positive that the BICI took place, but Bahrain should ultimately be judged on the implementation.
  — Efforts to achieve democratic reforms to bring Bahrain in line with modern democratic systems have failed.

**REASONS FOR LIMITED SUCCESS IN INFLUENCING POLICY IN BAHRAIN**

— Lack of a clear public stated policy towards Bahrain.
— Willingness on UK part to accept cosmetic and slow-paced limited reforms rather than the necessary fundamental changes to the political system.
  — Britain unwilling to yield hard diplomacy, possibly fearing the threat of backlash from Bahrain.
— Soft public condemnations with no push towards acceptance of international democratic standards.
— No clear program for dealing with Bahrain, with a lack of timescales for change, roadmaps for reform etc.

**WHAT THE UK GOVERNMENT COULD DO**

In our experience of dealing with UK diplomats, including former Ambassadors, we have discussed how to bring about reforms to the system and subsequently how to bring about long-term stability. Some recommendations to achieve this are as follows:

— Ask Bahrain Government to enter into negotiations with the opposition with a timescale exceeding no longer than three months.
— If this fails, UK Government can work with others in the international community for change:
  — Establishment of a special envoy on behalf of either the UK or the United Nations to Bahrain who can mediate with all sides to reach agreement.
  — Should agreement not be possible, this individual can devise his or her own recommendations for a solution.
From a human rights perspective, should Bahrain continue to fail to implement the BICI:

- UK can request a special session of the Human Rights Council on Bahrain.
- UK can push for a permanent office of the UN High Commissioner on Human Rights, with full authority, in Bahrain.
- UK can push for Bahrain sign the Rome Statute of the ICC.
- UK can push for Bahrain to sign additional protocols of the UN, as listed in the UPR recommendations, including on civil and political rights.
- UK can apply more pressure on Bahrain to accept UN Special Rapporteurs visits on the following themes:
  - Freedom of peaceful assembly and association.
  - Freedom of opinion and expression.
  - Freedom of religion or belief.
  - Torture.

Benefits of British Involvement in Reforms

We consider that British involvement in specific reform areas (such as the judiciary) can only be useful if seen in the bigger picture of genuine democratic reforms across the system. Only dealing with specific areas, without a general context, will allow the Government of Bahrain to divert away from real reforms. Reform in Bahrain needs to be considered in a holistic manner, that considers long-term stability over short-term gains.

General Recommendations

- Clear unequivocal support for democratic reform in Bahrain.
- Stronger public statements including official condemnations of violations and abuses of human rights.
- Making support of Bahrain in initiatives conditional on the actions of the Government of Bahrain.
- Empower the moderate opposition and those in the Government.
- Calling for a definite timeframe and key milestones for reform.

Conclusion

In conclusion there is a space for the UK to be more pro-active with regards to reform in Bahrain. We desperately seek the continuation of the strong economic and political as well as social ties between UK and Bahrain. It is our fear that Britain is in danger of losing its reputation as a force for good if it fails to be clear in its foreign policy towards Bahrain.

A fair and democratic constitutional monarchy, with respect for human rights, will be the only outcome to create long-term stability in Bahrain, which benefits all Bahrainis as well as its allies. We call upon the UK Government to seek this outcome through a renewed push for reform.

February 2013

Written evidence from the Bahrain Center for Human Rights

Summary

- 84 confirmed deaths have resulted from the uprising and the government crackdown, with 82 listed on the BCHR site and two recent cases of a man suffocated with tear gas and a 16 year old run over while being chased by police.
- Teargas continues to be used as a weapon of mass punishment, as towns and villages are attacked with excessive quantities, resulting in some deaths. Police have been seen purposefully firing teargas into homes.5
- Torture is practiced in official Ministry of Interior detention centers, unofficial centers (e.g., municipal buildings) and upon arrest in the houses being raided. BCHR has continued to regularly report torture in Bahrain throughout 2012.7
- BCHR estimates there to be more than 700 prisoners of conscience in Bahrain. This is based on the last reliable figures compiled by us in May as well as figures released by Al-Wefaq more recently.9

4 http://bahrainrights.hopto.org/en/node/3864
5 May 2012—http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vK3mV0qJGJw
6 http://bahrainrights.hopto.org/en/node/5357
7 http://bahrainrights.hopto.org/en/node/5235,
http://bahrainrights.hopto.org/en/node/5115
http://www.bahrainrights.hopto.org/en/node/5206
8 http://www.google.com/url?q=https%3A%2F%2Fdocs.google.com%2Fspreadsheet%2Fpub%3Fkey%3D0AqlijN5nmi9CdHJjO
URVOWpM19YRlZqYlJXcGI5R3c%26single%3Dtrue%26gid%3D0%26output%3Dhtml
Introduction

1. The Bahrain Center for Human Rights is the main independent human rights organisation in Bahrain. Because of its longstanding criticism of continuing human rights abuses in Bahrain, BCHR is considered a banned organisation and its website is blocked in Bahrain. The group was founded in 2002 by Abdulhadi Alkhawaja, a political exile who came back under the new Emir’s reforms. Alkhawaja was first arrested and the organisation banned in 2004 after he criticised the Prime Minister for the failure of economic reforms. Despite this, international human rights organisations like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch consider BCHR to be a primary source of reliable first hand human rights reporting in Bahrain.

2. Because of their prominent position in supporting the rights of Bahrainis to free expression and association, and for their international advocacy, prominent members of BCHR have been subjected to judicial harassment. Founder Abdulhadi Alkhawaja, who suffered severe torture, is currently appealing his life sentence for trying to overthrow the regime, despite no evidence of this. Current President Nabeel Rajab was sentenced to 3 years under Article 178 of the penal code which criminalises ‘unauthorised’ gatherings, even if intended to achieve a legitimate purpose. Since all public protest is now banned in Bahrain, this means that any public gathering of 5 or more people is now illegal.

3. BCHR’s vice-President Sayed Yousif al-Muhafda was imprisoned for almost 2 weeks on the charge of “illegal gathering”, but the interrogation was solely related to his speech delivered at the UN human rights council. Maryam Alkhawaja, acting President of BCHR, was told there is a warrant for her arrest in Bahrain when she was refused entry to Egypt, also because of her human rights work. She has also been told she is on a second list of people whose citizenship will be removed.

4. None of BCHR’s members have ever advocated violence. Many are people with formal human rights training who simply want Bahrainis to enjoy the rights to which they should under the International Covenants on Civil and Political and Economic and Social Rights, the Convention Against Torture, on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women and on the Rights of the Child. Bahrain has violated jus cogens norms of international law, especially the prohibition on torture. These violations are offences against the international community and law as a whole requiring states like the UK to hold Bahrain, especially as an ally, to account.

5. BCHR is a non-politically affiliated organisation which does not take any view as to what political solution is the right course for Bahrain. Our job is to support the rights of victims of abuse, regardless of background, gender, religion or race, to advocate for the observance of Bahrain’s human rights obligations and to use the only tool afforded by our small capacity—reporting and international scrutiny of violations.

Evidence

6. The current situation in Bahrain has deteriorated recently, with further repressive measures such as the complete banning of public protest and the removal of citizenship from 31 Bahrainis who have been prominent in their anti-government criticism. This is quite a good example of how Bahrain’s laws are essentially decided on an ad hoc basis by the regime.

7. The UK did not leave Bahrain with a solid, entrenched judicial system independent of the executive. This was one reason Bahrain’s opposition movement was calling for constitutional reform for such a long time, and the vast majority of Bahrainis would welcome the replacement of the constitution unanimously implemented by the King in 2002. Because this goal was frustrated for so long, the demands of the opposition became more radical.

8. The widening gulf in Bahraini society between the al-Khalifas and the rentier class who benefit financially from their rule, and poor and unemployed masses; can only be alleviated by holding the violators of human rights accountable for their crimes.

