



House of Commons
Foreign Affairs Committee

**‘Political Islam’,
and the Muslim
Brotherhood Review:
Government Response
to the Committee’s
Eighth Report of
Session 2016–17**

**Third Special Report
of Session 2017–19**

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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.

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Third Special Report

The Foreign Affairs Committee published its Sixth Report of Session 2016–17, on *'Political Islam', and the Muslim Brotherhood Review*, on 7 November 2016, as House of Commons Paper HC 118. The Government's first response to the Report was received on 6 January 2017 and published as the Committee's *Eighth Report, HC 967*. The Government's Second Response was received on 20 July 2017 and is appended below.

Appendix: Government Response

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) noted the Foreign Affairs Committee's report on 'Political Islam' and the Muslim Brotherhood Review, published on 7 November 2016, and responded to each of the Committee's conclusions and recommendations on 6 January 2017.

This report sets out the FCO's response to the Committee's subsequent commentary, published on 3 March 2017. The Committee's text is in bold and the FCO's response is in plain text. Headings correspond to those in the Committee's report.

Defining 'political Islam'

1. **The FCO agreed with the Committee's conclusion that political Islam comprises a broad spectrum of movements and ideologies, and that a 'one size fits all policy' is inappropriate. *When forming a nuanced policy, the FCO should continue to consider to what extent, and how, different political Islamist groups interact with, inspire, or support one another, thus appreciating the inter-connectivity of these groups as well as their diversity.*** (Paragraph 7)

The Government agrees that along with continuing to develop our understanding of the distinction between political Islamist groups, including in different geographical locations, we also consider any common factors. This encompasses, where relevant, any inter-connectivity between groups and if and how they inspire and support one another.

Our definition of 'political Islam'

2. **The FCO has provided three criteria against which political-Islamist groups, like others, can understand whether and why the UK regards engagement with them as appropriate. *While these have features in common with our criteria, the Committee would like to see the FCO provide a more detailed explanation of its criteria. This should include an explanation of what is meant by a "commitment to democratic processes with inclusive governance and tolerance"—which our original report described as including a commitment to give up power after an election defeat—and of what examples the FCO is referring to when it describes "respect for international agreements". The FCO should respond to our recommendation that these criteria should be used as a benchmark for assessing all political philosophies on an equal basis globally, and should not be applied exclusively to political Islamist groups.*** (Paragraph 14)

3. It is also the case that the Government has not responded to our conclusion that it is inappropriate for the FCO to place a form of Islamism that embraces “democratic principles and liberal values” and another form of Islamism that instead holds “intolerant, extremist views” within the same, single category of ‘political Islam’. *We recommended that the FCO devise and use a vocabulary that does not group such distinct ideologies together.* (Paragraph 15)

As the Government noted in its original response, we treat Political Islamist parties in the same way as any other political party. This approach applies on an equal basis globally. Our general principles for engagement with Political Islamist parties and groups are their (i) rejection of violence; (ii) commitment to democratic processes with inclusive governance and tolerance of other faiths and minorities; and (iii) respect for international agreements.

In more detail, we believe that ‘democratic processes with inclusive governance’ are important to allow people to have a say in the decisions that affect them, that is, through accountable, participative, representative and transparent political systems. Elections are one part of this. ‘Tolerance of other faiths and minorities’ reflects our principles on freedom of religion or belief. Groups or parties who teach others to reject and devalue those who follow a different religion, or do not have a religious belief, provide fertile ground for extremist views and behaviour. ‘Respect for international agreements’ includes recognition of the international rules based system and respect for existing agreements such as UNSC resolutions and those related to the Middle East Peace Process.

The Government tries to avoid using broad terms such as ‘Political Islam’ and ‘Political Islamist groups’ as we recognise that generalisations are difficult and can be misleading. As reflected in our original response, we do not adopt a ‘one size fits all’ policy as ‘Political Islam’ can cover a broad spectrum of movements and ideologies; and from those embracing “democratic principles and liberal values” to those holding “intolerant, extremist views”. Rather than having a different vocabulary to refer to each element within this broad spectrum, we have adopted general principles as a guide to which of these groups we should engage with [(i) rejection of violence; (ii) commitment to democratic processes with inclusive governance and tolerance of other faiths and minorities; and (iii) respect for international agreements].

