

HOUSE OF COMMONS  
ORAL EVIDENCE  
TAKEN BEFORE THE  
FOREIGN AFFAIRS COMMITTEE  
**UK's RELATIONS WITH SAUDI ARABIA AND BAHRAIN**  
TUESDAY 18 JUNE 2013  
DR ANDREW MURRISON MP, TOM McKANE and MATTHEW ARMSTRONG  
ALISTAIR BURT MP, JON DAVIES and SARAH MacINTOSH

Evidence heard in Public

Questions 259 - 376

USE OF THE TRANSCRIPT

1. This is an uncorrected transcript of evidence taken in public and reported to the House. The transcript has been placed on the internet on the authority of the Committee, and copies have been made available by the Vote Office for the use of Members and others.
2. Any public use of, or reference to, the contents should make clear that neither witnesses nor Members have had the opportunity to correct the record. The transcript is not yet an approved formal record of these proceedings.
3. *Members* who receive this for the purpose of correcting questions addressed by them to witnesses are asked to send corrections to the Committee Assistant.
4. *Prospective witnesses* may receive this in preparation for any written or oral evidence they may in due course give to the Committee.

## Oral Evidence

Taken before the Foreign Affairs Committee

on Tuesday 18 June 2013

Members present:

Richard Ottaway (Chair)

Mr John Baron

Sir Menzies Campbell

Ann Clwyd

Mike Gapes

Mark Hendrick

Sandra Osborne

Andrew Rosindell

Mr Frank Roy

Sir John Stanley

### Examination of Witnesses

*Witnesses:* **Dr Andrew Murrison MP**, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Security and Strategy, Ministry of Defence, **Tom McKane**, Director General for Security Policy, Ministry of Defence, and **Matthew Armstrong**, Head of Policy and Resources, Saudi Armed Forces Project, Ministry of Defence, gave evidence.

**Chair:** May I welcome members of the public to this sitting of the Foreign Affairs Committee? This is the sixth and final evidence session for the Committee's inquiry into UK relations with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. The Committee will hold a 40 or 45-minute evidence session with Dr Andrew Murrison of the Ministry of Defence followed by a short break, and then a full evidence session with Alistair Burt from the Foreign Office.

I give a warm welcome to Dr Murrison, who is probably more used to sitting this side of the Committee. He is the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Security Strategy in the Ministry of Defence. He is accompanied by Mr Tom McKane, Director General for Security Policy in the Ministry of Defence, and Mr Matthew Armstrong, who is Head of Policy and Resources for the MOD Saudi Armed Forces Project. I warmly welcome you both.

Dr Murrison, is there anything you want to say by way of an opening remark?

**Dr Murrison:** Thank you for your welcome. If it is agreeable to the Committee, I am more than happy to crack on with questions.

**Q259 Chair:** As you know, the Secretary of State at one point was possibly going to give evidence to us, but we spotted that he ended up in Saudi Arabia last week. Are you able to tell us what he was actually doing there?

**Dr Murrison:** Yes, I can—in broad terms of course I can. I will start by saying that the relationship with Saudi Arabia is good; it is strong and it is important to us. It is important to

understand the extent of our involvement with Saudi Arabia and the quality of Saudi Arabia as an ally to this country. As you will know, following the Gulf Initiative, which was launched in the summer of 2010, there has been an increased tempo of visits by Ministers, including the Prime Minister, officials and serving personnel. I think that that has been appreciated by our colleagues in the Gulf, particularly by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The Defence Secretary's visit last week was a flying visit. However, he did pick up very good atmospherics during that visit, and came away with the impression that it was well worth while and that we are making progress in that country.

As far as matters of substance are concerned, he did sign a letter of agreement dealing with SANGCOM—that is, the Saudi Arabian National Guard communication element of the work that we do. You will forgive me if I do not go into the details of that, but that was another step in our formal relationship with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

**Q260 Chair:** I fully appreciate that this is an unclassified briefing, but are you able to say—there were press reports that, following his visit, the BAE Typhoon deal is back on track. Are those reports inaccurate?

**Dr Murrison:** As you are aware, Project Salam is part of the general package that we have with Saudi Arabia and will see us sell to Saudi Arabia 72 Typhoon aircraft, of which 26 are in play at the moment. More than that I cannot say. What I would say, however, is that it is hoped there will be further export opportunities to a number of partner nations over the next several years, involving Typhoon. It is an excellent aircraft, as you know—we believe the best on the market—and I think it speaks for itself.

**Q261 Chair:** When this inquiry was announced, some months ago, it filtered back to me, and I shared this information with the rest of the Committee, that our inquiry was hampering or hindering the relationship with, and sales to, Saudi Arabia. Is there any evidence that this inquiry did actually hamper the relationship with Saudi Arabia?

**Dr Murrison:** There is always sensitivity on the part of both Saudi Arabia and a number of the Gulf states around inquiries of this nature. They, I think understandably, are concerned about the nature of the inquiry—where it may be heading—and it takes some effort on our part to assure them that there is no ill intent: that this is the way we do things, if you like. I would characterise your inquiry as being part of what they may, on reflection, expect to see in this Parliament. They do understand the differences—as indeed we should understand the differences, for our part, in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. The key to this is understanding some of those cultural differences; that is important. So I don't think your inquiry can be said to have helped relations, if I can put it that way, but I suspect you are not guilty of terminally damaging them, either.

**Q262 Chair:** When we were in Riyadh, we got the impression that they now fully understood how democracy works.

**Dr Murrison:** As a result of your visit, Chairman?

**Chair:** No. By the time we got there, that was the impression that we gained.

**Dr Murrison:** Well, I would say again, your comments invite me to make a general point, which is, engaging with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states, I hope, will enable them to understand us rather more.

**Q263 Chair:** Thank you.

Is it correct to say that the Ministry of Defence has double the number of staff in Saudi Arabia than the Foreign Office has?

**Dr Murrison:** I don't know.

**Tom McKane:** It wouldn't surprise me, Chairman, because there are, for example, about 100 Ministry of Defence staff in Saudi Arabia on the Saudi aircraft project. If you take into account those and the other Ministry of Defence teams and the defence section in the embassy, I imagine it could well be double, if not more than double. I don't have the precise figures.

**Q264 Chair:** Do you think this suggests that the MOD has got better access than the Foreign Office in Saudi Arabia?

**Dr Murrison:** I would be surprised if that were the case. I have the figures for the number of MOD employees we have in the various teams in Saudi Arabia, if it would be helpful. It is substantial. This is not new. Some of this goes back to 1964, so it is a long-standing relationship with Saudi Arabia. We can certainly provide you with the raw figures if that would be useful. I should also say that it is at senior level, so we have an RAF two-star heading the defence section in Riyadh.

**Tom McKane:** The Saudi aircraft project.

**Matthew Armstrong:** But many of our staff, at a more junior level, are dealing on a day-to-day basis with the Saudi air force, helping and assisting them, so I am not sure I would characterise that as access. It is direct practical assistance on the ground rather than political influence.

**Q265 Sir John Stanley:** Minister, could you explain to the Committee how it is that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in its latest human rights report lists Saudi Arabia among 27 countries of the greatest human rights concern of countries around the world, yet at the same time another Government Department—the Business Department—presumably with your Department's support, lists Saudi Arabia among the top priority markets for arms sales? How is it that within the same Government, one part lists Saudi Arabia as a top human rights concern and another part lists it as a top priority market for arms exports?

**Dr Murrison:** A country wins a place on the list of countries of concern for a variety of reasons. It does not, by any means, have to be internal repression or aggression against its own people directly. It can be due to, for example, its record on the treatment of women in society. In the case of Saudi Arabia, for example, we have made very clear over many years our opposition to capital punishment. There is a raft of reasons why countries win a place on that list. To then say that we will not treat with them in terms of defence engagement is a step too far because they nevertheless have the right to protect themselves. I suggest very strongly that those countries and societies gain a great deal from our engagement with them. For example, if we want to introduce concepts in our training like the moral component of warfare, which we do, we must engage with them. We could pull out, of course, and disengage completely but I am not sure, Chairman, where that would lead us. It is not clear to me that that would make the situation better.

**Q266 Sir John Stanley:** Does it not strike you as somewhat anomalous, Minister, certainly in terms of public perception, that you have the same country listed by the Government as a top human rights concern and at the same time a top market for arms exports? Does that not seem anomalous to you?

**Dr Murrison:** Part of the work of a Committee such as this is to improve and to inform public perception, but I hope that my explanation enables you to come close to understanding why we feel it is important to engage with countries like Saudi Arabia in the way we do, in terms of defence engagement. We make it very clear—behind the scenes is I think particularly effective with countries in the Gulf—that we have concerns about some aspects of how they conduct their business. That is no secret. If we were to disengage from them, we would be unable to do that.

**Tom McKane:** It might be worth adding that whether or not a country is regarded as a top priority for defence exports, every proposed export must pass through the Government's export licensing system. The criteria that the Government publish and that are used to assess whether sales should go ahead are used in testing the proposal.

**Dr Murrison:** It is important to say that all sales go through the consolidated criteria, and I maintain that they are the best in the world. Clearly, they take full cognisance of European Union criteria, and they are rigorous. That is our safeguard, judged on a case-by-case basis, in terms of what we do in providing defence and security equipment to Saudi Arabia and/or other countries.

**Q267 Mr Roy:** Minister, still on the sales criteria, it has been suggested to us previously that Gulf rulers have used their buying power to apply political pressure on the United Kingdom. Are defence sales used as a bargaining chip between Gulf states and the UK?

**Dr Murrison:** No. Defence sales are very much part of our defence engagement strategy. It is clear that, in order to engage with countries in terms of defence, you need to train with them, exercise with them and treat with them generally, but more than that, to have some sort of sales arrangement with them. This is British kit—kit that we know and use. We find that that is a very effective way of engaging with a number of countries, states in the Gulf being several.

**Q268 Mr Roy:** So there is no cross-over in discussions of, “This is what we want to buy. In order to buy this, we would also like to think politically about any type of situation.”

**Dr Murrison:** No. BIS owns the consolidated criteria. They have ownership of that—clearly, informed by the Foreign Office and the MOD where appropriate. If there are concerns from either quarter, that informs the decision that BIS makes. The consolidated criteria are rigorous, and each case is determined on its own merit.

**Q269 Mr Roy:** So no one on our side would partake in any discussion that is supposed to be about arms sales or whatever if it goes into any other political issue?

**Dr Murrison:** No. Each case is determined on its own merit against the consolidated criteria.

**Q270 Mr Roy:** Exclusively?

**Dr Murrison:** The consolidated criteria.

**Q271 Mr Roy:** On the remaining Typhoon aircraft, are you confident that the ongoing issue relating to those aircraft will soon be resolved, and a further Typhoon contract signed?

**Dr Murrison:** The situation at the moment is that Saudi Arabia wishes to purchase 72 aircraft. We have a Government-to-Government arrangement. As you know, that facilitates that. I am confident that the deal will be done.

**Q272 Mr Roy:** Are the problems that have been headed at the moment entirely related to pricing, or are there other political issues? I suppose, going by your last answer, that you will say, “No, there are no other political issues.” Is it based solely on pricing?

**Matthew Armstrong:** When the Typhoon deal was struck, there were a number of fixed price elements to it and some variable price elements that were left for later resolution. We are at the point where we are nearly finalising those discussions. I think they will be resolved at some point in the near future. They are purely pricing issues. There is nothing political about the aircraft that is an issue at the moment. The Saudis are happy with—

**Q273 Mr Roy:** Just for the record then, Mr Armstrong, is it just purely pricing that is the issue?

**Matthew Armstrong:** Yes. I think perhaps we are overstating it. It is not a major issue. It is something we talk about with the Saudis on a regular basis, and something that will be resolved, as the press report said, in the near future.

**Q274 Ann Clwyd:** Why does Saudi Arabia need so much military equipment?

**Dr Murrison:** Saudi Arabia notes, I suspect—Saudi Arabia can speak for herself—the challenges of the region in which she exists. I suspect that she would say that she feels threatened in many respects by the political situation in the region. But it is not really for me to second-guess Saudi Arabia’s requirements. Clearly, what we have to do is to respond to them on a case-by-case basis, which is what we do.