9. There has been speculation that the absence of any outlets of opposition, given the breakdown in the parliamentary process and dialogue between different parties, would eventually lead to more violence. There

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11 http://www.bahrainrights.org/en/node/5510
12 http://www.bahrainrights.org/en/node/5498
13 http://www.bahrainrights.org/en/node/5512
14 http://www.bahrainrights.org/en/node/5490
17 http://byshr.org/?p=1210
18 http://www.geneva-academy.ch/RULAC/international_treaties.php?id_state=21
19 http://scholarship.law.duke.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1016&context=lcp
20 Gengler, J, http://bahrainipolitics.blogspot.co.uk/2012/09/the-uprising-is-over-but-what-is-price.html
have been alleged bombings in Bahrain which have been blamed by the government on the opposition. These incidents should be investigated independently rather than being used as an excuse by the government to justify its repressive actions. Unfortunately, in the current climate, this is unlikely to happen.

10. Furthermore, there have been some signals that the government may be willing to intensify the crackdown. They have talked about prosecuting other opposition leaders, and have stopped people attending prayers at particular mosques because the worshippers might use the event to protest. This specific targeting of people because of their faith constitutes religious discrimination and significantly raises sectarian tensions in Bahrain.

11. In a more long-term view, numerous reports have chronicled the continuing dismal standard of human rights in Bahrain since the publication of the BICI report, from an IFEX mission report to Physicians for Human Rights as well as a number of follow-up reports from BCHR.

12. The UN’s Universal Periodic Review of Bahrain proposed many other recommendations for political reform in Bahrain, many of which were accepted by the regime. The UK must hold Bahrain to these promises, as well as to those made under the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry.

UK Government Engagement

13. The UK’s engagement in trying to resolve the Bahrain crisis in the last year has had no positive impact whatsoever. The UK Embassy in Bahrain has been silent, and its new Ambassador since September 2011 has been invisible. The FCO’s human rights report 2011 continued to peddle the idea that reforms were taking place, long after this was seen to be wishful thinking. It said “we are starting to see positive reforms in Jordan, and in Bahrain with its steps to implement the conclusions of its commission of inquiry into the violence we saw earlier in the year.” It also described the opposition movement in Bahrain as ‘sectarian’, despite the reactions of the Bahrain government targeting people because of their religious background.

14. The tone of the case study on Bahrain overall was incredibly naive and seemed to take it for granted that if Bahrain said it would set up a National Human Rights Commission tasked with promoting and enhancing human rights, then that would happen and could already be counted in a list of reforms. This is despite the fact that Bahrain is notorious for setting up human rights QUANGOs whose sole purpose seems to be to harass legitimate human rights activists at talks and UN events.

15. The UK government has quietly sought to arrange for mediation between the Bahrain regime and opposition, hoping to kickstart dialogue. These efforts have all failed. The UK Foreign Secretary says that all sides should “take steps to reduce tensions”, yet doesn’t acknowledge that this is incumbent upon the government, as they are the ones with all the power. Everybody seems clear about what the most important step to reduce tensions would be: freeing political prisoners in order for an inclusive dialogue to take place. Unfortunately, the UK is seriously lagging behind in arriving at this obvious conclusion; it has been an out-of-touch and ineffective bystander to the unfolding crisis.

16. Minister Alistair Burt MP has said that he encourages all sides to engage in an inclusive and constructive dialogue without preconditions, ignoring the fact that most of the principal opposition stakeholders are behind bars. There can’t be dialogue unless you have someone to have a dialogue with and it means that what is going on in Bahrain now is a monologue. The use by the FCO of phrases like ‘we are disappointed’ and ‘we are concerned’ give the observer of UK foreign policy the impression of institutional inertia. The UK uses similar excuses as the Bahraini regime to justify its reluctance to place Bahrain on the list of countries of concern, which the FAC’s own report criticised. It still seems to want to believe that some reforms have or will take place, despite the obvious resistance of the regime to anything but cosmetic institutional rearrangements.

17. The FCO has parroted the regime’s line that the reason there is no progress is because of street violence. The fact is that with most of the opposition leaders in jail, there is nobody to control the street protests and stop them becoming violent. Nevertheless, the majority of protests remain peaceful despite the escalation of government repression and the imprisonment of all major advocates of non-violent protest. Even the US has stated that political prisoners should be freed in order to facilitate dialogue, yet the UK is not even willing to go this far. This institutional lack of interest by the UK in a constructive engagement with the cause of the
Crisis in Bahrain extends to the UN Human Rights Council, where BCHR members have found the US delegation willing to talk and listen to us, while the UK delegation would rather avoid even giving us 10 minutes of their time to hear our concerns.

18. If the UK is truly concerned by the situation of Nabeel Rajab and other political prisoners, it is because we believe their "offences" were political, not criminal. If this is the case, the UK should hold Bahrain to its stated goal of implementing the recommendations of the BICI report, rather than releasing statements such as:

19. "We are concerned at the length of sentence handed down to Mr Nabeel Rajab for charges relating to comments made on social networking sites and for incitement of illegal rallies."34

20. The UK should say that it believes Mr Rajab and others are political prisoners, which Bahrain committed to release in line with Recommendation 1722 (h) of the BICI report.35

21. BCHR recommends that Bahrain be designated a country of concern. The UK should be able to criticise its allies’ performance in terms of its human rights commitments, especially when such criticism might help bring about reform and stability.

22. There are other things that designating Bahrain to be a country of concern would also improve. At the moment, UK security and PR companies do business with Bahrain without considering the human rights implications because it is a UK ally.

23. [***]

24. It does not help calm the situation in Bahrain, and it is arguably violating accepted standards of corporate social responsibility for UK and European companies to be assisting repressive governments to spy on and infringe the rights of legitimate human rights advocates. Designating Bahrain a country of concern would go some way to persuading companies not to do that kind of business with the Bahraini regime.

25. The UK should avoid sending security and police advisers to Bahrain, or encouraging ex-officers to go there as advisers. This continues a long tradition of the UK providing institutional support to a regime to maintain the status quo, rather than doing anything to encourage reform. Sir Charles Belgrave was the UK’s representative and adviser to the Emir from 1926-1957 and was eventually forced to leave after people came to see him as a hindrance to decolonisation and reform. John Yates, the former Metropolitan police assistant-commissioner is now in Bahrain and his presence appears to give a UK imprimatur for the police force to continue the same kind of repressive tactics they have used since the uprising began.36 Torture is continuing in Bahrain and if British officials have been involved in the investigations which led to this practice, they could be liable to prosecution for complicity in these offences. The FCO has also provided ‘human rights training’ to Bahraini officials,37 missing the point that the judicial system in Bahrain is institutionally corrupt. This kind of institutional support does nothing to assist the reform process and the UK should consider withdrawing it in future.

Conclusion

26. The UK has supported the rights of citizens of Bahrain in the past, when Bahrain held a referendum to decide on their status as an independent nation, free from the competing claims of the British Empire, and the Persian Empire which claimed the territory as its own. Bahrain was intended to be a state based on a constitution limiting the monarchy’s power, just as in the UK. But no sooner had Bahrain become independent than its constitution was abrogated and authoritarian, direct rule began. Bahrainis are still fighting for the same thing they wanted at independence, a state where the individual is protected by law from the unfettered power of its hereditary rulers.

27. Believing in human rights, democracy and the rule of law as the best form of government for Bahrain, we are convinced that change will come eventually. Free speech, freedom of association and all other rights in the ICCPR are necessary for this change to happen peacefully.

28. Protecting civil society, public discourse, a free press, impartial and transparent justice and independent health and educational institutions allow for dialogue and crisis resolution. These things are in the interest of the long term stability of the Gulf region. Continuing repression and violence can only lead to greater regional instability.

