



House of Commons
Foreign Affairs Committee

British foreign policy and the 'Arab Spring': follow-up

Twelfth Report of Session 2014–15

*Report, together with formal minutes relating
to the report*

*Ordered by the House of Commons
to be printed 17 March 2015*

The Foreign Affairs Committee

The Foreign Affairs Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration, and policy of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and its associated public bodies.

Current membership

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[Mr John Baron MP](#) (*Conservative, Basildon and Billericay*)
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Powers

The committee is one of the departmental select committees, the powers of which are set out in House of Commons Standing Orders, principally in SO No 152. These are available on the internet via www.parliament.uk.

Publication

Committee reports are published on the Committee's website at www.parliament.uk/facom and by The Stationery Office by Order of the House.

Evidence relating to this report is published on the [inquiry page](#) of the Committee's website.

Committee staff

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

Contacts

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Report

1. In February and March 2015, the Committee undertook a short inquiry following up its work earlier in the Parliament on British foreign policy and the 'Arab Spring'. We visited Egypt and Tunisia in February 2015,¹ and we took oral evidence from Tobias Ellwood MP, the FCO Minister with responsibility for the Middle East and North Africa region, on 3 March 2015.² On the basis of the visit and the oral evidence session with the Minister, we wrote to the Foreign Secretary setting out our observations, including matters which we are drawing to the attention of our successors in the next Parliament. We attach that letter as Annex 1 to this report.

¹ See Annex 2 for a list of meetings held.

² See [transcript](#) and [follow-up letter](#) from Mr Ellwood, dated 11 March 2015

Annex 1: Letter to the Foreign Secretary

Developments in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia

As you will know, the Committee conducted a visit last month to Egypt and Tunisia in order to consider developments that had taken place in the region since our 2012 report on British Foreign Policy and the 'Arab Spring'. We were briefed on the situation in the region before our visit by FCO officials and academic experts, and following the visit we took evidence from Mr Ellwood in his capacity as Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the FCO. Parliamentary time does not allow for a full report to be produced, so I am writing to you directly to set out the Committee's main observations. We will be publishing this letter as an Annex to our Twelfth Report.

Egypt

The FCO has faced substantial challenges in handling the volatile political atmosphere and changes in Egyptian leadership over the last four years. The Embassy was able to arrange high-level meetings for the Committee during our visit, including with the President, which indicated that the bilateral relationship had survived the changes in leadership. The meetings we had with ministers and others confirmed that Egypt remained interested in strengthening its relationship with the UK further. We noted both in our conversations in Egypt and in ministerial evidence a particular emphasis on security cooperation and trade in the bilateral relationship. This was demonstrated by the trade delegation led by Mr Ellwood to Cairo in January to boost trade and increase British investment in Egypt; the British delegation led by you to the March 2015 investment conference in Sharm el-Sheikh, at which BP announced that it had finalised an agreement to invest \$12bn in its West Nile Delta concession; and the recently-announced High-Level Security Dialogue begun in March 2015. We support this approach. We asked Mr Ellwood when he gave evidence on 3 March for the names of those companies who had participated in his January trade delegation, and he has confirmed that a partial list of companies that were on the delegation will be released shortly, with the names of some companies withheld at their request "for commercial or security reasons". We await that information and will draw it to the attention of our successors.

With a former military leader once again in power in Egypt, it is inevitable that comparisons are drawn to the past, and to the UK's relations with Egypt under Mubarak. In 2012, we noted damage that had been done to the UK's reputation because of its perceived support for autocratic governments. There has since been some criticism from commentators that the West, including the UK, has returned to a policy of prioritising strength and stability over one of supporting chaotic and messy young democracies, particularly in Egypt. This perception is reinforced by reports of a serious deterioration in the human rights situation in Egypt. We were told by some interlocutors on our visit that human rights (and human rights defenders) were under severe pressure.

In our 2012 report, we expressed concern about the human rights problems in Egypt and recommended that the UK prioritise the rights of women and religious minorities. We

have since highlighted concerns about Egypt's human rights situation in our 2014 report on The FCO's Human rights work in 2013. We acknowledge that the current leadership inherited a very difficult human rights legacy, and in our discussions with senior ministers in Cairo we were given assurances on the Egyptian government's commitment to improving the situation. We were also impressed by the active and apparently well-connected human rights team in the British Embassy in Cairo. Committee members visited a remarkable project dedicated to tackling violence against women developed by the UK in co-operation with the Egyptian government, which we considered to be a good example of the UK's support for human rights in Egypt. Although we were initially very concerned by Mr Ellwood's statement that he had not raised human rights during his trade delegation to Egypt, he has since clarified in his letter of 11 March that he raised human rights concerns with Ministerial interlocutors in the Egyptian Government during the trade mission, and that during a wide-ranging discussion with the Prime Minister, he made clear that the British Government wanted to see rule of law, transparency and respect for human rights strengthened in Egypt. We have been consistently told that trade can open the door for human rights conversations, rather than silence them. It is vital that this policy is implemented by Ministers by raising issues during trade delegations. In 2012, we called for the UK Government to maintain a consistent and robust approach to supporting human rights in Egypt, and we repeat that call now.