You will be aware that one of the criteria is that we need to have cognisance of whether a country is spending way in excess of what its budget would allow. In other words, is it spending a gross amount of money on arms that should be applied elsewhere? That does not apply in the case of Saudi Arabia, which is well placed to buy the sorts of things that we and others are selling to it.

**Q275 Ann Clwyd:** What if any of the equipment that we are selling were to fall into the wrong hands—is that a scenario you have even contemplated? What is the possible reaction to that equipment going into the wrong hands?

**Dr Murrison:** Clearly, we have to take note of the end user when we sell any equipment. I would characterise the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia as a country where we have a reasonable degree of certainty about the end user and that the equipment that we sell will be used for the purposes that we can easily foresee. You can imagine countries around the world where that might be more difficult, but I think we are reasonably safe with Saudi Arabia.

**Q276 Ann Clwyd:** Do defence purchases, or lack of them, by the Gulf affect the MOD’s own defence procurement?

**Dr Murrison:** No, I don’t think so. Again, we purchase equipment that we feel is best for the tasks that we have before us. We pride ourselves on having the very best. I am pleased when our armed forces are able to showcase British kit. I think that particularly those countries that are contemplating buying equipment from this country are reassured when they see equipment being used by our armed forces, since our armed forces, as you well know, are

held in very high regard across the world. Armed forces, particularly in countries where the armed forces military hierarchy assumes an elevated place in society, will note that the British armed forces are using particular bits of British kit and will be encouraged by that in their buying plans. Also, they are very keen to train alongside British armed forces that are using similar kit, so I think there is an holistic relationship between our defence industry and our armed forces, but I certainly would not characterise the relationship in the way you have suggested.

**Q277 Ann Clwyd:** Do you think that UK civil servants who work on UK Saudi defence matters, paid for by Saudi officials, can be expected to flag up concerns about, for example, corruption? There have been numerous concerns about corruption in the past, as you know.

**Dr Murrison:** Indeed. A lot of them are history. I do not think we necessarily need to go into some of the history of this. I am clear that British civil servants are well briefed on British legislation that relates to bribery and corruption. They can be in no doubt about what that looks like and what the consequences are in the event that they err. Our record in this respect, going way back to 1992 when the matter was looked at originally, is good. I am confident that our officials operate appropriately.

In terms of paymaster, of course they are British civil servants and they are paid for by the Crown. Any Government-to-Government arrangement is purely that, and the paymaster for civil servants remains the Crown.

**Matthew Armstrong:** As one of those civil servants, I would have no hesitation in raising any concerns that I had about bribery or corruption in any of our programmes. I have seen nothing that would give me any concern.

**Q278 Ann Clwyd:** There have been allegations. If we go back to 2006 and the Al Yamamah case, the investigations were controversially halted after it was advised that Saudi Arabia could withdraw intelligence co-operation. In 2012, the Serious Fraud Office launched an investigation into a subsidiary of the pan-European defence contractor, EADS, in the light of further bribery allegations. In answer to a parliamentary question inquiring about the case on 15 May this year, the Solicitor-General declined to give a running commentary on current investigations, so there are clearly investigations ongoing.

**Dr Murrison:** These are matters for the SFO. I am certainly not going to comment on them. All I will do is reiterate what I have said, which is that our civil servants are well briefed on bribery and corruption, and they should be in no doubt about how to handle such matters. In the event that they have concerns about them, they are passed up the chain and eventually land on a Minister's desk, so such allegations would be treated extremely seriously.

**Q279 Sandra Osborne:** Can I take you on to Bahrain? In 2011, the Bahraini authorities, by their own admission, used excessive force to put down a popular uprising. It emerged that Saudi Arabian troops had been sent in to assist. At that time, the UK Armed Forces Minister said that it was possible that some members of the Saudi Arabian National Guard who were deployed in Bahrain may have undertaken some training provided by the British military mission. Has the UK investigated whether any UK equipment or UK-trained Saudi forces were used in the GCC deployment to Bahrain, and if so, are you satisfied that the UK involvement was appropriate?

**Dr Murrison:** Yes, I am. Indeed, I can go better than that, because the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry considered these matters, and although fault was found, I

am very pleased to say that it was not found with Peninsula Shield, which is the GCC mission to Bahrain. It did contain people who had been in receipt of training, but I think that we can be reassured that none of that was used in a repressive way. Peninsula Shield was used, in the main, to protect installations, as I understand it, and the BICI report exonerated it from anything of the sort that you have described.

**Q280 Andrew Rosindell:** Minister, good afternoon. Will you elaborate a bit more about Britain's defence relationship with Bahrain, particularly in terms of operations in the Gulf and the Red Sea? How would the United Kingdom manage if we were not working as closely with Bahrain as we are?

**Dr Murrison:** We would manage; we always do. However, Bahrain is very important to us. It is a long-standing friend and ally, and it has been extremely helpful in providing basing and overflight facilities. Our defence engagement with Bahrain is very strong. You will know that the UK maritime contingent command is based in Bahrain, and that is part of the combined maritime force operating in the Gulf. So Bahrain is extremely important to us, but in the event that it was not there, we would clearly have to seek other alliances and partnerships. However, Bahrain is one of our closest relationships in that region, and we are very grateful to the Bahrainis for their hospitality and accommodation.

**Q281 Andrew Rosindell:** In 2011, it has been suggested that the Bahrainis threatened to withdraw their defence co-operation with the United Kingdom. Can you tell us, Minister, whether that is accurate? If it is, how did Her Majesty's Government respond to that threat?

**Dr Murrison:** I am not prepared to talk about conversations that we will have had with the Bahrainis at a fairly high level. Needless to say—I think I touched on it in response to an earlier question—when we say or do something, there is a risk that we will inflame sensitivities in that part of the world. I think that the way to deal with it, as indeed we have, is to continue our dialogue with those countries so that they can understand where we are coming from. We can simply disengage—we can always do that—but as I have said before, it is not clear where that would then lead us. If we are seeking to introduce countries to our values, working of course with the grain of those countries all the time and respecting their traditions—that is vital—then we need to engage with them. We are happy to do that, understanding that there are differences between us and the way that we each view the world, and in our culture and traditions. But we need to respect each other's.

**Q282 Andrew Rosindell:** But you are not able to confirm whether that threat was made?

**Dr Murrison:** I am not willing to confirm or deny it in the terms you have stated.

**Q283 Mike Gapes:** May I take it further? The Bahraini Foreign Minister came to the UK in October 2012, and a new UK-Bahrain Defence Cooperation Accord was signed during that visit. It was not publicised in any major way here, but it was publicised extensively by the Bahrain Government. Can you tell us, in the light of your previous answer, why a new defence co-operation accord was needed in 2012?

**Dr Murrison:** We sign accords—memorandums of understanding, letters of agreement—all the time, with a variety of countries, as you know. I have done it in the short while that I have been a Minister. These things are part of the weft and warp of the way in which we do business. I will not discuss the content of that particular document; it would be

wrong of me to do so, given the request of the other party. However, what I will say that it was a routine expression of our continuing desire to engage.

**Q284 Mike Gapes:** Was the timing in 2012 meant to signal British Government support for the Bahraini Government at that time?

*Dr Murrison:* No, it was part of our routine, ongoing engagement with Bahrain, which is a country that is important to us.

**Q285 Mike Gapes:** You said that you are not prepared to discuss what is in the accord. Without going into detail, however, can you confirm that there are provisions in the accord relating to human rights standards and training, and provisions that the accord could be suspended if the human rights situation in Bahrain was to deteriorate seriously?

*Dr Murrison:* I am not going to comment on that. I am perfectly prepared to enter into a correspondence and consider such a request carefully, but I am not prepared in open forum to discuss the contents of that accord.

**Q286 Mike Gapes:** So we are not able to find out what is in this accord even in general terms.

*Dr Murrison:* No, I am simply not prepared to discuss the contents of it.

**Mike Gapes:** It is a bit pointless asking any questions, I assume then.

**Q287 Chair:** May I take you up on your invitation to consider the nature of the questions? Perhaps you can respond in some general way.

*Dr Murrison:* You can certainly do that, and I will be happy to consider it.

**Q288 Chair:** Thank you, I would be very grateful.

This is a fairly self-evident question, but in the Ministry of Defence do you view closer co-operation with the GCC to be a good and positive thing? If so, what efforts are you making to advance it?

*Dr Murrison:* Yes. We need to understand that the GCC is a forum for dialogue. It is chiefly a political construct; it is not primarily a defence forum, so our defence engagement is primarily with individual member states. We do engage with the GCC Secretariat in Riyadh, but primarily our defence engagement is with the GCC's members and not with the GCC corporately.

**Q289 Chair:** Do you have any contracts with the GCC as a collective, as a body?

*Dr Murrison:* No. I am aware of none.

**Q290 Mike Gapes:** Do you ever publish any defence co-operation accords with any countries?

*Dr Murrison:* No, it is not our usual practice, unless of course the other party wishes to do so. I have to say, many of the accords are extremely anodyne and, I would say, most countries might probably welcome the publication of some of those more anodyne reports, but—

**Q291 Mike Gapes:** So why not the one with Bahrain?

**Dr Murrison:** But what we cannot do is to go against the wishes of the party with which we are signing the accord—that would be somewhat counter-productive.

**Q292 Mike Gapes:** What you are saying is that the British Government would be quite happy to publish this.

**Dr Murrison:** No, I am not saying that either. What I am saying is that I am not prepared in this forum to discuss the contents of that accord.

**Q293 Mike Gapes:** So it may not be the Bahrainis alone who are reluctant to have this made public.

**Dr Murrison:** I am not even prepared to comment on that, but I will take up your suggestion that I consider writing to the Committee.

**Mike Gapes:** Okay. I will draw the appropriate conclusion.

**Q294 Chair:** Minister, I will frame some questions to you. As this is our last evidence session, I would be grateful for a fairly prompt response. Is there anything else you wanted to say?

**Dr Murrison:** I would just say in closing that in everything that we do and all our discussions, we put a heavy emphasis on human rights. It is important to understand that that colours all our defence engagement. It runs through the very fabric of what we do, and I think it is important, just by way of reassurance, that your Committee should know that. If I may, I will also correct an error of fact. I might have misled you slightly by suggesting that last week the Secretary of State signed the letter of agreement relating to SANGCOM. It was in fact our ambassador in Saudi Arabia who signed it, but of course it has the same effect.

**Chair:** That is very helpful. I thank you, Minister, and your colleagues, for your open and frank revelations. We look forward to hearing from you further in response to our letter. Thank you.

*Sitting suspended.*

*On resuming—*

### **Examination of Witnesses**

*Witnesses:* **Alistair Burt** MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, **Jon Davies**, Director, North Africa and the Gulf, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and **Sarah MacIntosh**, Director, Defence and International Security, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, gave evidence.

**Q295 Chair:** We will continue with the sitting. May I welcome Alistair Burt, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs? With him are Jon Davies, Director of North Africa and the Gulf at the Foreign Office, and Sarah MacIntosh, Director of Defence and International Security. I welcome you all. Minister, may I alert you that, unfortunately, it looks as though we will be interrupted by a vote at, we estimate 15.42, and we will take a 10-minute break, on the assumption that it is just one vote, and continue afterwards? Is there anything you would like to say by way of an opening statement?

**Alistair Burt:** I would, if that is permissible. I will do my best to keep it tight. I very much welcome the opportunity to say a few introductory words about UK relations with the Gulf. As the Committee will be well aware, this is a critical region for the UK's national security and prosperity, and has been for several generations. We depend on the region for the security and stability of the global energy market. We look to them to help us in the fight against terrorism at home and overseas. A significant number of British jobs depend on contracts won in what, taken collectively, is one of our larger export markets globally, and should remain so, given the abundance of the infrastructure projects in need of British expertise.