29. When it comes to torture, the UK is still in an uncomfortable position criticising Bahrain for torture, since it has been the UK who has repeatedly given human rights training to Bahraini officials, and because of the UK’s history of involvement, having supplied the notorious torturer Ian Henderson who was implicated in torturing M au Mau Kenyans before leading torture interrogations in Bahraini jails in the 90s. The CPS refused to prosecute him despite clear and widespread evidence.38

35 http://bahraininwatch.org/govinaction/1722h.html
36 http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/sep/06/bahrain-citizens-pay-price-for-britains-dealings
38 http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/2642535.stm
30. When Bahrain and the emirates were British protectorates in the 19th and 20th centuries, Britain controlled their foreign policy. It seems to many observers that the tables have effectively been turned and UK foreign policy on the Gulf region is to some extent moulded by the concerns of Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia obviously feels that it can blackmail the UK Parliament into ignoring the UK’s problematic relationship with the Gulf. Since it is clear that, whatever the Government’s response to the Committee’s report and the strength of the criticism it contains, the UK’s economic relationship with the Gulf states will not be altered, we hope the Committee will be forthright in their treatment of the continuing abuses of human rights, of which there is abundant evidence.

31. Being a good friend and ally is not all about being a ‘yes man’. Anachronistic rentier states like Bahrain and Saudi Arabia need to wake up to the changing nature of their world. Reform, however slow, is better than none at all, and any benefits of the limited constitutional experiment of 2002–2011 in Bahrain have been obliterated by the conflict in the past year. It is not in the interests of regional stability for the UK to keep telling Bahrain what it wants to hear, signing defensive agreements and selling teargas, surveillance equipment and birdshot, and the damage done to the UK’s international reputation as a result is unquantifiable. If the UK’s number one priority in the Gulf is stability, it is clear that the current policy towards the region is not working. As Christopher Davidson writes:

32. “Of the six [Gulf] monarchies, Bahrain’s has by far the bleakest future, with little hope that the ruling family can restore sufficient legitimacy to ever govern again without resorting to martial law and extensive repression.”

Recommendations

— Call for the immediate release of all political prisoners.
— Call for NGOs to be allowed to send observer missions and trial witnesses to testify on behalf of political prisoners.
— Cease arms sales until Bahrain displays a willingness to initiate reform.
— In particular, there should be an international moratorium on the lethal use of birdshot and tear gas against civilians if not a ban of sales of such weaponry to governments like Bahrain.
— The UK should sign on to joint statements at the UN Human Rights Council like the one made in June 2012 which was signed by many Western states.
— Designate Bahrain a country of concern so that companies are discouraged from providing military and security assistance to Bahrain which might aid the government in repressing dissent.
— Consider withdrawing institutional and security assistance from the Bahraini regime contingent on some meaningful initiation of dialogue and reform.

[***] = redacted by agreement with the author.

20 November 2013

Written evidence from Caroline Montagu

Summary

— This submission deals with developments in women’s rights since 1998 when I first started working with Saudi women.
— Today women’s rights, presence, employment and activities are centre stage for Saudi Arabia. But in 1998 it was hard to get a group of women together in any of the three major centres (Jeddah, Riyadh, EP); women did not meet others from across the country as travelling for women was harder; no organizations, networks or internet for women and their concerns existed, except an annual women’s charity conference.
— Today the situation is entirely different; there are nine million women and girls; nearly 60% of Saudi graduates are women; their employment is needed in the economy, their voice is heard and they are seen.
— I could put in a number of firsts, like a female higher education minister, women on the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce board, a woman chairman of the Jeddah Economic Forum, first newspaper deputy editor in chief and so on.
— Women have always been powerful in the Kingdom in the private arena; now they are taking their place in the public sphere.

39 http://www.gsn-online.com/%E2%80%98insulted%E2%80%99-saudi-arabia-has-little-to-fear-from-uk-parliament-probe
40 http://bahrainwatch.org/arms.html
41 Christopher M Davidson, After the Sheikhs: The coming Collapse of the Gulf Monarchies, p 232
42 http://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/politics/foreign_affairs/Switzerland_signs_joint_statement_on_Bahrain.html?cid=33005362
Many aspects of women's rights, however, still merit a fundamental upgrade: the mahram (guardian) system, the wakil (power of attorney), family law in many vital areas, divorce, child marriage, to name a few. Women are not treated equally with men, as under Islam they should be.

Traditional accretions in Saudi society have obscured Islam's message of equality of the sexes and damaged women's position in society.

1. Women's rights and reform move forward slowly but inexorably. Saudi Arabia works on consensus, though reform of women's rights probably does not have a majority national mandate. It can never be stressed enough that Saudi Arabia is a conservative Muslim country; Islam dictates people's lives, beliefs and activities. It is a rigorous Hanbali interpretation of Islam, not changed much since the eighteenth century of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab.

2. Reform for women is top down, not a grass roots movement. It started with the government. King Abdullah has been backing reform for women since he was crown prince and his daughter Princess Adilah has been ably promoting women's rights, especially on domestic violence, cancer charities and the rights of women in business. King Abdullah's speech of September 2011 opened the Majlis al-Shura and the municipal elections to women. Earlier speeches of the King's stated women should be at the centre of the economy and he would not approve the marginalization of women.

3. At least 60%, if not 70%, of Saudi Arabia is conservative and does not want change. The power of, and adherence to, Islam cannot be overestimated. For every educated liberal woman there are at least two similarly educated conservative women. According to Prince Turki al-Faisal in a Washington speech in early November 2012 the fight is not between the educated and the non-educated in Saudi Arabia; it is between the liberals and the conservatives.

4. Saudi Arabia has representation, not democracy; in theory and traditionally, anyone with a problem can go to the majlis (council) of the governor of their region or to his palace; people can go to their tribal leaders. There are many regional organizations: majalis (councils), regional chapters of trade associations, regional charities, self-help cooperatives exist in the towns and cities. However, the Shia 2 million, mainly in the Eastern Province, are underrepresented and discriminated against.

5. Civil society in Saudi Arabia emerges through such organizations and provides an arena between government and people. The domestic charitable sector, which is large, spread across the country and diverse, provides one of the best arenas of civil society. The not-for-profit organizations, like Effat University or Dar al-Hekmah University or the Chambers of Commerce, are tools of civil society that need supporting and recognizing.

6. Driving is the iconic issue; women do not drive in the towns but they drive in the countryside; they have to—teachers, nurses have to get to their work places and their clients, it is accepted and they are not stopped. However, since men are wearing ghutras which stop them seeing sideways and women are wearing hijab or niqab, the danger of men and women driving is not so much possible seduction as increases in accidents—were traffic in Jeddah and Riyadh not almost permanently gridlocked.

7. ID cards are now issued for girls from the age of 16 and are mandatory for entrance to further education. The national ID card gives access to a bank account, which gives women financial independence. Since April 2010 women can travel in the GCC with a Saudi Arabian ID card and without a mahram, though with his approval. The King has many, many businesswomen who are constantly travelling, as business has been one of the preferred professions for women.

8. Shura and municipal elections: King Abdullah's speech of September 2011 put women at the centre of the country's development, giving women the right to run and vote in the municipal elections and appointing 35 women to the majlis al-Shura. Women in the shura will lead to full participation of women in society; they will have a responsibility to identify and reject laws and regulations that are incompatible with today's world, and will use it for women's needs and issues: pensions, equal pay, maternity leave, on-site nurseries, reasonable working hours and also for the Saudi women who are oppressed and underprivileged. It will allow women to explore and improve the status of women in society but they must be involved in all twelve committees: human rights, education, culture and information, health and social affairs, urban services and public utilities, foreign affairs, security, the economy, industry and finance, not the soft ones. There are many family law legal issues for women that need resolving, including abuse of all sorts, domestic violence, instant divorce, child marriage and inheritance.