Transparency of organisation, and internal structures

4. The Government broadly agrees with the Committee. However, we remain sceptical about whether it is possible for the Government to gain a clear understanding of the Muslim Brotherhood without at least some engagement with, and questioning of, the group. The secretiveness of the Muslim Brotherhood is, to a significant extent, the result of the repression that it currently faces and has faced historically. *We ask the FCO to take this context into account, and to engage with the Muslim Brotherhood so as to understand it better, rather than relying on the accounts of others.* (Paragraph 32)

5. The FCO has noted our conclusion. *We invite them to note our commentary in Paragraph 7 of this report, where we urge the FCO to consider to what extent, and how, different political Islamist groups interact with, inspire, or support one another.* (Paragraph 35)

The Government's position, based on the Muslim Brotherhood Review and a decision of the full National Security Council, including the now Prime Minister, remains unchanged. We of course acknowledge that developing and maintaining a detailed understanding of the Muslim Brotherhood is important. But while engagement is one means to enhance our understanding of MB related groups, there are other ways of developing this understanding when groups do not meet our principles for engagement.

As with our answer above, and noting the FAC's commentary in Paragraph 7 of the report, the Government agrees that given the diversity of different Islamist groups and political parties, we should develop our understanding of their distinctions **and** common factors. We should also avoid overly prescriptive definitions on who we should or should not engage with.

Involvement in violence and terrorism

6. Our report characterised the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood as a fundamentally non-violent group, while acknowledging and examining problematic elements of ambiguity with regard to its relationship with violence, and the FCO does not contradict this assessment. It is an unfortunate commentary on our support for democracy that a political movement that was elected to office and removed in a military coup accompanied by significant violence is not engaged with at any official level at all, in exile or in the UK. We recommend to the FCO that, notwithstanding the sensitivities of the Egyptian government, some discreet relations with formerly-elected officials in exile would be appropriate, not least to encourage and confirm a continuing commitment to non-violence. (Paragraph 56)

The Government does not agree with the FAC that we should be engaging with the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood at this time. The Main Findings of the Muslim Brotherhood Review concluded that the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, through the vehicle of The FJP, did not do enough to demonstrate political moderation or a commitment to democratic values when in power in Egypt. It found that parts of the Muslim Brotherhood have a highly ambiguous relationship with violent extremism—as set out in the then Prime Minister's 17 December 2015 written statement to Parliament about the Government's Review of the Muslim Brotherhood. The then Prime Minister cited as an example that although some senior Muslim Brotherhood leaders had publicly reiterated their commitment to non-violence others had failed to renounce calls for retribution in Egypt and it had been alleged that Muslim Brotherhood supporters had engaged in violence. The Main Findings supported the conclusion that association with or influence by the Muslim Brotherhood should be considered a possible indicator of extremism.

This problematic approach has been in evidence in recent months, when the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood has denied Daesh involvement in attacks against Coptic Christians in Egypt, even when Daesh have claimed responsibility, instead accusing the Egyptian Government of “organising or facilitating” the attacks. The Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) has also stoked sectarianism with comments on Pope Francis.

We agree with the FAC that “where political Islamist groups have inspired individuals to commit violent acts; the fact that such individuals left the groups to do so does not excuse the groups from some responsibility for inspiring the individual in the first place.” We would include the Muslim Brotherhood in this regard.

For the above reasons, we do not engage at present with the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. The Government believes that there is a fundamental requirement for any organization to reject violence unambiguously, confront violent extremism and commit to constitutional politics. We keep our policy towards the Muslim Brotherhood, including the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, under close and continuous review.

The Muslim Brotherhood Review

7. The Government's explanation for why it would not give the Committee sight of the full report under restrictive conditions, or provide it with a redacted copy, remain threadbare. If this was designed to be an internal document only, then it begs the question as to why the Review was publicly announced. The FCO has also offered no explanation for why there was a delay of a year and a half between the completion of the Muslim Brotherhood Review and the publication of the Main Findings, or for what was done with the report during this time. Not having seen the full Report, we are entitled to surmise that elements of the 2010–2015 Coalition Government were not content to publish any findings. (Paragraph 69)

8. *Since the Government has not allowed either the report of the Muslim Brotherhood Review or its authors to be externally scrutinised, we request an explanation of i) what internal procedures were in place for review and critique of the report and ii) are now in place to inform and update the position of the Government towards the Muslim Brotherhood in the future.* (Paragraph 72)

We would reiterate to the Committee the reason the full report of the Review was not made public is that material provided in the strictest confidence, including by foreign Governments, was reflected throughout and could not be fully redacted without rendering the report unreadable. Had the review been published without redactions it would have been regarded as a very significant breach of trust by sources of that material. As the then Prime Minister assured the Committee in his written evidence in June 2016, the Main Findings in the public domain were comprehensive and representative.