The region is also home to over a quarter of the world's sovereign wealth, a significant portion of which is invested in the UK. That is to say nothing of the over 160,000 British nationals for whom the Gulf is also home. We depend on Governments in the Gulf to help us deliver our foreign policy priorities in Libya, Syria, Yemen, Afghanistan, Iran and even Somalia, to pick just a range of examples.

I notice from the transcripts of earlier sessions that you have been interested to understand whether we have the correct balance between our interests and values. Let me start by reiterating the Foreign Secretary's belief that human rights are at the heart of our foreign policy. Our values are a thread that runs through all our foreign policy decisions. The UK Government is very clear in its condemnation of violence and its insistence on upholding the rule of law and individual rights, but it is also clear that there is no blueprint for legitimately governing a country and no one-size-fits-all model. Getting the balance right in our relationships overseas strikes me as one of the key responsibilities of the FCO, but also one of the most difficult.

To outside observers, whether or not we have that balance right often depends on their subjective view of what might be the most important UK interest. In truth, there will be differentiation in our approach. I think it right that we look at context all the time and make judgments that what may be right for one relationship at one time, bearing in mind the trajectory of a variety of indicators, might not be right for others. Some background remains fixed and constant; other issues may be more fluid.

The Gulf finds itself at the very heart of these difficult issues at this particular time. I am very grateful to experts at the FCO, here and abroad, who are assisting Ministers—and not just those in the FCO—to navigate such difficult waters.

Taking human rights as an issue of importance on which judgments about UK positioning are made, I again stress that there is no blueprint for this. Much depends on the nature of our relationship with the Government concerned. We need to establish what would be the most effective way to achieve our ends. With some Governments, all we can do is make public criticism: we simply do not have the level of relationship that would make private discussions meaningful. On other occasions, we consider a detailed private discussion will enable us to make more of a difference.

In all our relationships, particularly with our friends in the Gulf, we ensure that, as the Prime Minister has stated, no issue is off limits. They understand that we are speaking to them as a friend, but one with their interests, as well as ours, at heart. Our relationships with both Saudi Arabia and Bahrain are informed by our interests and our values. The values of these countries will never completely mirror ours and we cannot expect that. We respect their traditions and histories, seeking areas of common interest where we can co-operate, and where we disagree, making this clear. We are clear that stability is based on legitimacy and the consent of the people.

Finally, our priorities are closely interlinked with those of our partners in the Gulf: achieving security and stability in the region, based on legitimacy and consent, and increasing our prosperity to benefit us all, particularly in the current economic climate.

**Q296 Chair:** Minister, thank you very much indeed. We received evidence, during the course of the various sessions we have had, that the Gulf felt neglected up to 2010. Do you think that was fair comment? Have you got a view as to why they felt neglected?

**Alistair Burt:** I am sure all those who were engaged in the Gulf in past years were giving absolutely 100% of their best and fulfilling the relationship between us and Gulf states absolutely as they would have wanted to. What the Foreign Secretary felt when he was in opposition was that we could simply do more—we could be more engaged.

Since we came into office, we have been able to make use, for instance, of simply physically having an extra Minister in the Department to make sure that, physically, Ministers could get out more often. I notice that one of your witnesses said that, always, one of the usual problems is making sure there is a Minister free to be able to go out and go on a visit, and visits matter.

I think we felt that there was more we could do by way of visits, and more we could do to give a sense that traditional partners were as important now and in the future as they had been in the past. Without dwelling on the romance of the relationships, some of which go back hundreds of years in the Gulf, we could say, “It’s the relevance now that’s really important.” Then, of course, there are the regional strategic matters, which have become even more important in the last two or three years.

What we try to do with the Gulf Initiative is recognise that we could deliver more by being more active, and our sense is that we have been noticed for doing this.

**Q297 Chair:** Had any of the Gulf rulers expressed dissatisfaction with the relationship?

**Alistair Burt:** We picked up anecdotally, when we started to increase visits and contact, that the word “neglect” just popped up, but I would not say that it was anything like a concerted campaign from states or anything. People do notice if you go on more visits, if you pay more attention. I think there have been 230 outward visits to the Gulf since 2010, and that is not just FCO Ministers. What we have been able to do through the initiative is involve Ministers right across a series of other Departments—Health, Education, Business and Energy—to emphasise the breadth of the relationship with the United Kingdom. We think it has made a difference, and I think the Foreign Secretary was right to have recognised that there was more we could do to put more energy into this relationship.

**Q298 Chair:** Thank you. Turning to the relationship with the Gulf Cooperation Council as a whole, in the written evidence to us at the end of last year, the Government said that they wanted to have “a more formal mechanism for taking forward UK-GCC partnership.” Why was it felt that there was a need for such a formal mechanism?

**Alistair Burt:** First, we recognised also that the GCC could itself be rather more effective. There had been a sense that it had not operated as a particularly cohesive body. The relatively new Secretary General, Secretary General Al Zayani, who came into office around the end of 2010, beginning of 2011, I think shared that sense. That was demonstrated very quickly by the way in which the GCC operated over the difficulties in Yemen, where it was quite clear that the GCC initiative—encouraged by a number of ambassadors, including our own, who were working very hard in Yemen to seek a peaceful transition of what looked to be a very nasty situation developing—made a significant difference.

Accordingly, moving on to a more structured relationship, whereby the Foreign Secretary now sees GCC Foreign Ministers twice a year on a formal basis, I will be going next week to the meeting of the GCC with EU Foreign Ministers. It was our way of recognising that the GCC could be more effective itself. If that was to be the case, we wanted to be more engaged.

**Q299 Chair:** Would that be described as a meeting of the UK-GCC strategic dialogue?

*Alistair Burt:* I am not sure it formally comes under that heading.

**Q300 Chair:** When is the next meeting of the dialogue, and what would be on the agenda?

*Alistair Burt:* The GCC dialogue is certainly taken forward by the Foreign Secretary and me in a rather informal way. It is rather different from what we have across the region in a series of taskforces and working groups and the like. The relationship at the moment is a more informal one, followed by the Foreign Secretary and me, particularly by him in his two meetings. They will be well structured and will cover a range of issues.

**Q301 Chair:** We hope to develop a joint action plan. In the light of what you have just said about being a bit more informal than originally envisaged, did the joint action plan ever get up and running?

*Alistair Burt:* We have not developed a joint action plan with the GCC at this stage.

*Jon Davies:* Mr Chairman, as you say, when looking to put the encounters between the UK and GCC on a more formal basis, it has been proposed that there should be a joint action plan. That is still on the table. There has been some discussion at official level of whether that is a useful tool or not, and to what extent it supplements the bilateral UK relationship and working group or strategic dialogue with each country.

At the moment that is a work in progress, but it is something that we would expect when the Foreign Secretary meets his GCC counterparts again in September in the margins of the General Assembly in New York. It would be looked at again then, but it is not something that has been formalised or finalised yet.

**Q302 Chair:** Thank you. Minister, turning to trade, in your business plan we have a lot of commercial goals of doubling trade here, there and various places around the Gulf. Do you think it is wise for us to be engaging in such high-profile visits to promote the British defence industry so soon after the Arab Spring?

*Alistair Burt:* I think the short answer is yes. Let's be up-front about the UK defence industry. It is very important and very good. We have a clear belief that those states that feel themselves under potential threat should have the ability to protect and defend themselves. That is particularly so in the Gulf where not only is there concern among some states that they might be at risk with others, but they join with us in a very important strategic partnership. It makes sense to us to invest in that. It makes sense for those states to look to see what co-ordination they can have and whether they can buy the same kit, so that there is interoperability among them. Yes, it does make sense.

I do not think there should be the sensitivity that you mention in relation to the Arab Spring and Arab Awakening, which I am sure we are going to come to. The ramifications of the Arab Awakening are yet to be felt everywhere, but a certain amount has clearly been internal as states have looked at themselves, their system of governance and the relationships

between civil society and Government and the like. While this has been going on, states have also had an interest in how to potentially defend themselves and what they need to do that.

Our export control system, which a number of members of the Committee know extremely well, has very strict criteria that mean that we cannot sell certain things into areas where there is a clear risk of internal repression or human rights abuses. We were very conscious of that during the Arab spring, and we took certain steps to make that very clear. Equally, there is a lot of defence equipment for which those criteria are not invoked, because a state is looking to defend itself legitimately against those from outside. It is clearly important to keep those relationships going, and for such a set of key strategic partners, whose region will always be of great importance to the United Kingdom's prosperity and stability, it seems to me entirely correct that we are able to keep providing for those legitimate needs with the very highest quality of equipment, which will preserve the peace, keep people safe and avoid conflict. The United Kingdom defence industry does a great job in relation to that, and the United Kingdom Government should not be dissuaded from supporting that.

**Q303 Mr Roy:** Minister, in evidence to us the Middle East Association, a respected trade body, described the “deep budget cuts” that are going on at the moment. Because of those deep budget cuts, they are finding it hard to recruit and retain good local staff, which has affected the service that they have provided to United Kingdom business in the Gulf. Is that true? If it is true, what are you doing to address the problem?

*Alistair Burt:* Sorry, was this a concern that they had about UKTI?

**Mr Roy:** This is in evidence to us, Minister.

*Alistair Burt:* Yes, from the Middle East Association, but what was it about?

**Mr Roy:** On this inquiry.

*Alistair Burt:* Yes, I know, but when they were talking about difficulty of recruitment—for whom? For themselves?

**Mr Roy:** For yourselves—for local staff.

*Alistair Burt:* No, the provision of local staff is really important to the United Kingdom and, as I think people are aware, we have been using more local staff over the past couple years.

**Mr Roy:** The question is whether you are finding it hard to recruit and retain local staff.

*Jon Davies:* If I may, it is not a new problem. It is not always easy for us to recruit and retain, particularly in markets such as the United Arab Emirates, where there is a lot of competition for skills. In some places, yes, it is not always easy to recruit and retain. That is a challenge for any embassy and any public sector employer. It is a challenge to compete either for the local Emirati nationals, for example, in that case, or for third-party nationals who might be in the country. In some places, it is a challenge.

**Q304 Mr Roy:** So are you saying, Mr Davies, that that difficulty has nothing to do with the deep budget cuts?

*Jon Davies:* In the 25 years or so that I have been in the Foreign Office, it has always been a challenge, particularly in some of the higher-growth economies, to ensure you had and could retain the best staff. That is a challenge, but it is a familiar one.

**Q305 Mr Roy:** So how are you addressing the challenge?

**Jon Davies:** We try to make sure, as with any recruitment and retention problem, that we have a package of rewards that makes people want to work for us. Part of it is about what you pay and part of it is about making it a good place to work. Quite often people will choose to work, or look to come and work, in environments such as the British embassy, because of the prestige of the work, the nature of the work and the quality of terms and conditions in the embassy. We would look across the whole package of what we offer as an employer to recruit and retain the best people. Again, that is not new, but it is what we try to do.

**Alistair Burt:** My experience in talking to local staff—plainly, Ministers, particularly from the FCO, try to make it a point of their visits to talk to embassy staff; granted, in what is termed a town hall meeting you do not always get everything brought up to you and you have to look at staff surveys and everything—is that it has been the package around employment that has made a difference. There is a degree of loyalty to the United Kingdom for those who have been employed long-term. They do look at comparative pay rates—that is right—but they feel in most cases that belonging to the United Kingdom through the work they do is an added something, which they like as part of their employment. We have to be competitive in terms of pay rates for those abroad, but the wider range of benefits that local staff get in working for the UK seems to matter to them as well.

**Q306 Mr Roy:** Does that mean, Minister, that you do not agree with the Middle East Association, which says that deep budget cuts are causing a problem? Are you saying that you do not agree with that?

**Alistair Burt:** I am saying that I have not noticed a lack of effectiveness of our local staff or of the work we can do attributed to what the Middle East Association has said. So no, I do not agree with that.

**Q307 Mr Roy:** We have started with staff, but can I just ask this, on the British ambassadors: is the ability to speak Arabic no longer considered to be as important as it was for an ambassador in an Arabic speaking country?