9. Judiciary: Reform in the judicial system is very well overdue. From 2012 women lawyers can practice in the courts if they have 3 years’ experience. Male and female lawyers have the same rights and obligations and will face the same penalties for malpractice. However, the question is whether the judges, who hold total authority, will permit it. Some judges have shown antagonism to women in their courts, but the government is likely to come down on such behaviour. There are many family law legal issues for women that need resolving, including abuse of all sorts, domestic violence, instant divorce, child marriage and inheritance.

10. The Shari'ah certainly needs for codification, especially in family law. Precedent does not exist in shari'ah law thus leading to different judgments for the same offence and giving shari'ah judges far too much latitude. For instance in June 2012, when women were driving, Manal al-Sharif in the EP was given a prison
recommendations:

the importance of islam to saudi arabia cannot be over stressed. saudi arabia is a deeply religious and
muslim country; islam guides people's lives, thoughts, hopes and behaviour. saudi arabia does not want to be
a secular state and women do not want to be secular. women are muslims and they behave as such. the
difficulty for men and women is to be modern and a good muslim, and to adjust their islam to the present time.
People from the west need to understand the circuitous nature of Saudi change; the country often seems to behave in a through the looking glass fashion; small measures that look insignificant create major changes, like ID cards. Major issues, like domestic violence or cousin marriage, first appear in a newspaper, then nothing is said except public chat, and then months later a regulation is passed and, lo and behold, every town has to have a woman’s refuge.

The west could have more respect for how far Saudi Arabia has come in the last 30 years with more encouragement for what they are doing, more attempt to understand the Saudi way of doing things, more tolerance for things not going according to western principles.

Implementation of shari’ah needs to change in Saudi Arabia and no excuse exists for imprisonment of people without trial. Western activists regard Saudi Arabia with great suspicion on human rights, but look in India what the higher castes do to the dalits.

CV

CAROLINE MONTAGU, MA (Cantab), MA (London), has been working on the Middle East for over 30 years, principally on Saudi Arabia. She now writes on social and civil reform and women’s issues in the Kingdom, though previously writing on business and the economy. She has also written on the GCC states, Palestine and Afghanistan.

Posts include: Trustee, Saudi British Society, member of the Saudi British Business Council and the ABCC Chairman’s Consultative Committee on the Middle East, honorary member of the Middle East Association, senior adviser Women in Business International, and Research Associate, SOAS’ London Middle East Institute.

21 November 2012

Written evidence from The Foreign and Commonwealth Office

WHY THE GULF MATTERS

1. The Gulf has mattered to the UK for generations. Founded on mutual interests of trade, commerce and security, our relationships there are amongst our most enduring in the world. The Gulf is critical to our foreign policy objectives of security, prosperity and support for UK nationals overseas.

2. While we have many common interests, there are differences between us. The essence of any state to state relationship is respect for each other’s cultures and an ability to deal with difference honestly and frankly. We do not aim to use our relationships with other states to demand that they mirror us. But we do engage in frank discussion, defending and promoting our own values at all times, and encouraging other governments towards policies we believe to have merit and relevance to them. When we disagree with our partners in the Gulf on human rights-related issues, we make our concerns clear to each other. As the Prime Minister said during his visit to the Gulf on 5–7 November “there’s nothing off-limits in any of these relationships, and we discuss human rights, we discuss all of these concerns”.

3. It is in our fundamental national interest to see stable and open societies emerge across the Middle East over time. The Arab Spring has confirmed that long-term stability requires legitimacy derived from citizen participation and consent. However it is for each country in the region to develop a model that reflects its own unique historical and social context and gives every citizen a stake in the political and economic life of their countries. It is not for us to dictate change in any country in the region.

4. The UK has long-standing and close partnerships with all the Gulf states. Our cooperation is wide-ranging and reflects the strategic importance of the region, including commerce, defence, energy security and counter-terrorism interests:

Political influence in the wider region

The Gulf states are increasingly influential on the world stage, individually and collectively through the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). They have an important role in the wider Middle East, and through the GCC and Arab League have been at the forefront of the international response to events in Libya and Syria. Their support for sanctions on Iran is particularly vital. The GCC initiative delivered the transition process in Yemen. Gulf states provide political and economic support to Afghanistan, as well as basing support to the UK and other ISAF members. The UAE have taken the political lead towards tackling piracy in the region, as well as towards Somalia. Individual states also play an important mediation role. For example, Qatar sponsored the Darfur peace talks, culminating in the signing of the Doha Document for Peace in Darfur. As home of Islam’s Two Holy Mosques, Saudi Arabia has enormous global religious influence;

A secure and affordable energy supply

Around one third of global oil supply originates in the Gulf. Although the UK imports very little directly from the region, the Gulf is still of vital importance to the stability of global supply and the market price at which our energy is consumed. UK gas imports from the Gulf have increased dramatically over recent years
with around 20% of domestic consumption coming from the region last year. The strategic importance of the Gulf’s energy producers is only likely to grow as global demand increases over the coming decades. This will put further pressure on export routes, particularly the Strait of Hormuz, through which around 35% of seaborne traded oil passes;

Counter-terrorism

The Gulf states, and Saudi Arabia in particular, are key partners for the UK in the fight against terrorism, especially countering the threat from Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE are all founding members of the Global Counter-Terrorism Forum (GCTF). The UK and UAE co-chair the GCTF’s Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) working group, and are collaborating on the linked CVE Centre of Excellence, to be launched in Abu Dhabi in December;

Counter-proliferation

The Gulf states are also important partners for the UK’s counter-proliferation efforts, including combating nuclear proliferation in Iran;

Prosperity

The Gulf economies are developing rapidly, creating significant opportunities for investment in both directions. With an overall GDP of over $1.3 trillion, they constitute the UK’s seventh largest export market, larger than India, Russia and Mexico combined. Our bilateral trade with the Gulf has increased by 39% over the last two years from £21.5bn to £29.8bn of which £17.5 billion was exports of goods and services. In addition, the Gulf states are home to approximately 27% of the world’s sovereign wealth. Their investments in the UK totalled around £2.25bn in 2011. Past investments have traditionally focussed on real estate, but there is increasing interest in UK infrastructure, including for example the recent $1.5bn deal for the Dubai-owned DP World to develop the London Gateway project;

Consular/Immigration

The Gulf is home to the UK’s largest expatriate population in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, with over 160,000 British nationals based there and many more visiting each year. 23,000 British Pilgrims took part in this year’s Hajj alone. In 2011, over 250,000 Gulf nationals visited the UK.

5. We continue to expand our areas of cooperation. For example, we signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the UAE on development issues in March 2012. We encourage students from the GCC to study in the UK and are developing educational and cultural links with several Gulf states.

The Gulf Initiative

6. In recognition of the strategic importance of our relations with the Gulf states, the Foreign Secretary launched the Gulf Initiative in summer 2010 to reinvigorate the UK’s engagement and reverse neglect of the UK’s relationships in the region in previous years. The objective was to re-establish the United Kingdom as a strategic partner and expand our cooperation with the Gulf states.

7. Since then there have been over 160 outward ministerial visits to the region and more than 100 inward visits from senior Gulf interlocutors. Highlights have included State Visits by HM The Queen in November 2010 to Oman and the UAE, and the inward State Visit by HH The Emir of Qatar in October 2010, as well as the forthcoming inward State Visit by HH The Amir of Kuwait in November 2012. The Prime Minister has visited the region on four occasions. The Foreign Secretary regularly meets his GCC counterparts, and they recently agreed to establish a more formal mechanism for taking forward UK-GCC partnership.

