

SUMMARY OF SEMINAR PROCEEDINGS

'One Year On: Turmoil And Transition –The Arab Uprisings And The Path Ahead'

Committee Room 2 House of Lords

Wednesday 14th March 2012

On Wednesday 14th March 2012, Global Strategy Forum (GSF) held a seminar entitled '*One Year On: Turmoil and Transition – The Arab Uprisings And the Path Ahead.*' The seminar took place in Committee Room 2 of the House of Lords under the chairmanship of **Lord Lothian** (Chairman, GSF).

The speakers were:

Dr Maha Azzam, Associate Fellow, Chatham House;

Sir Richard Dalton KCMG, Former UK Ambassador to Iran and Libya;

Rt Hon Alan Duncan MP, Minister of State for International Development;

Ms Lindsey Hilsum, International Editor, Channel 4 News;

Dr. Eugene Rogan, Fellow, Middle East Centre, St. Antony's College, Oxford;

Rt Hon Jack Straw MP, Former Home Secretary, Foreign Secretary and Justice Secretary;

Lord Williams of Baglan, former UN Under-Secretary of State and Special Coordinator for the Middle East and Lebanon.

The seminar took the form of an opening address by Mr. Duncan, entitled, '*Change and Upheaval In The Middle East And North Africa: Getting Western Policy Right*', followed by two panels. Respectively, these covered the perspectives on the Arab uprisings followed by presentations on the options for the Western policy response.

Speakers identified the following main themes:

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British policy is firmly aligned with its international partners. In particular it endorses the five points contained in the 12th March address to the UN Security Council by the Secretary General Ban Ki-moon. In summary these are:

- Leaders must choose the path of meaningful reform, or make way for those who will.
- We must promote pluralism and protect the rights of minorities.

- Women have stood in the squares and streets demanding change, and now have a right to sit at the table.
- We must create opportunities for young people.
- There must be regional peace.

British experience and historical ties to the region have much to offer. But this will be by invitation. The key mistake to avoid is to imagine that one could ‘flick a switch’ and thus turn on democracy. All countries in the region are different and require individual approaches. It is important to temper expectations in accordance with realities.

PANEL 1: PERSPECTIVES ON THE ARAB UPRISINGS

Speakers in this panel (**Dr. Eugene Rogan, Lindsey Hilsum and Dr. Maha Azzam**) sought to set current events against a longer perspective.

Historical perspectives: A common mistake in analysing the Arab Spring is to overlook both its diversity – at least six separate revolutions are in progress today – and its historicity. There have been six decades of repressed resistance to autocratic rule and this was preceded by two centuries of opposition to absolutism. The Arab Spring thus represents a contemporary point on a long continuum of protest. It is a new age of constitutional reform. The reform movement is likely to spread to other countries, including Algeria, Sudan, Lebanon, Iraq and the Palestinian Territories. Eventually, the Gulf monarchies will also be impacted.

Western media reporting: There are some well grounded criticisms of press coverage: it oversimplifies and it prefers accessible stories. Sometimes journalists act as cheerleaders. Libya, for example, was highly accessible to Western journalists and may, as a result, have received over exposure. Syria is much less accessible and much more dangerous and thus receives less coverage. Time and resource limitations constrain more difficult stories, like the Tuareg refugees in Mali. Overall, however, Western media has done well to cover “people wild for elections” in the Arab states and the superior organisation of the Islamist parties. The media takes special care to verify video stories of human rights abuses forwarded to them from insurgent groups, for example in Syria. However, there is no substitute for eyewitness reporting.

A focus on Egypt: After 60 years of dictatorship in Egypt, the institutions of civil society are severely damaged. However, a fundamental shift in the direction of democracy has taken place and, for the first time, the Egyptian people can hold their leaders responsible. Free and fair elections have brought the Muslim Brotherhood to power, but this is open to reform ideas like the free market. Relations between the political parties and the military will remain tense, but there is no evidence of a secret deal between the military and Muslim Brotherhood. The military wants to protect its economic and legal privileges but is not seeking confrontation. Egypt’s most pressing challenge is economic. Investment is urgently needed, and could come from the Gulf states and the IMF.

PANEL 2: THE WESTERN POLICY RESPONSE

Speakers in this panel (**Lord Williams of Baglan, Sir Richard Dalton, Rt Hon Jack Straw MP**) generally took a cautious line on how Western intervention should play out. They warned of unintended consequences, but expressed deep concern about the failure to find a peaceful way forward in Syria.

The UN dimension: Outside observers, including the UN, need to be aware that current developments in the Arab Spring come from within Arab societies. They are not responses to outside events like the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 or the 1967 Six Day War. The UN Arab Human Development Reports have highlighted the shortcomings in Arab governance and it was a mistake in Western appreciation not to recognise these. The succession plan in Egypt was, for example, ludicrous. Western intervention is now urgently needed for Syria, possibly in the form of an international conference to circumvent the impasse in the Security Council or by a “Uniting for Peace” initiative in the General Assembly.

The pros and cons of intervention: there are many ways of intervening, but attempts to impose change by coercion should be rare. It is important not to over-interpret the example of Libya as a template for action elsewhere. Special circumstances applied to Libya, such as the unpopularity of leaders, organised support for the revolt and generous funding from regional states like Qatar and UAE. But even Libya showed the limits to airpower. Occupations and the destruction of infrastructure should be avoided. It is important to remain engaged in post-conflict development and to avoid misusing intelligence to support a particular policy. With regard to the new UN doctrine of Responsibility to Protect, it is important to understand that this creates an opportunity to intervene, not a right to intervene. States should be cautious of stretching UN Security Council resolutions to suit their own purposes. However, states should continue to seek legitimacy and legality for interventions via the Security Council.

UK policy in a shifting context: British history contains many instances where policy makers have turned a blind eye to the absence of democracy, making specious claims that certain countries were not suited for democracy – an assertion made by Lord Salisbury when prime minister about Ireland. Three principles are worth thinking about for British policy toward the Arab Spring. 1) Though local factors differ, universal principles need to be applied universally. We should support elections and their outcomes, even they are uncomfortable. It had been a mistake not to recognise the Hamas electoral victory in 2006. 2) In Europe there is a considerable degree of intermingling of church and state. Against that background, we should accept the legitimacy of faith-based political parties in the Middle East. 3) The West has a checkered history in the Middle East. It should cultivate and listen to regional partners, especially Turkey.