**Alistair Burt:** Actually, we think it is steadily getting more important. The Committee will be aware of the reopening of the language school by the Foreign Secretary and the determination to have more people who speak Arabic. As far as our ambassadors are concerned, 70% of our heads of mission in Arabic countries speak Arabic. Across the Gulf, it is not uniform, but where Arabic is absolutely essential to do the job, as in Saudi Arabia, there is a very fluent Arabic speaker in post. It is less necessary in Bahrain, and therefore there is not an Arabic speaker as head of mission in Bahrain, but across the Gulf the majority do speak Arabic and we are increasing the number of those who are capable of speaking it.

**Mr Roy:** But in Sudan, Qatar and Algeria, Minister, they do not speak Arabic.

**Alistair Burt:** Well, our Algerian head of mission speaks fluent French, which is probably what he needs more in Algeria. It varies from place to place. Where we need an Arabic speaker, there is an Arabic speaker. By reversing the trend of being less interested in local speech, which was present some years ago—

**Q308 Mr Roy:** Is that below A2 grade or above it, Minister, for the Arabic speakers?

**Alistair Burt:** I think it is right across the board: 60% of our staff in speaker slots have reached target level in speaking Arabic. Of course, the locally engaged staff will all naturally speak the local language in any case. This is UK-based staff, who tend to be the higher grades.

**Q309 Mr Roy:** We know that, for example, in Bahrain the ambassador speaks below the A2 grade. Is that right, and is that going to be improved on?

*Alistair Burt:* That is right.

**Mr Roy:** Will it be improved on?

*Alistair Burt:* The view taken is that in Bahrain it is not essential to speak Arabic, so that has not been a consideration, no.

**Q310 Mr Baron:** Minister, perhaps not in Bahrain, but in general there is a view that the FCO has been a little bit behind the curve when it comes to languages generally and having representation on the ground. That has been generally acknowledged by the FCO itself, hence the initiatives that you have outlined and that have been announced, which are very welcome indeed. How far do we need to go down this path before we get the balance right between putting the resource in but also having people on the ground who can speak the language, and who therefore have a better chance of knowing what is going on and a better feel for the political, economic and social make-up in the countries in which they are based? How much further do you think we have to go on that?

*Alistair Burt:* At present approximately three quarters of our staff in Arabic speaker slots have some level of proficiency in Arabic. We are seeking to increase the percentages. Essentially, you are quite right: we thought fewer people than needed were speaking Arabic, which is why we have reintroduced the language school and there is more Arabic training. We are looking to increase it.

It is a mixture. I have no doubt that those who speak the language—you only have seen those who are engaged—have an advantage in doing so. It is important to make sure that our embassies and our missions have the ability to delve in society widely. But they do work as teams, that is the point. I do not think that there is any evidence of anywhere that we cannot reach through a combination of UK-based staff and locally based staff to get the information that we need.

However, it does help to speak the languages—the Foreign Secretary is absolutely correct. We are right to put more efforts into that and we are right to reopen the language school and to be teaching right across the board. We currently have a further 25 members of staff undergoing full-time Arabic training in preparation for their posting to the region. We have 70 effectively undertaking after-work classes in Arabic in London and some 80 staff are using an e-learning package. So we really have increased the importance of learning Arabic across the region, and there will be more posts for them.

**Q311 Mr Baron:** That is very welcome news. We fully appreciate that what you see on paper does not always translate on the ground as regards skills, but at least it is heading in the right direction. Do you think that the problem needs to be approached in a more endemic manner? For those diplomatic staff who have language skills, should that not be better recognised? Or is it being recognised, for example, in the career paths and structures when it comes to planning careers? It is not just a question of having the ability. It is a question of recognising it to encourage others and to encourage that expertise throughout the system.

*Alistair Burt:* I am going to ask Jon to comment in a second. My sense is that it is the overall quality of an individual and what they can do that is the heart of our progression or anything like that. Language skills as a part of that are obviously important. But still, it is the ability to handle that and do the job that makes the difference.

**Jon Davies:** When one is recruiting as head of mission or at any level, language skills are an important thing, but just one important thing that I would look at. I am interviewing, coincidentally, for a head of mission post in our region tomorrow and languages will be one thing that we will look at in the mix. But I don't necessarily want to appoint a brilliant linguist if they don't bring with them the rest of the things that are needed for leadership of a post. However, it is part of what we would think of these days as diplomatic excellence. I think it always has been, but it is getting more attention, as the Minister has said. It is certainly part of what we look for when we recruit and what they looked for when our posts were recruited.

**Alistair Burt:** Once our trained speakers are in place we will have 40% more speakers of Arabic in our posts overseas than in 2010. So that is a measure of the step change that we think we needed.

**Q312 Sir Menzies Campbell:** Like others, I welcome the fact that the language skill has been re-established. Many of the statistics you have given us have been very encouraging. But if I can put it this way, we would not send anyone to Paris to be ambassador who could not speak French. Why? Because we know what the impact of that would be culturally and the extent to which respect would be extended. May we take it, then, from what you have said, that the objective is to ensure that all those who head missions, as soon as they can and most certainly in the future, will be fluent Arabic speakers as a mark of respect to those kingdoms and emirates to which they are sent?

**Alistair Burt:** I entirely take your point. Probably my answer would be that we are seeking to increase the pool of those who will be in position for the senior positions of Arabic speakers. Clearly this process will work through time. You cannot come from a standing start and suddenly convert all your senior people.

**Sir Menzies Campbell:** I quite understand that.

**Alistair Burt:** But your point is fair. I would go back to something that I said earlier and have to repeat. Where we believe it is absolutely necessary to do the job—there are some places where it is absolutely necessary—we have the Arabic speakers in place. But there are other Arab states where that has not necessarily been the case and other skills have been necessary for the ambassadors. Accordingly, provided the language is covered elsewhere, then we have believed it has been appropriate to have someone who did not have that language. Plainly, if there are more Arabic skills available to the FCO, it makes a bit of a difference when you have a wider pool, which in many ways I wish we had.

**Q313 Sir Menzies Campbell:** These are all countries with which in some cases we have very close relationships. They are strategically important, particularly at this time. Would you accept the general principle that we should do everything in our power to ensure that at the highest level in our representation there is effective communication, so that for example, if the ambassador goes to call upon the king, the emir or someone of that kind, that communication is not affected by the fact that there has to be simultaneous translation, which we all know from our experience is never as good?

**Alistair Burt:** No, it is not. Clearly it is something that a Minister notices because almost inevitably for most of us—

**Sir Menzies Campbell:** We'll send you to language school.

**Alistair Burt:** Well, it would be great. Actually, all of us need to go to language school, and we should have done it many years ago. Most of us are trading on the fact that everyone speaks our language, so it ill becomes politicians to poke fingers at others. We could all have done better ourselves.

Your central point is absolutely right. What I have seen, by way of observation, is that there is always someone present who speaks the language, even if it is not the ambassador. In significant meetings involving a Minister and a senior representative of the other state, there is always someone from the UK side who is able to pick up the nuances and everything else. The simultaneous translators do a good job.

Your point is well made. Of course we should be looking as much as possible to ensure that those who represent us have the appropriate language skills in the places where they are serving, together with the other skills they need to be an effective ambassador. The wider the pool the better. We are addressing that, and we are picking it up from where it was. That pool will be wider in future.

**Andrew Rosindell:** Good afternoon, Minister.

**Alistair Burt:** Hi, Andrew.

**Q314 Andrew Rosindell:** Does the British-Saudi Arabian two kingdoms dialogue still exist?

**Alistair Burt:** No. We're looking for— Sorry, I saw that it had been tossed around in your discussions before. It was there in the background, but it has not been rekindled, for all sorts of reasons. You will be aware that, for the first couple of years of the coalition Government, relations with Saudi were slightly difficult because of illnesses and ill health in Saudi Arabia. One or two of the things that we would have liked to have got off the ground were not possible.

The two kingdoms dialogue is not there, but there is still talk about how to work up a strategic dialogue in ways not dissimilar to the one the Chairman started with, with the GCC. As Tom Phillips said, it was on the table when he left, and it is still on the table now. However, it does not get in the way of the relationship or anything else. It is perhaps terribly easy to think that because we have created the taskforce in the UAE and the working groups in other states, that is now how the relationship must work. No, not at all. The relationships are good across the board, but different states want different things and have formal or informal structures as suits them. We would like to pursue this, because we think it would help to give an extra bit of structure, but it has not got in the way of the relationships or anything else up to now.

**Q315 Andrew Rosindell:** Has there been any other formal agreement, such as a full strategic partnership, a joint working group or a steering committee? Has anything been formally agreed between the two countries?

**Alistair Burt:** No. As I have said, that is always the risk of setting up something like that somewhere else. Everyone thinks, "Well, we've got to have one." In actual fact, you look at what is being achieved, what the relationships are and what you are able to do state-to-state. Do you need a formalised structure? We thought it would be a good thing, so we set up the taskforce with the UAE that I chaired with Dr Gargash over a period of time. Others have said, "Well, can we formalise our relationship?" But it is not necessary for all, so with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia we have the informal but regular bilateral contact of which you are aware.

**Q316 Andrew Rosindell:** Minister, in terms of increasing trade with Saudi Arabia, we have specific targets with Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates but not with Saudi Arabia. Why is that?

**Alistair Burt:** We have a general target of doubling our bilateral trade across the region between 2009 and 2015, and we are well on track with that. I have not seen a particular reason why we have not pinned one down in Saudi Arabia as such. I am looking at Jon.

**Jon Davies:** No, I think in each case it will be a reflection of what is on offer. I should say that the Saudi market is more mature and is already extremely healthy for the UK. Looking to guarantee a doubling of that market over the period would therefore have been more challenging. If we can, we will, but that is why we are not committing ourselves as formally as that.

**Q317 Andrew Rosindell:** The USA has also managed to agree a reciprocal visa arrangement. Have we considered that? Have we tried to do the same with Saudi Arabia?

**Alistair Burt:** Have you spent a lot of time talking about visas, Mr Chairman? I ask because you have put your finger on one of the hottest topics. Any of us who pay visits to the region will find that visas are brought up very quickly.

**Chair:** It has come up regularly in our visits to a number of countries.

**Alistair Burt:** It does. As I am sure you are all aware, the Government have been proceeding on a border security assessment for some period of time, looking at the visa arrangements across the Gulf, and are still considering the outcome. Visas are incredibly sensitive, but they are not just for business and prosperity purposes; they have a security implication and the like. We believe that the visa service we operate right across the Gulf is very good. In each of the states, regular visitors to the United Kingdom know exactly what it is that they need to do. They are able to get multiple or long-term visas and they know what they need to get them. Everyone would always like the easiest possible visa system, and they look at what each other is getting.

My honest assessment is that even though this is raised a lot by all the states in the Gulf, it does not desperately get in the way of people's visits here, and we are extremely conscious of any risk that that should be the case. We want people to travel, we want business people to be able to stay and invest, and we want students to come here, but the security side of it remains equally important. Where there is a threat or risk that states could be used by those who wish to enter the United Kingdom, we have to be incredibly careful, and we obviously work with the Home Office in relation to this.

The visa system is constantly revisited to see whether we can make it easier for regular visitors and those we know and are able to identify. That is what all the work on biometrics has been about. We have refined the processes to ensure that they are quicker. We will continue to do that, but the bottom line has to be security as well as prosperity.

**Chair:** Thank you. I hope that completes the answer to Mr Rosindell. We will reconvene in 13 minutes at 1.55 pm.

*Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.*

*On resuming—*

**Q318 Chair:** Minister, welcome back. How are you placed for time in your diary?

**Alistair Burt:** My time is yours, Chairman, for goodness' sake. I cleared my diary.

**Chair:** Thank you. I hoped you would say that. We continue the questioning with Ann Clwyd.

**Q319 Ann Clwyd:** Minister, the Foreign Office has acknowledged concern about Saudi Arabia's counter-terrorism programme, which has been responsible for human rights

violations, torture, solitary confinement, and the detention of political opponents. How does the UK handle counter-terrorism information supplied by Saudi Arabia?