8. In addition, we have created working groups such as the UK-UAE Task Force, launched after the Prime Minister’s visit in June 2010, the UK-Oman Joint Working Group, UK-Kuwait Joint Steering Group and a UK-Bahrain Joint Working Group. The Gulf states have welcomed this approach, noting and encouraging our increased diplomatic engagement across the region and often at the most senior levels.

The UK’s foreign policy priorities in its relations with Saudi Arabia and how effectively the Government balances the UK’s interests in defence, commerce, energy security, counter-terrorism, and human rights

9. The UK and Saudi Arabia have a long history of friendship and co-operation. Saudi Arabia is an influential voice in the region and has played a key role in the Middle East Peace Process, Yemen and now Syria. It is the only Arab country to be represented amongst the G20. As the home of Islam’s Two Holy Mosques it has enormous global religious influence.

10. Saudi Arabia has the world’s second largest proven oil reserves, uniquely maintaining significant spare oil production capacity. It has faced its own very serious terrorist threat. We have strong cooperation on counter-terrorism which is essential to the interests of both countries. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia is a fast-developing economy, of the scale of Turkey or Brazil, with significant trade and investment links to the UK.
11. As with all other countries, we raise our concerns about human rights wherever they arise, at all levels in our relationship and in all relevant areas.

**Defence**

12. The UK-Saudi defence relationship is rooted in shared interests in ensuring regional security and stability for our allies. The relationship underpins the bilateral relationship through a variety of activities involving the Saudi Ministry of Defence, the Saudi Arabian National Guard (SANG) and the Ministry of the Interior. For example, the UK maintains a small British Military Mission (BMM) of British Army personnel on seconded service that trains and advises the Special Security Brigade of the SANG.

13. Defence engagement has strengthened and deepened the UK-Saudi bilateral relationship and is the result of decades of partnership between UK Armed Forces and British defence companies with the Kingdom. In 2007, the Saudi Arabian Government announced an agreement to purchase 72 Typhoon aircraft. So far, the RSAF has taken delivery of 24 Typhoon aircraft. In addition to the Government-to-Government agreements, UK industry has supplied equipment direct to the Saudi Armed Forces, including communications, vehicles and homeland security equipment. These programmes represent a significant success story for UK industry, sustaining many thousands of jobs and billions of pounds of export orders.

**Trade and Investment**

15. Saudi Arabia is the UK’s largest market in the Middle East and 18th globally, with UK exports of goods and services valued at £68bn in 2011 (around 20% of UK trade in the region). We estimate that there are over 6,000 UK companies actively exporting to Saudi Arabia. In 2011, UK exports of goods were valued at £3.25bn, a 3% increase on 2010. Exports are rising overall, although UK exports of services saw a decrease from £3.1bn in 2010 to £2.76bn in 2011.

16. The UK is the second largest cumulative foreign investor in Saudi Arabia, after the US, with approximately 200 UK/Saudi joint ventures. UK companies are active in infrastructure, aviation and petrochemicals, including the diversification of the petrochemical industry. Major companies present in the market include BAES, Rolls Royce, Shell, HSBC, Harvey Nichols and Tate & Lyle. The Saudi Arabian Government is focussing a large part of its spending plans on developing social infrastructure and an ambitious industrial diversification strategy, including the creation of new Economic Cities and industrial clusters. This investment has created opportunities for high-value projects in a range of sectors; transportation infrastructure, healthcare, waste and water, and petrochemicals.

**Counter-Terrorism**

17. Saudi Arabia is our key operational partner on CT in the region and a strategic partner in our global efforts. As Custodian of the two holiest places in Islam, HM King Abdullah, along with the Saudi religious authorities, have an important role to play in countering the violent Salafi-Jihadism that Al Qaeda espouses. The Saudi authorities have been unequivocal in condemning AQ terrorism.

18. Our regional focus is on disrupting and degrading AQAP based in Yemen. Saudi Arabia is a key ally for the Yemeni Government in its struggle against AQAP, making Yemen a safer country for its citizens and reducing the threat to the UK and our allies. British-Saudi collaboration has resulted in the foiling of AQAP terrorist attacks, which would have caused substantial destruction and loss of life, including the provision of information to protect British interests. An example of this cooperation was the discovery at East Midlands airport of a ‘printer bomb’ onboard a US bound flight in October 2010. The initial alert came from the Saudi authorities, who have been quick to provide information to protect British interests on many other occasions.

19. Our counter-terrorism partnership in recent years has also allowed us to promote our values and help improve human rights in Saudi Arabia. For example, giving the Saudi authorities greater forensic expertise will give them greater capability for evidence-based prosecutions, which will be admissible in court. While we believe we have made some progress in advancing our values through counter-terrorism cooperation, NGOs, such as Amnesty International, have criticised Saudi counter-terrorism efforts as being the cause of human rights violations. They allege the Saudi authorities have employed the counter-terrorism law for the detention of political opponents, torture, solitary confinement, and excessive pre-charge and pre-trial detention. The British Embassy in Riyadh has registered our concerns about arbitrary detentions with the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Justice, and has been permitted to attend a counter-terrorism trial in the future. It is
important that the Saudi authorities take the necessary action to instil confidence within Saudi society and internationally that the Saudi judicial process is a humane one. However we continue to believe that the UK’s ability to influence reform and best practice will be most effective if we are cooperating on counter-terrorism.

**Energy Security**

20. The UK has a strong, historical energy relationship with Saudi Arabia. A formal Ministerial UK-Saudi Energy Dialogue takes place annually and was last held in Riyadh in May 2012. In recent years British-Saudi joint efforts have led the way in establishing the International Energy Forum, the leading organisation for transparency in energy markets and consumer-producer dialogue, whose 89 member countries now represent around 90% of global oil and gas production and consumption.

21. Saudi Arabia has a vital role in securing the reliable and affordable energy supply that is needed to underpin global economic recovery. It is the world’s largest oil exporter and is the only country where capacity to extract and export oil exceeds to a meaningful degree the level at which it chooses to do so. This spare capacity gives it the unique ability to provide additional market supply to mitigate disruption elsewhere. This was graphically illustrated in 2011 when Saudi Arabia was able to pump an additional million barrels per day to compensate for the reduction in global supply caused by the conflict in Libya, thereby helping to ensure that the market remained relatively stable during a period of reduced supply and heightened tension in a key oil producing region.

**Education**

22. Saudi Arabia faces two major challenges in education and training: increasing the number of places at all levels of education in response to the high birth rate, and the creation of an indigenous work force equipped with the necessary skills to meet the requirements of the modern global economy. This situation presents an opportunity for partnership and the promotion of British values. There are around 22,000 Saudi students in the UK, nearly one third of whom are women and many of whom are funded by the King Abdullah scholarship programme. Not only do they receive an excellent education here, but they also develop a better understanding of the UK and our values.

**Healthcare**

23. The Saudi Arabian Ministry of Health has allocated $100bn additional spending to a five-year healthcare development programme, with the intention of drawing on international best practice to help provide top class, universal healthcare to its population. The UK is well-positioned to support the Ministry, drawing on NHS and private sector expertise. In April 2011 the Department of Health and the Ministry of Health signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to enhance cooperation. Since then, UKTI and the Department of Health have organised a series of commercial, clinical and official exchanges to identify areas for cooperation and strengthen bilateral links. These include a scheme to train Saudi postgraduate medical trainees in the UK and establishing clinical partnerships between UK and Saudi institutions.

**Human Rights**

24. Saudi Arabia has a poor human rights record, and as such, is designated an FCO Country of Concern. The human rights position in Saudi Arabia reflects widely-held conservative social values. Many of our human rights concerns regard punishments prescribed by Islamic Sharia law. There are indications that the Saudi Government is slowly encouraging Saudi society to open up. The Interfaith Initiative is a good example of this, but many Saudis are not supportive. We must, therefore, work with those in Saudi society who are advocating reform, in order to build support for full application of human rights standards. The broad range of interests that the UK and Saudi Arabia share and the importance of our partnership to the wider MENA region enable us to engage across the full range of issues. We raise our concerns with Saudi Arabia, bilaterally and through multilateral institutions, such as the EU and UN. Some of our main concerns are.