On procedure, the review was conducted by Sir John Jenkins and Charles Farr, who consulted widely with representatives of governments, political movements, religious leaders, academics and other independent commentators. The National Security Adviser then led work across government to consider the review's policy implications.

The Government and its operational and regulatory partners continue to assess developments in the Muslim Brotherhood movement in the UK, including its statements and actions. We also continue to carry out the Review's commitments: refusing visas to members and associates of the Muslim Brotherhood who are on record as having made extremist comments; seeking to ensure charities that have links to the Muslim Brotherhood are not misused; strengthening liaison arrangements with international partners; enforcing the EU asset freeze on Hamas; and keeping under review whether the views and activities of the Muslim Brotherhood meet the legal test for proscription.

Tackling extremism remains a Government priority. As the Prime Minister said in her speech to the Gulf Cooperation Council on 7 December 2016, by focusing not just on violent extremism, but on the whole spectrum of extremism, violent and non-violent, at home and abroad, we are not just going after the terrorists but working to address

the causes of this terrorist threat by targeting the ideology of extremism and all those who seek to spread it. In addition to tackling extremist ideology, we also look to increase resilience in vulnerable communities.

Reactions to the Main Findings—Undermining the UK's image abroad

9. We are disappointed that the FCO continues to refuse to shed any further light on the Muslim Brotherhood Review process, and fails to address whether at least some of the evidence submitted to the Review could have been published. *The Government should explain why it chose to publicise the existence of a sensitive internal Review process if it was not going to be willing to allow this process to be externally scrutinised.* (Paragraph 76)

10. We continue to hold that a complete understanding of the Muslim Brotherhood requires an understanding of the impact on the group of having its elected government removed from power in Egypt by the military in 2013, seeing at least many hundreds of its supporters killed by the Egyptian security forces at protest sites during that same year, and thereafter being both proscribed and broadly repressed in Egypt. The Main Findings only mentioned historic incidents of violence against the Muslim Brotherhood, in the 1950s and 1960s. It ignores the events of 2013 and thereafter. (Paragraph 79)

11. The lack of any mention at all of these developments, which had a deep impact on the Brotherhood, from a report that aimed to understand the group, was a glaring omission from the Main Findings of the Muslim Brotherhood Review. The FCO continues to ignore and fails to explain this omission, and does not address why—and by whom—the developments of 2013 and thereafter were deemed irrelevant to the Terms of Reference. *It should now do so.* (Paragraph 80)

12. Please see our commentary in Paragraph 79 and Paragraph 80 of this report. *The FCO should explain how it can effectively “continue to challenge the Muslim Brotherhood to resolve the ambiguities in its relationship to violence in Egypt” if officials have not met at an official level with the group since 2013.* (Paragraph 84)

As in the answer above, although the full Review was not published, the Main Findings in the public domain were comprehensive and representative. The Review was commissioned by the then Prime Minister. Its Terms of Reference did not include an examination of events in Egypt following the fall of the Morsi Government. The purpose of the Review was to better understand the philosophy, activities, impact, and influence on UK national interests of the movement. This was reflected in the Review's recommendations, the majority of which referred to the Muslim Brotherhood's role and influence in the UK.

Government officials meet a wide range of political groups, which is vital for effective diplomacy. However, in deciding whether to meet a group, and as above, one of the three key principles of engagement is our potential interlocutors' attitude to the use of violence. This in itself is a challenge to any group to resolve any ambiguities in its relationship to violence. We keep our policy towards the Muslim Brotherhood, including the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, under close and continuous review.

Perceived pressure from Gulf allies

13. **The Committee did not comment on whether it had seen evidence of bias in the Review's conclusions. We instead stated that we had seen no evidence to suggest that Saudi Arabia had exercised undue influence over the report. But we were working from the publicly-available material. And, while agreeing with some of the Main Findings of the Muslim Brotherhood Review, other aspects of our report expressed significant misgivings about others, not least the failure of the Main Findings to address the events that occurred in Egypt in 2013 (see our commentary in Paragraph 79 and Paragraph 80 of this report). (Paragraph 87)**

As in the answer above, the Terms of Reference of the Review did not include an examination of events in Egypt following the fall of the Morsi Government. The purpose of the Review was to better understand the philosophy, activities, impact, and influence on UK national interests of the movement. As in our previous response to the Committee on perceived pressure from Gulf allies, we would reiterate that the decision for the Review to be led by one of the FCO's most senior and respected diplomats, Sir John Jenkins, reflected his extensive experience and knowledge of the Arab world.