**Alistair Burt:** The CT relationship is extremely important to us, but we are very clear about what information cannot be accepted. The Prime Minister has been absolutely clear that the United Kingdom cannot use any information that may have been produced by torture or anything like that. All those we work with in counter-terrorism activity know and understand that very well. However, an awful lot of work goes on where nothing of that sort is engaged in.

**Q320 Ann Clwyd:** May I just ask you specifically, do you make enquiries about the sources of information and their treatment?

**Alistair Burt:** Yes, but there is a limit as to what I can say about CT operations, as the Committee will be aware. The standards that we have to work to and the standards that we can use for evidence or anything like that are clearly extremely important to the United Kingdom.

**Q321 Ann Clwyd:** We are just trying to explore your statements about your concern for human rights. You say that human rights are at the forefront of the Foreign Office's approach to everything. I want to explore that issue more deeply. If you get counter-terrorism information and it comes from sources who may have been tortured or ill-treated, what enquiries do you make?

**Alistair Burt:** Hold on, I am not privy to some of this information. If there is an inquiry going on—let us say the Saudis have concerns that a bomb is on its way to the United Kingdom through Yemen—I do not know anything about that operation until we find out that something has been done with some success. I am not in a position to make any inquiry about any information that is part of any current ongoing investigation. It is not part of my part of my role; I would not be involved in that sort of investigation. Are you saying that after, say, the discovery of something like the Yemen bomb, I go back to the Saudis and say, “How did you find out about that?”?

**Q322 Ann Clwyd:** No, I am asking the question in general, because you made a generalisation about human rights and respect for human rights.

**Alistair Burt:** Correct. But as far as CT operations are concerned, as I say plainly, I am not aware of the passing of information at an operational phase—that simply would not be exposed to Ministers. I understand the point of your question, but I cannot say that, in every case, a Minister is looking at a piece of information supplied to the United Kingdom and saying, “Where did it come from?” That has never been brought to me.

**Q323 Ann Clwyd:** Has the promise given to you that the embassy would be able to attend a CT trial actually been fulfilled?

**Alistair Burt:** I do not have that information. I will have to respond to you on that in another way, I am afraid.

**Q324 Chair:** Does Ms MacIntosh have the answer to that?

**Sarah MacIntosh:** No, I do not; I am sorry.

**Q325 Ann Clwyd:** May I ask you in general about human rights and values? What human rights concerns did you raise on your last visit to Saudi Arabia, and did you raise specific, named cases with the Saudi Ministers? If so, which ones?

**Alistair Burt:** I did not raise named cases with Saudi Ministers. The engagement I had, both with Ministers and with the Human Rights Commission, was about the way in which human rights were being treated in Saudi Arabia at the time, the work of the commission, and the steps forward that were being made. I did have an opportunity, when the Minister of Justice came to the United Kingdom, to talk about reform in the police and court system. We have made known our concerns about the detention of people and trials, so I had an opportunity to engage on that as well as in relation to the death penalty and women's rights.

**Chair:** I think that you have wandered into someone else's group of questions. I have got Mike Gapes down for this with you coming in on the back of it. Continue your question, then Mike will take over.

**Q326 Ann Clwyd:** Human rights organisations have complained that the FCO appears reluctant to press Saudi Arabia on human rights issues, possibly because it has prioritised other interests.

**Alistair Burt:** That is not correct. It is always an easy charge to throw and level, but it is not right. We engage with Saudi Arabia on a whole variety of issues. If you look at the statements I made after a couple of the death penalty cases last year—the execution of the armed robbers and the execution of the young lady of Sri Lankan background—you will see that we made very strong and condemnatory statements in relation to those. We do not allow other issues to cloud our judgment in relation to that. Also, when you were talking to Sir Tom Phillips, I think he made it clear that he was under no instruction to downgrade human rights in relation to other parts of the relationship, which he certainly was not, and he also indicated that that did not interfere with the rest of our relationship.

We have what is called a frank and robust relationship with Saudi Arabia in terms of human rights. As I said in my opening statement, its human rights values are not ours, and we are absolutely right and free to make our comments about them—and we do; we do not hold back on that. I do not give you any guarantee that, in response to our representations, great or sudden changes are made. But we do make it clear that we believe that stability in any state comes from adherence to human rights values, together with a whole series of other things that are building blocks of stability, and we do not hold back from discussing that with Saudi Arabia.

**Q327 Ann Clwyd:** Some recent cases have appeared in the western press. For example, two of the most prominent human rights activists in Saudi Arabia, members of the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association—Abdulla al-Hamid and Mohammad al-Qahtani—were jailed for 11 years and 10 years respectively. Are those the sorts of cases that you might have raised?

**Alistair Burt:** Not necessarily. I would make a judgment on that according to what the ambassador would say and to what cases he was taking up locally. Not every single case of a dissident or a human rights activist necessarily comes into a ministerial discussion, but they are certainly part of the regular dialogue that ambassadors have with states, in so far as we believe that it is appropriate to make representations in certain cases.

**Q328 Ann Clwyd:** There are several reports about foreign maids. One, at least, has been executed.

**Alistair Burt:** I repeat the point I made earlier. The case that I was referring to was a young girl of Sri Lankan origin who was a nanny for a child. She was accused of murder, convicted, and subsequently beheaded. I made the strongest possible statement of condemnation about the process, because we believed that it was highly likely that the woman would have been underage, or under a reasonable age, and still a child when the offence was committed, if it had been committed. We objected to both the principle of the death penalty and the manner of it, so in terms of condemning the process, the sentence and the manner in which it was carried out, I am not sure that I could have done very much more. So do we take those cases up? Yes, we do.

**Q329 Ann Clwyd:** Did you do that in Saudi Arabia?

**Alistair Burt:** We made the statement here because the events were happening while we were here. It was happening contemporaneously with my being in London. To believe that the Saudi authorities did not see a statement from the United Kingdom just because it was made in London is not correct. Were the Government of Saudi Arabia made aware of the United Kingdom's deep distress at the sentence and our belief that it was wrong? Yes, they were.

**Q330 Mark Hendrick:** Minister, going back to counter-terrorism, you made it quite plain earlier that the Government are not happy to receive any intelligence that may have been extracted through the use of torture. However, when information is provided, is it taken at face value or are direct inquiries made by your officials to check the source of that information?

**Alistair Burt:** I look for some guidance on this, because I am not involved operationally in CT activities or anything like that. What I referred to was a very clear statement from the Prime Minister in relation to torture, which he made at the beginning of this Government, to say that the United Kingdom was not involved and would not receive information associated with it. Where this tends to come, of course, is when either issues go to trial and evidence is being relied upon or not, or in incidents relating to the past, where the United Kingdom is brought to book legally for things that Governments might have been responsible for in the past. That is why, first, it is not in our interests to receive information that may have been obtained illegally, and why we would currently sort of wish to reject it, because we do not want to be in those situations.

Where information is being gathered during an investigation—in order, say, to stop an incident, as opposed to dealing with the legal consequences afterwards—genuinely I am not involved in that process. I do not know what safeguards are introduced.

**Q331 Mark Hendrick:** But you are responsible for your officials who may be involved in that process.

**Alistair Burt:** Well, we are, of course, responsible for our officials, but again, my operational knowledge is not such as to know, in the middle of an operation, whether people are pressed as to where a bit of significant information should come from. All I would say is that, as we know, information has to be tested for its reliability. Time and again, there have been concerns that information extracted illegally is not necessarily the most reliable, so I have to work on the basis that professionals must get the most accurate information in order to make their judgments, but every British official knows the stance of the Government in relation to the obtaining of information and evidence illegally.

**Q332 Mark Hendrick:** But what you are not saying, then, is that any evidence extracted illegally would necessarily be disregarded as to its value?

**Alistair Burt:** I cannot answer the question, Mr Hendrick, because I genuinely do not know. In the course of an investigation into something that might turn into a plot or a threat against us, I do not know how every piece of information is adjudged in those circumstances—I really don't. I know that we cannot place any reliance upon information extracted illegally for evidentiary purposes. It does not help us in court. We know also that in dealing with the return of prisoners abroad and in handling them, if there is any risk of torture it affects the way in which the United Kingdom can be involved and the way in which we can be involved with other intelligence agencies.

I am sure that the Committee will be aware of the circumstance in Afghanistan of trying to create what we call a compliance mechanism, which is being sure about how people are treated to make sure that there is a proper relationship for any individual caught by the United Kingdom—by UK forces—and handed over. We have to be confident that handing them over to a process will be appropriate, legal and the like.

I cannot say in relation to CT operations is, in the midst of them, what processes are gone through? All I would say is that every officer working for the United Kingdom in CT operations knows the rules that we have to abide by and what ultimately can be relied upon or not relied upon in court.

**Q333 Mark Hendrick:** Would you say that the counter-terrorism relationship between ourselves and Saudi Arabia is equally important to both states, or would you say that we need them more than they need us?

**Alistair Burt:** No, I think it is important to both states. The Committee will be aware that Saudi Arabia suffered a very serious threat of terrorism a decade ago and in subsequent years. Dealing with that was extremely important to them. They are aware that they have people within their state who can be attracted to radical or extremist ideas, a number of whom, of course, are already outside Saudi Arabia and may be operating in different countries. They know of the concerns about Yemen, for example. It is therefore a matter of great interest to them that they are able to deal with these issues, and it is to us—I go back to the discovery of the printer plot against the United Kingdom and the work of the Saudi authorities in relation to that.

I think, quite genuinely, that this is a mutually beneficial arrangement. It is in all our interests that we are able to tackle terrorism and prevent its effects, but an important part of that, which is at the base of the argument, is how it is done. That is why the United Kingdom maintains the standards that it does, and is in the position of both apologising and paying damages when it has not adhered to those standards. The fact that it is written in to what we try to do is in our interests, and there is not a state that we co-operate or work with that is not aware of that.

**Sarah MacIntosh:** May I add one sentence? I am afraid that I cannot answer the question around operational CT cases—I am not responsible for those—but I can say that in the relationship on CT with Saudi, a number of institutions in the UK, including the MOD and the Metropolitan police, are involved in training around how to conduct CT operations and the policing that surrounds them. Part of that is a forensics training programme for the Saudi police, which is specifically designed to reduce the reliance on confessional evidence for human rights-related reasons, so improving the skills elsewhere reduces your reliance on that.

**Q334 Mike Gapes:** Minister, in an answer to Ann Clwyd, you said that we robustly raise human rights issues, and I think you denied the accusation that we look the other way on these matters. Given the importance of counter-terrorism, defence, security and trade, if it comes down to a choice between human rights issues and those other issues, which you regard as important, is it not true that we actually give a greater emphasis to security and trade than we do to human rights?

**Alistair Burt:** I think, Mr Gapes, that this question has been raised with other witnesses and I think that the responses you have had were uniform: the answer is no. As I say, the former ambassador was asked quite specifically whether he had been instructed to go easy on human rights if there was a risk to commercial operations, and he said no. It is complementary: they are both important to us; it is not an either/or. Equally, I do not think the Committee has had any evidence from anyone to suggest that our speaking out on issues has cost us any big contract or anything else.

There is an understanding in the states that we visit that our adherence to human rights, and the importance we attach to it, is very important to us. There is also an understanding that they do not do things necessarily in the same way as we do in the UK, but they know why we will raise it, and they know why it is important. It is important not just because it is part of our value-base system, but because it is part of everybody's. International human rights obligations matter to all.

We make the point about security and stability in states being associated with a legitimacy of Government based on consent, in which human rights play an enormous part and abuses affect that. We will make this point to Saudi Arabia. There is no evidence that it does not carry the same significance with us as in talking to others, but it is part of the overall relationship and it is not an either/or.

**Q335 Mike Gapes:** Can I then press you? Do we send diplomats to any of the trials of human rights activists that are taking place in Saudi Arabia?