Women’s Rights:

Women’s rights in Saudi Arabia are principally affected by the Guardianship system, under which women’s freedom to participate in society is greatly restricted. The views of Saudi women on their rights are mixed, particularly on the pace of reform. Nevertheless, reform is underway. King Abdullah announced last year that more women would be appointed to the Shura Council (Parliament) in 2013, and there will be female participation in the 2015 municipal elections, as candidates and as voters, for the first time. At the London 2012 Olympics female Saudi athletes competed for the first time. Women’s employment opportunities are increasing and Saudi women can now travel freely within the Gulf Cooperation Council area without the need to be accompanied by a male guardian. However, gender segregation is still commonplace and many rights, such as the right to drive, have yet to be realised. Women’s rights will continue to be an area of focus in our human rights work in Saudi Arabia.
The Death Penalty

The UK Government opposes the death penalty in all circumstances. There was a sharp increase in the number of executions in Saudi Arabia to 77 in 2011 from 27 in 2010. Over the past five years, there has been a reduction in overall numbers of executions. Saudi Arabia is one of only four countries in the world to carry out public executions by beheading. We welcome the King Abdullah has shown on this issue, encouraging families to show clemency by waiving their private right under Sharia Law to have their relative’s killer executed.

Torture

Torture is unacceptable in all circumstances. The United Kingdom attaches great importance to preventing torture and tackling impunity for those who use it. We have heard allegations of torture from NGOs and from some individuals held in detention in Saudi Arabia, but these are difficult to verify. Some of these allegations involve the extracting of “confessions” using torture, which are then used as evidence at trial. The Saudi Justice Minister has publicly stated that any accusations relating to torture would be fully investigated. Transparent and accountable systems of care for those in detention are central to addressing these allegations. The UK Government is establishing a method of engagement with the Saudi Ministry of Justice to support its justice sector reform programme. To date, the Saudi Government has invested at least £1.2bn on new court houses, technology, and judicial training, with specialist courts envisaged in family, commercial and labour law. The Saudi Appeal Court and new Supreme Court have also increased access to justice.

25. The full range of concerns and our actions are set out in the FCO Annual Human Rights Report 2011 and quarterly updates for 2012. We discuss human rights frankly and in detail with the Saudi authorities at all levels, and in all areas of cooperation. Ministers raised a range of human rights concerns with the Saudi Minister of Justice in April 2012 when he visited the UK, as did Alistair Burt, FCO Minister for the Middle East, when he visited Riyadh in May 2012.

Saudi Arabia as a foreign policy partner for the UK, particularly with regard to Iran and Syria and as members of international and regional organisations

26. Saudi Arabia and the UK work together on many of the challenges facing the Middle East, particularly Syria, Iran and Yemen. The UK shares Saudi Arabia’s concern about the violence in Syria and welcomes Saudi Arabia’s continuing support for a united response by the UN Security Council. We have a regular dialogue about Iran and share many concerns about the Iranian nuclear programme and Iranian interference in the region. The UK and Saudi Arabia are co-chairs of the Friends of Yemen initiative, conceived to co-ordinate international support for Yemeni efforts to stabilise and regenerate the country. We also co-chair the Transition Fund under the Deauville Partnership.

27. Saudi Arabia provides substantial amounts of financial support to a number of regional causes. The International Monetary Fund records Saudi Arabia as having pledged $17.9bn since the Arab Spring began to countries most affected by unrest. In addition to this, Saudi Arabia provides money for the Occupied Territories through international organisations, such as $5m to the UN Relief and Workers Agency in June 2012.

The implications of the Arab Spring for UK foreign policy in its relations with Saudi Arabia

28. Aspirations for a greater stake in society were limited in Saudi Arabia in the early days of the Arab Spring. Small-scale protests occurred in a number of locations across the country in early 2011, though primarily centred on some Shia communities in Eastern Province. In March 2011, the Government responded by introducing a country-wide economic package worth $137bn to boost public spending on infrastructure, housing, unemployment and public sector salaries.

29. Following the arrest and wounding of Shia Sheikh, Nimr Al Nimr, on 8 July in the Qatif region a wave of protests and violent clashes began between demonstrators and security forces resulting in five fatalities (four civilians, one police officer) and injuries on both sides. Since last October, fourteen demonstrators and three security personnel have been killed in the Eastern Province. The number of deaths and injuries so far has raised questions as to whether or not the use of force was deployed in accordance with international standards. We have a number of human rights concerns relating to these demonstrations, including restrictions on freedom of expression and freedom of peaceful assembly, and the right to a fair trial that meets international standards of justice—it is still taking too long to bring those arrested to trial. We raise these concerns with the Saudi authorities.

30. Despite the turbulence in the region and unrest within Saudi Arabia, the UK’s relationship with Saudi Arabia remains strong, as demonstrated by the Prime Minister’s recent visit to Saudi Arabia. We continue to work closely with the Saudis on regional issues, particularly Syria and Yemen.

How the UK can encourage democratic and liberalising reforms in Saudi Arabia, including its power to effect improvements

31. We have been clear that in Saudi Arabia, as elsewhere in the region, it is not for Britain to dictate the pace or nature of any reform. However, we support the Saudi Government’s gradual steps towards long-term...
reform, which gives citizens, particularly young people and women, a greater stake and interest in the political and economic life of their country. We encourage these reforms through regular official and ministerial contacts particularly ministerial visits; developing stronger links in a wide range of sectors, for example, strengthening parliamentary relations through the forthcoming visit to the UK of the Chairman of the Shura Council at the invitation of the Speakers of both Houses; encouraging cooperation in the justice sector, which allows for discussion on human rights issues; and outreach to Saudi society, for example the PM's recent visit to Saudi Arabia during which he met female law students at the Dar Al Hekma college in Jeddah to hear their views on the aspirations of Saudi women.

The UK's foreign policy priorities in its relations with Bahrain and how effectively the Government balances the UK's interests in defence, commerce, energy security, counter-terrorism, and human rights

32. A group of 33 islands with a total area and population size the same as Merseyside, Bahrain is a Constitutional Monarchy headed by King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa. The Al Khalifa royal family has ruled Bahrain since 1783. The population is approximately 1.2 million, half of which is made up of expatriates (a majority of whom originate from sub-continent Asia) who make up at least 70% of the workforce. There are no confirmed figures on the sectarian make-up of the Bahraini population and estimates vary, but the general consensus puts the Shia/Sunni split at about two-thirds majority Shia.

33. The UK and Bahrain share deep historical ties dating back over 200 years. In 1820 Bahrain became a British protectorate, gaining independence in 1971. The UK's long-term engagement in defence, trade and investment, and counter-terrorism has enabled us to support human rights and reform in Bahrain.

TRADE AND INVESTMENT

34. Bahrain has the smallest but most open economy in the Gulf. Around 95 British companies have branches there. UK exports of goods to Bahrain have increased by 35% to £163m so far this year, and in 2011 the UK exported £293m of services. After a flat 2011, UK imports from Bahrain have increased this year to £195m, largely in petroleum-related products. Future opportunities for British businesses are expected to result from Bahrain's re-development plans, which include using the $10bn GCC development fund.

DEFENCE

35. Bahrain is critical to the protection of Gulf shipping lanes (through which 17 million barrels of oil are shipped per day) and global energy supplies. It is home to the UK Maritime Component Command (UKMCC), for which Bahrain provides onshore basing, giving the Royal Navy the ability to operate not only in the Gulf but well beyond to the Red Sea, Gulf of Aden and North West Indian Ocean. Bahrain also provides vital basing for four UK mine-hunters in Al-Mina port, stationed in the Gulf to keep the Strait of Hormuz clear and contributes approximately 100 personnel in support of US forces in ISAF in Afghanistan.

