

HOUSE OF COMMONS
ORAL EVIDENCE
TAKEN BEFORE THE
FOREIGN AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

UK's RELATIONS WITH SAUDI ARABIA AND BAHRAIN

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Evidence heard in Public

Questions 171 – 258

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Oral Evidence

Taken before the Foreign Affairs Committee

on Tuesday 14 May 2013

Members present:

Richard Ottaway (Chair)

Ann Clwyd

Mike Gapes

Andrew Rosindell

Mr Frank Roy

Sir John Stanley

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.

Q171 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 non-governmental 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 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 under way and measures that are being taken, and then taking the appropriate measures. Thank you very much indeed.

Q172 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 relationship 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 disband 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 Abdullah 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 Adaleh 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.

Q173 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?

Q174 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—

Q175 Chair: You are dissatisfied?

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.

Q176 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.

Q177 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.

Q178 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.

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 trial 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.

Q179 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.

Q180 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.

Q181 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 those cases where 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.

Q182 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."

Q183 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 research into how 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.

Q184 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 seen 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 law since is that there was a fuss at the time and it is still not on the statute books. Sometimes there is a difference between the line that is being given to us and the way the Saudi Arabian authorities are thinking.

Q185 Mike Gapes: In your written submissions, you ask for the UK Government to press for improvements in many areas of human rights, and you have referred to some of them today. What leverage does the UK Government actually have and how should they use it?

David Mepham: I think that they do have leverage. We can argue about how much and over what time period that leverage will have demonstrable impact at the other end, but I—

Q186 Mike Gapes: Is it economic? Is it military? What can we tangibly do to get the changes you want?

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 there are 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.

Q187 Mike Gapes: So this is moral and declaratory statements, rather than tangible economic co-operation or—

David Mepham: I do not think we are proposing comprehensive sanctions. We are not proposing sanctions against Saudi Arabia. There is an issue around arms—clearly, we should not sell stuff that might be used to abuse human rights. Phil has already made that point. We are not talking about particularly coercive measures that we can use to bring about the kind of changes we would like to see; no, this is about consistent pressure, encouragement and, where appropriate, support, and about trying to bolster the forces for reform within the country and using multilateral forums more effectively. We have talked about the UPR. There is also the Human Rights Council that comes up every couple of months; there are opportunities for the UK to press human rights issues through that mechanism too. The EU could be another source of influence and leverage too.

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.

Q188 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—I can 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 and 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 instances have relatively junior 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.

Q189 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.

Q190 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 Bahrainis 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 some 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.

Q191 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.

Q192 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.

Q193 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 they 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 have been sentenced to death and then executed. Often what has facilitated that—we have talked about the unfair trial procedures—is, in many cases, that they have not had interpretation facilities available to them and have not had legal representation at their trials. Those numbers are very worrying as well.

Q194 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.

Q195 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.

Q196 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.

Q197 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.

Q198 Chair: And does the British Embassy support you there?

David Mepham: No, it wasn't involved at all in the visit.

Q199 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.

Q200 Chair: I remind members of the public that this is a public sitting, we are in Parliament, and photography is not permitted, so could 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 back seat, watching, and the British 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 their experts. Whether the British Government decides to take or not take action in regards to the deteriorating situation in Bahrain, British citizens should. They are lively citizens with a history. After Hamad bin Isa’s statements in the UK, they must take a stand. We know that Britain is going through an economic crisis, but you cannot build your country and economy on the misery and bloodshed of the Bahraini people.”

Q201 Chair: Thank you. Mr 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.

Q202 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 protestors. 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 protestors 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.

Q203 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.

Q204 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—

Q205 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.

Q206 Chair: And the BICI report?

Ali Alaswad: It is not implemented.

Q207 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.

Q208 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 2011, 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.

Q209 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.

Q210 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 Bahrain 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.

Q211 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 unity 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.

Q212 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 had major demands, including an elected government, fair distributions and the taking away of the gerrymandering system that has left the country with a sectarian division.

Q213 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.

Q214 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.

Q215 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.

Q216 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.

Q217 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.

Q218 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.

Q219 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.

Q220 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, although, in fact, it goes back centuries. Do you think the UK should be making more effective use of its position by private or public means?

Maryam Alkhawaja: 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 cyber-security. For us, that is very concerning, because you have someone who 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.

Q221 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?

Q222 Mike Gapes: The UK Government's attitude—is it more supportive of the Bahrain Government than, say, the United States or 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 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.

Q223 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 Morocco-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.

Q224 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.

Q225 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.

Q226 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 Alkhwaja: 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.

Q227 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.

Q228 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 Alkhwaja: 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.

Q229 Ann Clwyd: How useful have your meetings with the British Government been?

Maryam Alkhwaja: 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 reform. 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 dissidence 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 UK. 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.

Q230 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.

Q231 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.

Q232 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.

Q233 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 forming 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.

Q234 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.

Q235 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.

Q236 Ann Clwyd: Have you been back to Bahrain since you published your report?

Sir Nigel Rodley: No, I haven't.

Q237 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.

Q238 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 elicit that could affect the dialogue, so one has to be really quite suspicious of the reason.

Q239 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.

Q240 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.

Q241 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.

Q242 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.

Q243 Chair: Are popular perceptions of Saudi Arabia accurate?

Lady Sandwich: I do not think so.

Q244 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.

Q245 Chair: Is the embassy in the same position as you are? How do you think the embassy is doing out there 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 in 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.

Q246 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—

Q247 Chair: How about at the moment?

Lady Sandwich: I don't know.

Q248 Chair: Have you been recently?

Lady Sandwich: No, not in the last year. There is an ex-ambassador sitting here—*[Interruption.]* 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.

Q249 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.

Q250 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.

Lady Sandwich: I think that both are needed. 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. You know we 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.

Q251 Mike Gapes: So you do not agree with people—we have heard from some former diplomats—that quiet diplomacy is the way to deal with the Saudis.

Lady Sandwich: I don't think it's either/or.

Q252 Mike Gapes: You have touched already on progress for women's rights and reform related to women. When we were there we met a number of women who were in the Shura Council, and there was a parliamentary visit here that included prominent members. We met with them, and they were very impressive people. Do you think that this process is widely accepted in Saudi society, or is the King in advance of the conservative culture to which you have referred?

Lady Sandwich: I'm afraid I continue to think that the reform in Saudi Arabia is top-down and that the King is pushing reform through against, probably, a conservative 60% of the country. There is probably a conservative 60% of women who really do not want the reforms that are going through at the moment, and who think that life for them under the Sharia as it is practised in Saudi Arabia—heaven help them—is how it should be.

On the other hand, small, small edging forward in 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 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 women. 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.

Q253 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.

Q254 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.

Q255 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.

Q256 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.

Chair: You said that it was 60%—

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—

Q257 Chair: So that 40-60 split applies to all—Ministries, the public and everywhere?

Lady Sandwich: It is all the way through.¹ 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.

Q258 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.

¹ Note by witness: Most ministers are “liberal” in their attitudes to social reform or King Abdullah would not have them there. 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.