**Alistair Burt:** We have sought to monitor trials.

**Q336 Mike Gapes:** Do we actually attend the trials?

**Alistair Burt:** I am just trying to recall if there are any presently going on. We have certainly in the past where it has been possible to monitor trials. It is not always possible to do. Not every state allows those from abroad to take part and observe, but where we can, and it has been important, we have sought to do so. Jon, I don't know whether you have any more.

**Jon Davies:** I can't give you a definite yes or no answer, but we will check that.

**Q337 Mike Gapes:** Perhaps you can write to us and tell us if there are any examples where you have.

**Jon Davies:** If it were a possibility and we also think that it would be positive to do so, we would normally look to do so. It is also the sort of issue that is raised by, for example, our head of the Human Rights Department, who recently visited Saudi Arabia to discuss these issues with her opposite numbers. So we are trying to find other ways of raising our concern other than that.

**Q338 Mike Gapes:** You are not aware of any specific cases when diplomats, whether ambassadorial or lower level from the embassy, have attended trials in Saudi Arabia?

*Alistair Burt:* We would need to write. I know that we have—and do—attend trials across the region. I cannot give you a specific answer on Saudi Arabia.

**Q339 Mike Gapes:** Perhaps you will write.

*Alistair Burt:* But I do know it is something we look to do, when it is right to do so. There is certainly no bar or suggestion that we shouldn't.

*Jon Davies:* The question was about Saudi Arabia specifically?

**Q340 Mike Gapes:** Specifically about Saudi Arabia, and on Saudi Arabia, the final question from me is about the United Nations Human Rights Council's universal periodic review, which is due later this year. The human rights report from the FCO said that you were "committed to the success of the Universal Periodic Review process". Are we intending to make a robust contribution to this process with regard to Saudi Arabia? On what topics are we likely to focus?

*Alistair Burt:* First, let me say that we do, of course, have Saudi Arabia listed as a country of concern. In a way, that rather belies the sense that we go easy. You will know, of course, that Bahrain is not a country of concern under the FCO; it is a case study. If there were any suggestion that the United Kingdom was soft on Saudi Arabia, it would not be a country of concern. But it is, and it is under a whole series of headings, whether it is the death penalty, whether it is human rights, whether it is representation.

From memory, running through the list that we have in the Home Office report, it details those areas where we are most concerned. They include trials and detentions. You may safely assume that what we have in this year's human rights country of concern listing for Saudi Arabia, which is quite a fair number of paragraphs, forms the basis of our concerns and would form the basis of the concerns that are taken through at the UN.

**Q341 Mike Gapes:** But you haven't yet decided specifically what?

*Alistair Burt:* No, it is a bit early.

I come back to that because it is an important process. For those who do say, "Oh well, clearly you don't press these issues firmly," that report is pretty important. If the United Kingdom wanted to pull punches on the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, it would not be a country of concern. Why should we put ourselves in that position? We do so because it is the right thing to do. There are different reasons why Bahrain is not in that position and different judgments made in relation to both, but the fact that they are both named and up-front is because we have concerns over human rights. If this was not a matter for the United Kingdom to be concerned about—if we were more concerned about commerce, defence and everything else—why would we put our relationship at risk by doing that? We do so because it is the right thing to do, and we are dealing with people who understand that.

In both Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, we are dealing with countries that are edging, in different ways, towards reform. We have not discussed women's position in Saudi Arabia yet, and you may wish to or not, but looking at where a very conservative society looking to reform under King Abdullah—you have been there yourselves—it is an interesting but difficult process. Although we will not mirror each other, and we understand the context, it does not lead us to pull punches in our reports, which we don't.

**Q342 Sandra Osborne:** A couple of witnesses to the inquiry suggested that Saudi Arabia's role as a primary partner is overstated, that it does not necessarily represent wider

Arab opinions, such as related to Egypt, and that it does not have much policy-making capacity. Do you feel that Saudi Arabia has the capacity and political will to be a reliable partner of the UK in pursuing foreign policy goals?

**Alistair Burt:** Yes, I think we do. Saudi is looked to by its neighbours; there is no doubt about that. In both the GCC and, particularly, the Arab League, it is a key player. The Saudis were fully engaged in securing Arab League support for the international military campaign in Libya, for example. Saudi Arabia is looked to by the OIC as well. King Abdullah saw to it that the OIC convened an extraordinary summit in August 2012 in Mecca, which saw the OIC decide to suspend Syria's membership of the OIC due to the actions of the Assad regime. There is plenty of evidence.

It is different to Egypt. There is no doubt that in North Africa and in the Arab world, Egypt has a special place, but so does Saudi. Saudi is a powerful neighbour. What its foreign policy dictates is of huge importance, obviously, to the other Gulf states that surround it, but it is also of great significance in the Arab membership organisations.

**Q343 Sandra Osborne:** You talked earlier about the close working relationship with Saudi Arabia in relation to the various challenges in the Middle East, and you mentioned various countries. To what extent are UK and Saudi goals aligned with regard to Syria, Iran and Bahrain? Do the UK and Saudi Arabia want to achieve the same result with regard to these countries?

**Alistair Burt:** I think you have hit on a key aspect of the relationship. This will dovetail with some of my earlier remarks. Saudi Arabia is a key strategic partner. For all the reasons that you have looked into and that we know so well, the Gulf will remain an important region of influence. I think that our interests are aligned. Saudi Arabia knows how important it is to keep the trade routes free and away from any conflict. Saudi Arabia is acutely aware of the presence of Iran, for example, and of the risks that both it and we believe Iran poses to the region through its nuclear file and other ways in which it has sought to interfere with its neighbours. Whether it is Bahrain or Syria, that evidence is plain. It is in our collective interest to ensure that states are free to go about their own business without fear of interference or threat. It is clearly in our strategic interest that Iran does not become nuclear-capable, thus leading to the risk of proliferation in the region. In all such areas, our interests are aligned.

As far as Bahrain is concerned, clearly there is a special relationship between Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, and I am quite sure that that will be something you will want to explore this afternoon. Obviously, I would not think for a moment that Saudi's relationship with Bahrain is the same as that with the United Kingdom. In so far as we all want to see Bahrain succeed, a national dialogue is being conducted by Bahrainis with Bahrainis, producing a political solution to the complex situation in Bahrain, thereby ending the violence and ensuring greater inclusion and delivery of the BICI recommendations. I think that Saudi Arabia's interests, to that extent, are the same as ours.

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

In many of these respects, as I have outlined, we do have similar interests. That is why we are such an important partner, why we share things in terms of counter-terrorism and intelligence, and why there is such a close relationship. It is also why we are prepared to sell

very sophisticated weaponry to Saudi Arabia in order that it protects itself and plays its part in the protection of a region that is very important to the United Kingdom.

**Q344 Sandra Osborne:** Do you believe that Saudi Arabia could do more in relation to Iraq?

*Alistair Burt:* Well, that is a good question. I do not know, is the short answer. Let me think it through. The most important thing that would lead to greater stability in Iraq would be for the Iraqi political leaders to recognise their responsibilities and try to play their part in ending the sectarian violence that is now ripping the country apart. There is a sense that there is an influence from Iran in relation to Prime Minister Maliki; certainly he and the Iraqis are very aware of Iran. That would give some sense of nervousness to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, but the issues in Iraq almost certainly need to be settled by those in Iraq. We have had enough experience of people from outside trying to be engaged there.

Iraq is going through a difficult time, and it must make its own judgments about what is right. If the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia can be of any influence with Sunni leaders in Iraq by saying, “You must find a way through the polarisation in Iraq and make sure that the political process works to end the violence and provide a political opportunity”, I am sure that that would be time and effort well spent. However, at the moment Iraq’s problems lie first and foremost for Iraqis to deal with.

**Q345 Mr Baron:** Minister, can I turn to the pressing issue of Syria and the nature in which our interests—that is, Saudi Arabia’s and this country’s interests—are aligned vis-à-vis Iran? We are very conscious of the rivalry in the region: the sectarian Sunni-Shi’a split, the Persian-Arab split and all the rest of it. However, we have a conference coming up, and it currently looks as though the Iranians are not going to be welcome. The argument seems to go along the lines of, “Well, they don’t agree with us.” There is therefore even more requirement actually to speak to them and discuss the issues at every opportunity. To what extent is that being influenced by Saudi Arabia’s approach to Iran, or is that something very different?

*Alistair Burt:* Complex stuff, still very much up in the air. At this stage, we do not yet know who will be sitting round a table, and if not sitting round a table, involved in discussions about the conclusion of hostilities in Syria.

**Q346 Mr Baron:** But can I just say something? That is absolutely true, but at the same time, the position to date has been that the west is going to have problems with Iran turning up.

*Alistair Burt:* Unsurprisingly, I am not going to deviate from the answer that the Foreign Secretary gave to your question, and questions from others, on this subject just a couple of hours ago.

**Mr Baron:** What a shame!

**Q347 Mike Gapes:** The position does not change.

*Alistair Burt:* There are some basics in life that we all have to stick to, and the Minister for the Middle East agreeing with the Foreign Secretary seems to me to be not a bad one.

**Q348 Sir Menzies Campbell:** Hold the front page!

*Alistair Burt:* Again, as we are among friends, let’s talk about it. Iran’s influence on what is happening in Syria is immense. We know this. Without Iranian support, it is possible

the regime would have fallen by now, because Russia might not have committed troops in the same way. Iran has probably had some people on the ground, and has probably influenced Hezbollah to get involved. Its involvement is very clear. The issue is that they are clearly part of the problem, but to what extent are they part of the solution?

The Foreign Secretary has made it clear that the cast list for the first Geneva seems to be a reasonable basis, but there is much going on at this stage; this is absolutely current, Mr Baron. I think that those who are involved in trying to resolve Syria and end the appalling bloodshed and violence being wreaked by Assad on his people are acutely conscious of the involvement of a whole series of actors. I have no doubt that those in Saudi Arabia are well involved and well engaged. Trying to get an answer to what is happening in Syria is likely to involve as many actors as possible. I do not know, and I do not think it is possible to say this evening, what format would engage people. All I will say is that the Foreign Secretary has said what he has said in terms of engagement at Geneva. But everyone is well aware of the situation affecting the Iranians.

**Q349 Mr Baron:** If I may, Minister, can I bring this back to Saudi Arabia? No one's hands are clean in this conflict. We know Saudi Arabia is arming the rebels; the reports are widespread. You are absolutely right to suggest that Iran is part of the problem, but it can only be part of the solution if you talk to them and get them round the conference table. To what extent is our relationship with Saudi Arabia causing problems on that front?

**Alistair Burt:** I do not believe it is. I do not believe that is the nub of the issue. Saudi Arabia has been a key part of the Friends of Syria—the core group of nations, as well as the wider group, that has been doing everything in its power to work with those who express peaceful opposition to the regime, who have found themselves under attack and who have been recognised as the legitimate representatives of the Syrian people by more than 130 other states and entities. Saudi Arabia has been a key part of that.

I do not believe there has been a public admission by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia that they are supplying arms into the situation. They have certainly provided support to those seeking reform, who are under pressure, as the United Kingdom has. I don't believe I should put on the record any admission of Saudi Arabia supplying arms. Clearly, they have an acute interest in an Arab state whose population is under attack from its Government, and where people are dying in serious numbers. They have the same determination. The Foreign Minister has expressed a wish for the violence to come to an end, and for the peaceful political solution being proposed through the Geneva process to be followed as a matter of great importance.

Remember, the Arab League's envoy, Lakhdar Brahimi, the same envoy as for the UN, has also sought a peaceful solution. Saudi Arabia is working for a peaceful solution, and I do not believe that its concerns about Iran, which many share, in any way get in the way of trying to find the right and peaceful answer to what is happening in Syria.

**Q350 Mr Baron:** Can I move us on to the Middle East peace process generally? It is becoming a bit of a cliché, but the response to any queries about the Middle East peace process is that there is no peace and there is certainly no process. To what extent is Saudi Arabia providing support to the effort to restart the Middle East peace initiative or process? Is the Arab peace initiative still relevant today?