36. The UK routinely hosts Bahraini-funded students at Sandhurst, Cranwell and Dartmouth and provides in-country UK Officer Training Programmes to the same high standards received by UK armed forces, which helps ensure professionally-trained armed forces and raises awareness of human rights. The Government firmly believes that continued engagement provides the opportunity to support reform within the Bahraini military and beyond.

Defence sales

37. The Government considers export licence applications for all defence equipment carefully against the Consolidated EU and National Arms Export Licensing Criteria. Shortly after the start of the Arab Spring, the Government reviewed all existing export licences for military and dual-use equipment for all countries in the Middle East, and in the case of Bahrain recommended revoking 23 individual export licences and removing the country from 18 open licences. The licences revoked covered equipment which could be used for riot control destined for end users including the Police, Ministry of Interior, the Bahrain National Guard and the Bahrain Defence Force (BDF). Licences which were not revoked included goods such as aircraft components for the BDF.

Bahrain as a foreign policy partner for the UK, particularly with regard to Iran and Syria and as members of international and regional organisations

38. We regularly discuss Iran with Bahrain, both at ministerial and official level. Bahrain shares our concerns about Iran's nuclear programme and Iranian interference across the region, and has been a partner in implementing sanctions against the Iranian regime.

39. Bahrain co-sponsored the 3 August UN General Assembly resolution on Syria, which voted overwhelmingly to demand that the Syrian regime ended violence and for all parties to implement the UN and Arab League's political transition plan.
The implications of the Arab Spring for U.K. foreign policy in its relations with Bahrain

40. From 14 February 2011 until martial law and a State of Emergency were imposed by HM King Hamad in mid-March 2011, demonstrations demanding socio-economic and political reform took place in Bahrain. More than 35 people were killed, thousands arrested and many lost their jobs. Following a request from the Bahraini Government, Gulf Co-operation Council troops and police entered Bahrain on 14 March under operation ‘Peninsula Shield’ to safeguard installations and infrastructure points. In response to international condemnation and pressure, the State of Emergency was lifted in June. A ‘National Dialogue’ was launched in July 2011 to bring together various segments of Bahraini society to discuss areas of reform in political, social, economic and human rights issues. FCO Minister for the Middle East Alistair Burt said on 29 July 2011 ‘We welcome this month’s National Dialogue which has been a first step as the Bahraini people seek to overcome Bahrain’s challenges. Its long-term success, however, will depend on how the government and parliament takes forward its recommendations. Effective implementation of those recommendations that were agreed, with the active participation of Bahrain’s communities, will be vital in ensuring reconciliation, stability and prosperity. So too will be further genuine reform which addresses the broader issues which have been raised by the Bahraini people. Ensuring an ongoing and inclusive process will be crucial and we continue to urge all parties to remain engaged.’

41. King Hamad commissioned an independent investigation to look into human rights abuses that took place during the events of February and March, known as the Bahrain Independent Commission Inquiry (BICI). This was the first time that any government in the region had set up an international investigation into allegations of state abuse. The BICI reported its findings on 23 November 2011. The Commission found the authorities to be severely at fault. In particular, it said the use of torture and excessive force was “systemic and systematic”. King Hamad promised to implement reforms based on the Commission’s recommendations and hold to account those responsible for committing human rights abuses. The BICI found no evidence that GCC Peninsula Shield forces had been involved in human rights abuses.

42. A National Commission was established to advise the Government of Bahrain on implementation of the BICI recommendations; when that closed in March 2012 a ‘BICI Follow Up Unit’ was set up under the patronage of the Justice Minister to oversee implementation of reforms. Many reforms based on the outcomes of the National Dialogue and BICI have been introduced over the last 12 months, most notably:

- constitutional amendments that give the Council of Representatives increased authority and strengthened their supervisory role over the work of the Cabinet;
- a Special Investigations Unit has been established to determine the accountability of those who committed unlawful or negligent acts resulting in the deaths, torture or mistreatment of civilians;
- an independent Ombudsman in the Ministry of the Interior has been established to receive complaints and grievances and to oversee and conduct investigations;
- new Police Code of Conduct introduced based on international best practice;
- audio-visual recording equipment has been installed in prison and detention centres;
- all charges relating to freedom of expression have been dropped;
- convictions and sentences that were handed out by a Special Military Tribunal have been/will be reviewed in civilian courts; and
- a Victims Compensation Fund has paid out $2.6m to victims and their families (at time of submission).

43. While much has been achieved, we have made clear to the Bahraini authorities that much remains to be done including to implement the BICI recommendations in full. For example:

- more steps should be taken to relax censorship and allow the opposition greater access to media outlets in country;
- investigations by the Special Investigations Unit have only resulted in the conviction of three police officers so far, the highest at Lieutenant Colonel level, and accountability remains a contentious issue;
- the rebuilding of Shia mosques destroyed during the unrest is still very much work in progress;
- despite the announcement of the recruitment of 1000 community police officers from mixed backgrounds, there remains a lack of integration and mixed sect recruitment across the security forces in Bahrain.

44. In May 2012, Bahrain underwent its second Universal Periodic Review in the UN Human Rights Council. It accepted 145 recommendations in full, and 13 partially, and voluntarily undertook to produce an interim report to update the Council on progress made before the next review in four years’ time.

45. We still have concerns about human rights violations not covered by the BICI and will continue to press the Government to fulfil its commitment of full implementation of reforms based on the Commission’s recommendations. This is one of the reasons is why Bahrain is considered under the FCO’s newly-created quarterly review system on human rights indicating the level we feel appropriate given our concerns and in view of the current trend.
How the UK can encourage democratic and liberalising reforms in Bahrain, including its power to effect improvements

46. As a friend and ally, the UK has and will continue to support Bahrain’s steps towards reform. From the outset of protests, we made clear our concerns to the Government about the heavy-handed treatment of protestors. We supported the establishment of the BICI, and welcomed the King’s agreement to implement all its recommendations in full. We have pressed all sides to engage and met frequently with major opposition groups such as Al Wefaq, while urging the Government to uphold its commitments and obligations.

47. The unrest saw the increased politicisation of the Sunni community, existing political societies re-energised and the emergence of splinter groups across the political spectrum. With more political actors on the scene, engaging in an inclusive and constructive dialogue is proving more difficult than ever before. There are also certain extremist groups, such as the 14 February Youth Coalition, who are continuing with a strategy of violence and disruption, and some within Government who are opposed to further reform; this severely undermines attempts for reconciliation. The increase in violent protests, particularly since April of this year, is further exacerbating the divisions in society and making progress on political dialogue more difficult. On 13 June two bomb-making factories were discovered by the Bahraini authorities. According to them, the nature of the explosives found indicated they were ready for use in co-ordinated and simultaneous attacks that would have resulted in mass casualties and damage. On 5 November five improvised explosive devices were planted, which resulted in the death of two civilians and seriously injured another.

48. Further to the human rights reforms agreed under the BICI and UPR discussions, we have made clear that there needs to be dialogue on reform between the Government and all political societies in Bahrain, including representatives from all community groups. The solution must be agreed by Bahrainis and for all Bahrainis, and we encourage and press all parties to begin a dialogue process without preconditions. The UK continues to offer to share our experience in negotiations with the Government and parties of Bahrain.

49. Throughout 2012 we have hosted a number of high-level delegations including HM The King, HRH The Crown Prince, and the Ministers for Justice, Human Rights and the Interior. Continuous high-level engagement allows us to have frank and honest conversations. We frequently lobby the Bahraini Government on issues that concern us, particularly human rights. Bahrain has taken the first steps on a long-term process of reform and the Government assures us it has made efforts to address mistakes made and to try guarantee they are never repeated. But much more remains to be done. We strongly urge the Bahraini Government to continue on this path of reform to achieve the long-term stability which is in the interest of all the Bahraini people.