Tunisia

Our 2012 report was cautiously hopeful about Tunisia's prospects following the overthrow of its leader, former President Ben Ali, in 2011. In the intervening years, Tunisia experienced a politically difficult period in 2013-14. Happily, it has emerged from these difficulties and agreed a new constitution, holding elections in 2014-15 which saw a peaceful transfer of power and the formation of a new coalition government. We were pleased to find a universally positive and optimistic outlook among those we met during our visit in 2015.

In 2012, we concluded that the UK should continue to strengthen ties with Tunisia. On our recent visit, the British Embassy facilitated high level access to the most senior members of government which again indicated that relations between the UK and Tunisia were good. We welcome the FCO's decision to dedicate increased staff and resources to its Embassy in Tunisia, and believe that this is paying off. We had expressed concern about the UK's low profile in 2012, and were told by experts both here and in Tunisia that it remained the case that the UK's work to support political and economic reforms was not well known. This was frustrating given the extremely impressive projects run by the British Council and BBC Media Action that we visited in both 2012 and 2015. Mr Ellwood confirmed in his evidence that this was not a deliberate strategy and said that the UK was a visible partner, but agreed that perhaps there was more that we could do. We also noted that no FCO ministers had visited Tunisia for some time, though this was in part due to the election schedule in Tunisia. We suggest that a ministerial visit to Tunisia is considered a priority under the next Government.

We noted that while Tunisia itself is relatively secure, it is situated in a volatile region and has a long border with Libya. There have been reports that Tunisians have constituted the largest numbers of foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria, which is of serious concern. We welcome the UK's commitment to engage with Tunisia on security issues, and ask that the FCO carefully monitors whether returning fighters pose any threat to the flourishing British tourist presence in Tunisia.

In our last report, we expressed some disappointment with the European Union's response to the 'Arab Spring'. Tunisia has long sought better access to European Union markets, and since 2011, its government has at times stated that it is disappointed with the EU's assistance. Many commentators have called for the EU to do more to provide trade, jobs and investment to assist Tunisia's recovery. We were pleased to find that the UK was considered to be a supportive partner to Tunisia at the EU level, and we urge the UK to continue this and to support any further negotiations to improve trade between Tunisia and the EU.

Libya

Sadly, the situation in Libya is far less bright than it was in 2012. The deterioration in the security situation in Libya and closure of the British Embassy there in 2014 meant that it was not possible for us to visit Libya in 2015, as we had in 2012.

In 2012, we concluded that the Government had been bold in its response to the Libyan crisis. However, post-intervention rebuilding has proven to be difficult. After 42 years of Gaddafi rule, Libya was largely without functioning institutions and there was a failure to dissolve the various militias and prevent the flow of weapons across North Africa. That the current crisis and conflict in Libya was brought about by failures among the Libyan politicians and militias does not absolve the international community, or the UK, from a particular responsibility to assist Libya to repair itself. The fact that ISIL appears to have taken advantage of the chaos in Libya to establish itself there is a security concern reaching beyond Libya, and is further motivation for the international community to provide assistance.

There is cause for some optimism in the UN-organised talks, particularly - as Mr Ellwood pointed out - because all parties have shown a degree of willingness to take part. We welcome the appointment last year by the Prime Minister of Jonathan Powell as the UK Special Envoy to the Libyan Political Transition. Although we have received some limited criticism of his role and lack of visibility, on the whole we heard significant praise from diplomats. We see his role in assisting UN envoy Bernardino Leon in his efforts to find a negotiated solution as a clear commitment by the UK to help Libya's ongoing transition.