**Alistair Burt:** Yes, but first, I think the opportunities for a revival of the process are as good at the moment as they have been for some time, for reasons we all know very well: there is a second-term President who is prepared to take an interest in it—very seriously, from his

speech in Israel—and a new Secretary of State in the United States, who is personally very committed. So perhaps there is a process under way.

There is a sort of peace—certainly compared with Syria—between Palestinians on the west bank and Israel. There is a ceasefire peace of sorts even between Hamas in Gaza and Israel, but it is not stable unless we get the settlement.

I understand an Arab League delegation recently saw Secretary Kerry; the Saudis were part of it. The Arab peace initiative, which of course has been a key part of Saudi Arabia's background and involvement in the Middle East peace process for so long, was reiterated as still being a key part of the process looking forward. It was a very important statement that that was made: it is a key part of the process. I think Saudi Arabia has every interest, as the rest of us do, in seeing this issue resolved, with so much uncertainty around in the rest of the area, and we are certainly using that. So Saudi Arabia supports the efforts being made by Secretary Kerry and ourselves to see some progress, which is absolutely vital in the issues between Israel and the Palestinians.

**Q351 Mr Roy:** Minister, on Bahrain, a year after the 2011 uprising, the Government created the joint working group and signed a defence accord with Bahrain in 2012. Was that intended as a signal of support?

**Alistair Burt:** It represents a very supportive relationship between the United Kingdom and Bahrain, which we make no secret of. We see Bahrain as an important partner for the United Kingdom in the region—an important historic partner, a partner who plays a key part in our strategic defence, has given the United Kingdom support with basing rights and helped us in relation to Afghanistan. The joint working group, as we discussed earlier, is one of the evolutions of the Gulf Initiative. Bahrain was looking to formalise the bilateral discussions that we have right across the board. We have chosen to do it through the working group and the defence accord. I think you may have discussed with Defence Ministers that there is a strong relationship. That you could take both those items as evidence of that strong relationship seems to me perfectly reasonable.

**Q352 Mr Roy:** The working group first met three months ago. What was achieved?

**Alistair Burt:** It's got five broad pillars: bilateral issues, reform and assistance, security and counter-terrorism, trade and investment, and regional issues. I will discuss each of those headings. On reform and assistance, we continue our efforts to support Bahrain in implementing the BICI recommendations, of which there were 26. The Crown Prince recently indicated that there were some 17 separate projects that he could count where the United Kingdom was giving technical assistance to Bahrain, some in relation to implementing recommendations, others wider capacity building assistance. So, it is reform and assistance—us encouraging the national dialogue as a key part of the working group.

On regional issues, as you would imagine, we discussed what was happening in the Gulf and the strategic partnership that we have. On trade and investment, we continue to look for opportunities to increase the trade between us. There was a 39% increase in trade between 2009 and 2012. The current total bilateral trade of goods and services is £884 million.

**Q353 Mr Roy:** But what was achieved, Minister?

**Alistair Burt:** What was achieved was the opportunity to discuss under each of those headings the current issues where we could do more. For instance, in terms of reform and technical assistance, sitting across the table from those responsible for implementing BICI, I can say, "How is this going? Why have some parts stalled more than others? What are you

going to do about such and such? Why aren't we making progress on that?" The working group gives the opportunity to do that.

**Q354 Mr Roy:** On doing that face to face, if you thought, for example, there were no signs of reform or improvements in Bahrain's protection of human rights, would you then ultimately suspend that group?

*Alistair Burt:* No, because I do not think that that is the point and the purpose of it. We are committed to assisting Bahrain in delivering on the BICI recommendations, because we believe that, together with the efforts being made at political dialogue, they form the best opportunity of stability for Bahrain in the long term. I do not think that a relationship based on a sort of "or else" principle would do the job at the moment. It is clear that we have made a big commitment to Bahrain; I make no bones about that. Look at the work that we have done and the efforts of our ambassador there. We have taken a view that we believe that by engaging with opposition and Government, working through these recommendations, the very complex governance issues in Bahrain that spilled over into tragic violence in February 2011 have the best chance of being dealt with.

I do not think we would help that relationship if I were to go in to the working group and say, "Unless you do X, Y and Z, that's it." I do not think we have reached the stage where it is appropriate for me to talk in those terms. Where we do not think progress is being made, we are prepared to say so, as we have done through various statements.

**Q355 Mr Roy:** Can I just ask about progress? I want to take you to what may be a need for a united front between the United Kingdom and the United States in relation to Bahrain. We heard the Crown Prince in November 2012 speak glowingly of the United Kingdom, but at the same time totally ignore the United States. I am tempted to ask you whether you think the United States has been too critical of Bahrain, but I suspect you would not give me an answer.

*Alistair Burt:* I would say it is a matter for them.

**Q356 Mr Roy:** Exactly, that is what I thought. Do you agree that there is potential for a united front, if the United Kingdom and the United States are as one in relation to human rights or anything else with Bahrain? Or does it just not matter?

*Alistair Burt:* I think probably it is more a situation of nuance than anything else. I appreciated what the Crown Prince had to say. I would not have wanted it to be seen in opposition to anyone else. Others are trying to encourage Bahrain in their own ways. The United States will speak with a different voice, because they believe that is an effective way to communicate. We believe that ours is a different way, perhaps because we have a different type of engagement.

I do not necessarily want to see our support for Bahrain counterpointed with anyone else's. Are our interests the same of those of the United States in wanting to see reform in Bahrain? Absolutely. Clearly, I have met and discussed with senior US officials the situation in Bahrain and our common aim of seeing recommendations followed through for the stability of Bahrain.

**Q357 Mr Roy:** Can I take you to a subject of criticism from the opposition, and that is the British advisers in Bahrain, such as John Yates and Daniel Bethlehem? Are those advisers

a help or a hindrance in relation to the opposition's perception that the UK backs or supports the regime?

**Alistair Burt:** I don't know. Clearly, that is a matter of opinion for them. They are independent advisers, as you know; they are not UK Government advisers. They were chosen because of their operational experience and the help that they could give, which I certainly support. As we know, throughout the region one of the difficulties is in controlling large numbers of people. Incidents in the past often occurred due to a lack of training in security forces who made a misjudgment about how to handle the crowd.

**Q358 Mr Roy:** So you don't think there is any potential reputational damage to the United Kingdom from the perception of those advisers.

**Alistair Burt:** No, I don't think so. I have held conversations with the major opposition party in London as well as Manama. Had the opposition at any stage in my conversations with them brought that issue to me, I hope I could have reassured them. I think those officers there are trying to do something of benefit to the people of Bahrain and the political process.

I would seek to reassure them. If they take a different view, that is a matter for them. I would hope to reassure them that that is the purpose of their being engaged there. If people are worried about how Bahraini forces reacted in February '11, then they would have just been left alone to their own devices and we would not have been engaged in trying to improve and make their responses safer. I would say that our involvement is a good thing and seek to persuade others that that was the case.

**Q359 Mike Gapes:** Minister, in the written evidence from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office that you sent us, paragraph 42 refers to the follow-up to the independent international commission's recommendations, and states that "all charges relating to freedom of expression have been dropped" with regard to individuals who have been detained. However, I understand from Human Rights Watch that in fact 13 defendants remain in jail on long-term sentences relating solely to their right to freedom of expression. I got that information this week, and I am therefore interested to know which is true—what Human Rights Watch is telling me or what your written evidence to us says.

**Alistair Burt:** My understanding of this—and clearly if it is a matter of dispute then we will need to check it—was that charges relating to freedom of expression were indeed dropped, but there were other serious charges relating to a number of the defendants. My understanding is that they have been held on those charges. We do not have access to all the evidence, so we are not in a position to make a judgment as to whether we think that is fair, but my understanding has certainly been that their convictions are related not to freedom of expression but to other serious offences.

**Q360 Mike Gapes:** So in that sense, the memorandum we received was insufficient, as it did not go into all of the aspects. Perhaps you could send us a note to update it.

**Alistair Burt:** I can certainly update it. It is honest and accurate in relation to freedom of expression, but plainly if people are charged with other offences—

**Mike Gapes:** Okay. Fair enough.

**Alistair Burt:** But we will check that. Jon, was that your understanding—am I correct?

**Jon Davies:** My understanding was as yours, Minister, but we will double-check.

**Q361 Mike Gapes:** Can I take you on to the statement in which the FCO said that it was “disappointing”—you yourself were quoted, Minister, with regard to “the importance we and the international community place on the visit”—that the visit of the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture has been cancelled? I understand that it has been cancelled twice, at short notice, with no date arranged for a visit. What are we doing as a Government to impress upon the Bahraini authorities that this does not look good and needs to be sorted out quickly?

**Alistair Burt:** We have pressed them in private, and, as this is not a private occasion, I can say that we can press them in public, because your question is entirely correct; we think it does no good to the Bahraini authorities not to allow the Special Rapporteur to visit. We think if the Special Rapporteur was able to visit it would help validate the efforts that Bahrain is making in this respect. We press upon it and this is a perfect example of me being able to do that publicly.

**Q362 Mike Gapes:** Do you think that there is some internal politics going on in Bahrain that means that invitations are made but then rescinded because of a struggle between different parts of the political system?

**Alistair Burt:** There is a lot of internal politics going on in Bahrain, and this gives an opportunity to touch on that, although again I think by now you will be well versed in it.

I have taken the view for some time that, in essence, although there is a more complex picture, we are talking about four particular groupings. Within the Sunni minority and those in government, there are a group of those who see reform as very important, and clearly the Crown Prince has a lead role in that. There are others in the Sunni community who are hesitant: they are worried about change and they have been less forward in terms of reform. That is a matter of dispute and discussion within the Sunni community.

In the Shi’a community, there are clearly those—such as the leaders of al-Wifaq, who I have met on a number of occasions—who believe, according to the Manama dialogue, that a political settlement that recognises the al-Khalifa monarchy is something they can work towards. It will involve a great deal of representation and their engagement in national dialogue is an expression of that. There are others who are maybe influenced outside but also may just feel that that is not enough, and there are some on the edge of violence connected with the February 14 movement.

Each of those different blocs puts pressure on the others. Will there have been difficulties inside each of those blocs, particularly in the Sunni community, on the Rapporteur? I do not know, but it is perfectly possible.

**Q363 Mike Gapes:** Final question. In passing you touched on the attitude, when you were talking about Saudi Arabia and relations in regard to Syria and Iran. Do you share the fear that many people—including many in Bahrain—have, which is that the wider conflict in Syria, and potentially in Iraq and elsewhere in the region between Sunni and Shi’a, could have knock-on consequences on and hold back the efforts to build some kind of national consensus for a new way forward?

**Alistair Burt:** It is a very good question, to which I could not possibly give an answer. I will just do my best with an opinion. It is very clear that the whole region has a heightened state of tension because of the events of the past two and a half years. You see that reflected across the Gulf in a number of different ways. The reaction to Arab awakening in North Africa has been far from uniform. Some have responded quickly and generously. You could argue that in Saudi Arabia, for instance, the \$130 billion package of support to the people and

efforts in the eastern region to provide financial support to ease tensions were one reaction to the situation.

That everyone is apprehensive and worried about where conflict can lead is clear, but the issues affecting Bahrain clearly go back well before Arab awakening or anything like that. In a sense, it is an unresolved issue of reform dating back more than a decade to when the King, as soon as he came into his position, started seeking to make some changes and found, as we have just discussed, difficulties within the Sunni community over how far those changes should go.

Events in Syria or anywhere else will have heightened worry, which will certainly have increased because of Iran's activities in Syria. Concerns that even though Iran might not have instigated recent events in Bahrain, they are certainly in a position to exploit them, will not have helped the situation. Hence our determination. We have frequently said, "Let the Bahrainis solve this."

Each state is different, so it is trite but correct to say that it is a unique situation, so there must be a unique Bahraini solution to the problem. It will help if people allow the Bahrainis do that. My sense is that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia wants a stable Bahrain and is supportive of the national dialogue process and how it has been taken forward. Would they be afraid of more Iranian involvement in Bahrain? Yes, they would, and so would Bahrainis, because the Iranians should not be involved. Everyone has a vested interest in seeing the Bahrainis make the decisions here, but you are right to highlight fears and apprehensions, although I do not think they are stopping anything. Hopefully, they should drive a Bahraini settlement.