50. The difficult relationship between Bahrain and Iran is underpinned by suspicion and Bahraini claims of Iranian interference in their domestic affairs through links with the Bahraini Shia community. Since the Arab Spring began, the Government of Bahrain has claimed that Iran is providing support to dissident groups and promoting violence. It has been difficult to substantiate these claims and we note that the BICI report on the events of spring 2011 found no evidence to support them. However, we are concerned that Iran and other foreign actors have moved from exploiting the political and propaganda opportunities offered by continuing unrest in Bahrain to offering more direct support to some radical Bahraini Shia opposition elements which are pursuing increasingly violent tactics.

The long-term trends and scenarios in the region for which the FCO should prepare, and the extent to which it is doing so

51. Through MENA Research Analysts (MENARG) and FCO Policy Unit, the FCO regularly engages in horizon-scanning and trend analyses to inform the UK’s political and economic work in the region. As outlined in the FCO’s 2011 report to the Foreign Affairs Committee, ‘British Foreign Policy and the Arab Spring: The Transition to Democracy’ such policy work led to the creation of the UK’s Arab Human Development initiative before the Arab Spring. This has subsequently been renamed the Arab Partnership and supports projects that promote a more open societies and economies in the Middle East.

52. The Gulf states are not homogeneous: the precise combination of challenges for each state, the urgency with which action is needed, and the strategies adopted to deal with them vary considerably. Countries in the Gulf, as elsewhere in the world, will need to find ways to adapt to the changing demands of their people. As the Prime Minister said during his recent Gulf visit “We should recognise that all countries are different, that they have different pathways, different histories, different cultures, and we should recognise in many of our strong Gulf partners... you have the growth of what I call the building blocks of open societies and democracies.”

53. Since the beginning of 2011, all the Gulf states have increased their spending on measures such as food and fuel subsidies, public sector wages and investments in housing and infrastructure. For many Gulf states, this will be unsustainable in the longer-term. Gulf states will face the common challenge of maintaining financial discipline in the face of rising public sector spending. Further challenges will include the need to continue diversifying their economies and reducing dependence on hydrocarbon revenues and vulnerability to energy price fluctuations. In addition, the Gulf states need to create productive employment opportunities, in particular in the private sector, for increasing numbers of young nationals entering the jobs market each year. Crucially, they need to invest in high quality education to provide young people with the skills they need to take advantage of these opportunities, thereby also reducing their dependence on expatriate labour.
54. Gulf states will also need to manage issues of identity and tackling sectarianism. The unrest in Bahrain has taken on an increasingly sectarian nature, driven by the political and economic grievances of the Shia majority. Continuing low-level unrest in parts of Saudi Arabia’s Eastern Province also has a strong sectarian dimension, and sectarian tensions have been exacerbated in Kuwait.

55. The Government believes that it is firmly in the UK’s interest for the Gulf states to address these challenges successfully and that we have a role, as a long-standing friend and ally, in helping them do so.

The extent to which the FCO has the resources, personnel and capacities required for effective policy in the region

56. To achieve the FCO’s policy goals, we need the right workforce with the right skills in the right places. The 2012 Strategic Workforce Plan has ensured we are deploying the right staff where they are needed, including locally-engaged staff who are so essential to our work in the Gulf and across the network. Reflecting the increase in our work in the Gulf, we have increased our staffing in the region, with the creation of four new UK-based slots across the Gulf. We have also increased our local staffing where required.

57. Through the Diplomatic Excellence programme we are strengthening core policy-making skills, expanding economic and commercial diplomacy expertise across the FCO and increasing our language proficiency, particularly in Arabic. In 2011/12, we have designated a further six UK-based roles in the Gulf network as Arabic speaker slots to ensure that we have the right language skills in place.

19 November 2012

Supplementary written evidence from Alistair Burt, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office

I undertook to write to the Committee on certain points raised during my recent evidence session on your inquiry into the UK’s relationship with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain.

You raised the goals of doubling two-way trade, which we share with some Middle Eastern governments, and Andrew Rosindell asked in a related question why we had trade targets for some GCC markets but not all.

We have a commitment to double two-way trade with the governments of Kuwait and Qatar, reflecting a desire by the host government or a representative national business group to match our determination to increase our own exports. These targets cover the period 2011 to 2015. The UAE’s target, set in 2009 ahead of the UK/UAE Joint Economic Committee, is to increase bilateral trade by 60% by 2015— from £7.5bn to £12 bn. But not all Gulf states think in these terms, and the markets vary; as Jon Davies pointed out during the evidence session, the Saudi market, for example, is more mature. And our oil and gas imports cannot easily be shoehorned into this kind of model. So we need to stay focussed our own primary role—to increase British exports. This is underlined by the UKTI team in Saudi Arabia setting themselves a target of increasing exports by 10% as part of their wider performance targets for 2013/14.

On our own export targets, each Gulf Embassy works to a performance agreement with UKTI headquarters based on targets relating to two things; how much it can generate for how many companies, and how much value it can derive for British business from campaigns focussed on high-value opportunities within the market. These campaigns match Gulf demand with British expertise and include GCC-wide rail and metro projects; oil and gas, airport, health and education opportunities, as well as a focus on the 2022 World Cup in Qatar—part of our London 2012 legacy agenda. Our posts also work hard to encourage investment into the UK from the Gulf, and we are now looking to put more people into the region to do this.

The Committee asked whether Embassy officials attend the trials of individuals being charged on human rights or counter terrorism cases in Saudi Arabia. Embassy officials can attend any trials in Saudi Arabia, but with some limitations. Attendance by diplomats requires the agreement of the presiding judge in each case. As this depends on the views of the individual judge, our recent experience is that permission for Embassy officials to attend is not generally given. Embassy officials most recently attended a trial hearing of a human rights activist in November 2012.

I also promised to write about the Freedom of Expression charges in Bahrain. On 24 December 2011, the Bahraini Public Prosecutor, Dr Ali bin Fadhil Al- Buainain, announced that charges relating to speech protected by the right to freedom of expression would be dropped in a number of cases stemming from the unrest earlier in the year. According to the Public Prosecutor, the decision affected 343 individuals in 43 cases and was based upon the ongoing assessment of the National Safety Court procedures and review of the legality of charges levelled against the accused. Other cases that involved crimes of violence would remain pending. Mr Gapes’s question related to the high-profile case of “the 13” political activists. The Information Affairs Authority in Bahrain issued a statement on 12 January 2013, following the Cassation Court’s decision to uphold the convictions and sentences, which stated:

“On the charges considered by the Court, firstly it must be emphasized that the decision of the Court of Appeals on 4 August 2012 did not include any charges against any of the accused related to Freedom of expression which were all dropped by the Public Prosecution against all the accused. Moreover, the Court
of Cassation, in its decision of 7 January 2013, did not address those charges, and limited its deliberations and decision to the above mentioned crimes.

Henceforth, the Court’s deliberations were confined to accusations related to the formation of a group in violation of the provisions of the Law, the purpose of which was to overturn the Country’s Constitution, topple its political regime, disrupt the application of laws, prevent State’s institutions and public authorities from performing their functions, impair private liberties of citizens, undermine national unity, attempt to overturn the State’s Constitution and topple its monarchy by the use of force”.

Therefore, as I explained in my response to the Committee, these individuals remain in prison due to other serious offences. This does not, however, lessen our concern about reports that some of the defendants had been abused in detention, denied access to legal counsel and coerced into confessing. We have raised these concerns with the Bahraini Government on numerous occasions and continue to call on them to meet all of their international human rights obligations.

8 July 2013