Illegal migration through and from Libya is undoubtedly a major concern, not least because of a potential security threat from terrorists who could use this means to travel to Europe to conduct attacks. Since Italy's Mare Nostrum operation ended in November 2014, it has been replaced by the EU's more limited Operation Triton. Human rights groups, including the UNHCR, have criticised this move, claiming that it places migrants at much higher risk of death. Mr Ellwood, on 3 March, said that Mare Nostrum had in

some ways been counter-productive in that it encouraged hazardous migration, and he promised to provide us with data showing whether the number of migrant boats had increased or decreased. The Minister has since written to say that this data is not yet available but will be provided as soon as it is published. We await that information and will draw it to the attention of our successors.

FCO approach

Arab Partnership Department & Fund

We learned that the Arab Partnership Department has just been re-named the Middle East and North Africa Directorate Strategy Department, with a “broader footprint” and more communications work. Greater effort on strategic communications is welcome, as we noted in our 2012 report that perceptions of the UK in the region were poor and that the FCO needed to do more to address this. It remains unclear to us, however, what this change means in terms of staff and resources for the Department. In our 2012 report we stressed the importance of analysis and expertise on the Middle East and North Africa, which had deteriorated in the FCO prior to 2011. We note Mr Ellwood’s assurance that that this has been improved, that language skills have been upgraded and that experienced Ambassadors are returning to the region with established networks later in their careers, indicating that the FCO is cultivating a depth of experience in the region.

2015 also marks the end of the Arab Partnership funding period established in 2011, and the future and status of this flagship part of the FCO’s response to the ‘Arab Spring’ now appears somewhat unclear. In its annual report to the Committee on the Arab Partnership Initiative in July 2014, the FCO said that its ongoing programming was an indication of its commitment to the region. We were told by Mr Reilly, Head of the MENA Strategy Department at the FCO, that the amount of money to be spent on the Arab Partnership countries was to increase, but that some is channelled via the Conflict Pool (soon to be re-named the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund) rather than the Arab Partnership Fund. In 2012 we welcomed the Arab Partnership Fund as a tool to promote political and economic reform. We encourage our successor committee to continue to monitor the FCO’s changes in these funding streams and the net increase or decrease to the FCO’s spending in the region.

Annex 2: List of meetings held in Egypt and Tunisia

The Committee visited Cairo and Tunis between 9-13 February and held the following meetings:

Egypt

HMA and UK Government officials

Abd al-Munim Aboul Fottouh, 2012 Presidential candidate

R. Stephen Beecroft, US Ambassador to Egypt

Roundtable with analysts (economics, polling, media)

President Abd al-Fattah Sisi

Roundtable with human rights organisations / activists

General Mohamed al-Assar, Deputy Minister of Defence

Nabil el Araby, Secretary General of the Arab League

Visit to British Council funded project on tackling sexual violence

Hatem Seif El Nasr, Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs

Dinner with political party representatives

Tunisia

President Beji Caid Essebsi

HMA to Tunisia and UK Government officials

Visit to British Council funded projects, Young Arab Voices and BBC Media Action

Taieb Baccouche, Foreign Minister

HMA to Libya and UK Government officials

US, German, French and EU Ambassadors to Libya

Dinner with analysts, civil society representatives and MPs

Habib Essid, Prime Minister

Rachid Ghannouchi, Ennahda

Mohammed Ennaceur, President of the Assembly

Formal Minutes

Tuesday 17 March 2015

Members present:

Sir Richard Ottaway, in the Chair

Ann Clwyd
Mike Gapes
Mark Hendrick

Mr Frank Roy
Sir John Stanley
Nadhim Zahawi

Draft Report (*British foreign policy and the 'Arab Spring': follow-up*), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

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

Paragraph read and agreed to.

Annexes read and agreed to.

Written evidence was ordered to be reported to the House for publication on the internet:

Arab Partnership Initiative annual report 2013-14 (submitted by the FCO)

Letter from Tobias Ellwood MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, FCO, dated 11 March 2015

Resolved, That the Report be the Twelfth Report of the Committee to the House.

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

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

[Adjourned till Tuesday 24 March at 5.00 pm]

Witnesses

The following witnesses gave evidence. Transcripts can be viewed on the Committee's inquiry page at www.parliament.uk/facom.

Tuesday 3 March 2015

Question number

Tobias Ellwood MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, **Samantha Job**, Head of North Africa Department, and **Julian Reilly**, Head of MENA Strategy Department, Foreign and Commonwealth Office

[Q1-62](#)

Published written evidence

The following written evidence was received and can be viewed on the Committee's inquiry web page at www.parliament.uk/facom. ARA numbers are generated by the evidence processing system and so may not be complete.

- 1 Foreign And Commonwealth Office ([ARA0001](#))
- 2 Foreign And Commonwealth Office ([ARA0002](#))