**Q364 Sir John Stanley:** Minister, will you confirm for the record the evidence that has already been received by the Committees on Arms Export Controls from the Government that British-made armoured vehicles exported to Saudi Arabia were sent by the Saudis across the causeway into Bahrain to guard key infrastructure installations during the demonstrations in Bahrain following the Arab Spring?

*Alistair Burt:* I think that is true.

**Q365 Sir John Stanley:** Thank you. Will you also confirm what is I believe a statement of the obvious, which is that that deployment made it unnecessary for Bahraini security forces to provide for the security of those key installations and enabled those Bahraini security forces to be used for internal security operations?

*Alistair Burt:* There is an inevitable logic in your question. I am sure that that must be correct, yes.

**Q366 Sir John Stanley:** Thank you. Could you also acknowledge that the conduct of at least some of the Bahraini security forces, in the degree of their use of violence against essentially peaceful protesters—we all saw on our television screens Bahraini security vehicles simply mowing down peaceful protesters, substantial numbers of those demonstrators being put into jail, the abuse of those demonstrators when they were in jail and the use of torture, rape and threats of rape, on which the Committee has received abundant evidence—was totally unacceptable by the benchmark of international human rights standards?

*Alistair Burt:* That is all correct, and I do not think it is a matter of contention with the British Government. That is why we criticised the Government of Bahrain. It is why we revoked, as you know very well, certain licences in terms of arms exports for Bahrain. It was

also the starting point for the remarkable independent commission of inquiry instituted by the Government of Bahrain. Uniquely in the region, the commission of inquiry ended up criticising the Government and setting out a series of recommendations to ensure that nothing like that happened again. Your description of events is one that would be accepted by all of us. It was the starting point, we hope, for change.

**Q367 Sir John Stanley:** Given your acknowledgment of the three points I have made, will you take the opportunity of this final ministerial evidence session at the conclusion of the Committee's inquiry to offer an expression of regret that British armoured vehicles exported to Bahrain indirectly facilitated extreme violence against civilian demonstrators and very serious human rights abuses?

*Alistair Burt:* No, Sir John. I can see exactly where you are going, but there is no connection between the work done by the Saudi authorities to protect certain places in Bahrain and the behaviour of Bahraini security forces subsequently. That the Bahraini forces were able to go off and do their job is clear, but they could have handled it in a completely different manner. They could have handled it in the manner demanded by the international community. They could have handled it in the manner expressed by BICI when they looked into it. They could have handled it in 101 different ways, and they should have done. There is no logical connection between what the Saudi authorities were asked to do by the Government of Bahrain and the GCC, namely to come in and provide protection and do what they did—there is no connection between any of those vehicles and any human rights abuses. It would have been entirely open to the Bahraini security forces to do their job properly, so there is not the connection between the two. Had there been, the point of your question would have been absolutely valid, but I do not see it.

**Q368 Sir John Stanley:** So you are not prepared to offer any expression of regret that it was British-made armoured vehicles that were able to facilitate the use of Bahraini armed forces and police forces in a way that was wholly unacceptable in human rights terms?

*Alistair Burt:* No, Sir John, in all fairness, I am not. You are making a connection and trying to put us in a position that I do not think is fair. We believe, and we have made this very clear, that there was no reason for the Bahraini security forces to act in the way they did. They did so for a whole series of reasons, examined by the commission of inquiry, a number of which were accepted by their own Government and by the forces themselves as having been wrong.

I see no evidence that the Saudi authorities condoned or, by their presence and by using British vehicles, played any part in encouraging that behaviour. I think it is an unfair connection to make, and I think it is way too tenuous. Could the Bahrainis have done it entirely without any Saudi Arabian forces on the island at all? Yes, probably they could have done. So I think it is unfair to search for some British connection to rap us over the knuckles for supplying equipment to Saudi Arabia.

Let me be absolutely clear: the regret is the way in which the Bahraini security forces handled what happened in February 2011. I accept, as we all do, your description of events that were appalling. That is what is in the process of being corrected, but I think it is too tenuous to say that, somehow, British-made vehicles made this possible. These were Bahraini judgments that were made, and they were wrong.

**Q369 Sir John Stanley:** In your earlier evidence, Minister, you said that you were the faithful servant of the Foreign Secretary. You will be aware that the Foreign Secretary has

formally stated to the Committees on Arms Export Controls that the British Government do not grant export licences or arms that might “facilitate internal repression.” Isn’t this a case where British arms facilitated internal repression?

*Alistair Burt:* I do not think so. The connection you are trying to make is genuinely way too tenuous. Plainly, what happened in Bahrain was wrong. We have all said so and those who were involved have said so. There were immense repercussions, but trying to draw the link that the supply of equipment led inevitably to the behaviour, rather than the deployment, is not correct.

**Q370 Chair:** Are you concerned by reports that the perception in Britain of Bahrain is becoming rather negative? One witness rather likened the UK’s position with Bahrain to Russia’s with Syria. What is your reaction to that?

*Alistair Burt:* I have felt for some time that it is a complex situation that is not always faithfully recorded. I do not wish to criticise the press because they report what they see, but anyone who has been to Bahrain and been engaged for a period of time knows that this is not a simple situation. They know that there are people working for reform and change, and they know that there are still things that go on that are wrong.

The United Kingdom has set out its stall. I make no apology for this and I will be totally up front: we think that the best chance for stability in Bahrain lies through the successful national dialogue process by Bahrainis, which will seek their own political settlement, which is highly likely to encompass the al-Khalifa leadership and the structure of Bahrain. We think that Bahrainis should be given every encouragement to proceed with this and do all the BICI recommendations and the like.

We do not ally ourselves to all the opposition to the Bahraini Government, because that varies. There is some opposition that we deal with, work with and listen to because we believe that they are part of the solution. There are others that we think have taken to violence that we will not sanction and not support.

I have seen, as you must have seen, the evidence of those who assault some of the security forces—the people who get fire extinguishers, stuff metal rods in them and fire them at the police. That is unacceptable; it cannot be justified and it cannot be excused. I would want to see absolute condemnation of that sort of violence, which does not help in the process. At the same time, it is absolutely essential that the security forces adhere to the highest possible standards.

I think that that is a justifiable position for the United Kingdom. If people look at the situation in Bahrain, they will see that it is complex, and the more you go into it, the more you understand the layers and issues reflected. For instance, the coverage of the grand prix and the protest leading up to that tended to wait for the protest to turn violent, which was usually at the end of a Government-allowed protest which was conducted peacefully by opposition forces. At the end, it tended to get hijacked by a few and that was what was reported, not the fact that peaceful protest was made and handled perfectly properly by those wanting to protest as well as the Government authorities that allowed it. The impression was gained of a population against the grand prix, with the violence and everything else. I did not think that that told the whole story.

That is my position. We are very clear about what we are trying to help achieve in Bahrain for all Bahrainis. Sometimes, the full picture is not displayed. I do not mind facing up to the criticism for supporting the Bahraini authorities in trying to see through reform, and I am prepared to criticise them when they do not. That is the appropriate position for us to take.

If we take a reputational knock fairly, that is fine, but sometimes it is a bit unfair. We do see opposition groups; the ambassador is meticulous in relation to that. We do not see people connected with violence, but we see the opposition at the embassy in Bahrain and we see them here. We are trying to work through and be fair to all.

**Q371 Chair:** You say that the embassy in Bahrain meets opposition groups. We have had evidence that the British embassy is less accessible for opposition groups and human rights activists than other embassies. Is that a fair comment?

**Alistair Burt:** I have picked up one expression of concern in the witness statements and we are not sure that we have actually had a request from that particular group to come to the embassy, but I would look at any of them. I have seen opposition groups in the embassy. I obviously know the ambassador very well and I know that he would want to see and does see those involved in the opposition, because their involvement in the process is vital. The people he has said that he will not see and play a part with clearly are those who have supported or endorsed violence. I think the Committee would think that that was fair. I am very keen, however, to ensure that our embassy is open to all political groups, because that is where an embassy draws its information from that can inform us. We will look very carefully at that, but my sense was that the particular group that had expressed concern has not formally asked to see the ambassador there, but we will do what we can.

**Q372 Chair:** This is the last topic before we wrap it up. In answer to a question from Mr Gapes, you mentioned Iran. Do you think that Iran is interfering in the internal activities in Bahrain at the moment?

**Alistair Burt:** Yes, but I do not think that is a complete answer to all the issues. I am very conscious that there are some in Bahrain who would like to see Iran as the source of all the problems, but I don't think that is fair or correct. After the events of February 2011, our evidence has tended to suggest that the Iranians were not active in Bahrain in instigating them, but they were well placed to exploit. The media that are beamed across from Bahrain are very significant. They play into the Shi'a villages and some of the material is not designed to be helpful or conducive to peace.

We have had evidence more recently of some more active involvement on the ground. Alas I am not able to share that evidence. My overall impression remains that Iran can and does exploit the situation, but there are many issues in Bahrain that can be settled by Bahrainis between themselves. It is not an excuse for the Bahraini authorities to say that there is some engagement or involvement with the Iranians. The Iranians should leave off and allow Bahrainis to do their job, but the Government and the authorities have to do their job in seeing through this reform process. That is the most likely counterbalance to anything the Iranians might wish to do.

**Q373 Chair:** So you don't think that Iran poses a serious security threat to Bahrain.

**Alistair Burt:** I think Iran poses a serious security threat to everybody, frankly, and if they are allowed to run on with their nuclear threat and everything, that is certainly true.

**Chair:** So you think they do pose a serious threat to Bahrain?

**Alistair Burt:** They could do. I don't believe at the moment that there is any evidence to suggest that they do—I look to both colleagues. Could they in the future? Yes, they could. Have they been engaged? Yes, they have. I am very keen to stress, however, that I am not blaming the Iranians for what is happening in Bahrain. I think the Committee has that sense, too. There is plenty that the Bahraini Government can and should be doing to follow on the

extraordinary track that they set themselves, which is unique in the Gulf, and they should concentrate on that. Have I got the Iranians right?

**Jon Davies:** I think you have. We have seen elsewhere Iran's willingness to intervene and interfere. They have done so to a limited extent, as the Minister describes, and they may well do it again. They can, should they choose, pose a significant threat. As of today, they are not threatening the existence of Bahrain.

**Q374 Chair:** There is no sign of activity there as of today?

**Jon Davies:** I hope that is not what I said, Chairman. There is evidence of activity, yes, but it is not to the extent that we have seen Iran do in other countries, which would make it a more significant threat.

**Q375 Mike Gapes:** But you will confirm that Iran still does not recognise Bahrain as an independent state and believes that Bahrain is Iranian territory. Is that not the case?

**Jon Davies:** I think that their formal position is to accept it, but Ministers of their Government will sometimes express a claim.

**Mike Gapes:** Ahmadinejad and others have made statements in the past.

**Alistair Burt:** And also about other bits of the Gulf as well. There are other islands that they lay claim to. They are quite free in their expression of where their territorial range lies, but let us all hope that recent events might just move things in a different direction. Insha'Allah, as they say.

**Q376 Ann Clwyd:** On a point of clarification, you mentioned national dialogue taking place in Bahrain. I understood that the national dialogue had actually broken down.

**Alistair Burt:** That is not the latest information that I have. It has been a bit of a stop-start process. We have impressed upon all who have been involved—a little like Northern Ireland—that there will be good days and bad days. I am not aware and have not been given a signal that it has broken down. That there may be a pause is not unnatural in the process, but I have not seen anything—unless it is absolutely right-bang immediate. It is a process and it is not easy to get the parties to talk about what they need to talk about. It may take some time, but we are working really hard with both sides to keep them engaged.

**Chair:** Minister, thank you very much indeed. You have been very good with your time—more than two hours—so I thank you and your colleagues very much indeed.

**Alistair Burt:** It has flown by, Chairman. Thank you.