

## IS THE MIDDLE EAST IMPLODING

Thank you so much for offering me this opportunity not so much as to give you - of all people - a 'lecture', but more to play a part in a continuing conversation amongst friends of the middle east, who alternately hope for it, pray for it, are frustrated and shocked by it, but love it.

I don't intend to give a potted history of my three and a half years at the FCO. If you wish to hear that, come to my CMEC briefing on Feb 4<sup>th</sup> in the HOC. But in seeking to address the question directly, I must inevitably omit much so I begin with an apology. There is so much background to this, that all cannot be covered. If I have missed anything you consider to be blindingly obvious, please correct me by question, or write subsequently. Please excuse any ignorance. I speak in the company of those who know the Middle East with a depth which I can never match, and I speak not as an expert but as a commentator, for we are too close to many events which are still evolving; in the old phrase it's journalism and not yet history capable of the analysis of perspective.

And may I, right at the beginning acknowledge my debt to a number in this room for their patience and support in teaching me about the Middle East in the midst of its turbulence. A minister has an embarrassment of riches at their disposal, and I have been more embarrassed than all. Academics, serious journalists, authors, those doing business in the region, NGO's, Ambassadors, Foreign Ministers and Diplomats from all the countries in the region, and all who I met on my travels - I am indebted to you for the insights you have offered. And above all to my colleagues at the FCO at every level for their extraordinary dedication to our country and the peoples of the region- any reputation at all I have in this area is built so much upon them.

Let us begin. Is the middle-east imploding? The honest answer is that no one knows, but that would not be much of a lecture if I left it there! I think the answer is no, but the region possesses all the ingredients which could make it so, some of which it is well used to, and some that are new. Sherard CC quote I argue the following:- I am still optimistic about Arab awakening, or Spring, or however we can characterise this latest outpouring of expression in the Arab world, even though the path will inevitably be long. A new narrative of governance by consent is in process of being developed throughout the region. An agreement between Israel and Palestine is needed this year. Although regional power issues involve Western interests, the Sunni/Shia divide is out of western hands, and not for us to pronounce upon. However the region needs religious tolerance and brave leadership to encourage it, and faces increasing dangers if not. But, where there is stability, opportunities abound for economic and commercial development, with a young demographic as able and ambitious as any in the world, given the chance to flourish.

I commence with my last point - economics, coupled with demographics. The ME is not a region unto itself but a key and growing player in world growth and prosperity, and in investment overseas. On arriving in Dubai for the first time some three and a half years ago, I had an experience common to many. Our consul general said to me as we drove through a stunning urban landscape from the airport to his residence 'nothing that you see in the next half hour was here thirty years ago'. Gulf growth and development has of course been outstanding, with Dubai 2020, and the World Cup in Qatar in 2022 simply further major milestones on the world stage, and its influence will likely be stronger still in years to come.

With that commerce comes greater world stability, as we become more interdependent. But this is not just about exporting finance, it is also about realising the relentless human instinct for achievement, for security for one's family, and possessing the drive to do better than previous generations. Arab young people possess this as much as any other, you only have to dip into Lebanon's vibrant social media world, or talk to Noura al Kaabi, the UAE's CEO of TwoFour54, a media and entertainment hub and discuss film production ambition to know this. These are people whose conversation does not revolve around politics, but life!

However the brutal facts are that the Arab world needs to create forty million new jobs in the next decade to provide for its predominantly young population. This cannot simply be achieved through public employment, even for those states blessed with carbon resources, still less for oil importing states.

A further sobering fact, as the Economist reported in its review of Arab Spring last July, is that in 1960 Egypt and South Korea were roughly economically equivalent, whereas now Egypt's GDP is one fifth that of South Korea. This tells not simply its own story, but reads across into the region as a whole. A growing young population, increasingly aware of what is available to their counterparts around the world, is not going to accept that for some reason their birthright in an Arab state includes an acceptance of a fixed economic disparity with others. There is no reason why it should, and all over the region I have observed those with a commitment to improvement staking out new ground to business. They have to overcome an attitude to state employment seemingly tied simply to personal subsidy, or a means to find a quick temporary solution to longer term structural needs. Encouraging entrepreneurship also means recognising increasingly the role of women, to set up and run sound businesses, inevitably impacting upon their previously restricted roles in some states.

I do not see this grinding to a halt. Future development is already being encouraged in some places by enlightened moves on the economy; Erbil and the Kurdish region have been making the most of their peaceful environment to encourage growth and investment, states are implementing liberalising reforms to make it easier for

businesses to set up and grow; and developing of transference of expertise in carbon energy and technology to new energy sources being just some examples.

These changes will be boosted still further through advances in education. As in other parts of the world there has been an increase in domestic higher education, though this has yet to be coupled with the increase in graduate level jobs which should naturally follow. But perhaps even more important will be the wider influence flowing from those who have been educated by their states abroad. As an example, and of course a number of states have done the same, the enlightened policy of HM King Abdullah in Saudi Arabia to educate over 130,000 in Western Universities, upto a third of them women, has far reaching, beneficial consequences of which we have not yet begun to see even a fraction, but we will. The drive of all those exposed to further and higher education will be to be engaged in charting their own life and making more of their own decisions. Those educated to higher levels domestically, and even more those educated abroad with their greater exposure to a world beyond their own shores will want what they see others in Asia, South America or the West want; material security, opportunity and dignity in their occupations. An imploding Middle East will not provide that, but a stable one will.

Will the next generation of those in the Middle East find that their politics provides that stability? Any analysis yet of Arab Spring is way premature. I have already lived through the early waves of optimism, and the doom laden characterisation of Arab Autumn or winter. When will we ever learn that such determination to find seasonal comparisons merely leads to open invitations to irony and hubris?

We are still at an early stage of trying to work out quite what the phenomenon of public expression, commenced in Tunisia in late 2010/early 2011 might mean. We know some things. It was not externally calculated, or organised. It was not prompted either by the West, or al Qaeda. It was not Islamic. It was not about Israel. It was not caused by Facebook and social media, though they played a part. From the very origins of spoken or written word, the people have always found a way to reach the main square and begin marching to the palace! But it might have been about Al Jazeera, a decade of questioning of rulers in an unfamiliar manner. For it was not the same, state to state, but there were similarities. It was about corruption. It was about economics. It was about illegitimate republican dynastic expansion. It was about exclusion from political process of the young, of women, and of the quiet.

Contrary to popular opinion, I do not think there was ever a time in the FCO when there was a naïve belief that suddenly a whole series of problems had come to an end, and there was now a brave new world. From posts to directors to Ministers we recognised early, that, in William Hague's words, we were witnessing the most profound political change in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but no-one was in any doubt that change would take time and its course was uncertain.

But I do believe that some of what we are witnessing is, in terms of value judgements, good, and better than what was in the past. Not to believe this would be to deny what has already been achieved, and to belittle the bravery of those currently engaged in struggle, and I also believe that what is being undergone is a better safeguard against implosion than what was there before.

The easy, and in some places, fashionable opinion is of course to hint darkly, that things were rather better as they were; that provided you were not one of the minority on the capture and torture list in states of repression, it was all sort of ok, from the Christian supposedly protected by the Assad policy of sectarian divide and rule, to the UK and the US with our allies, to people who were prepared to trade their own freedom for relative domestic peace and security.

I would argue that it was actually this which was more likely to lead to implosion, than what has eventually reacted against it, my principal witness in such a claim being the indisputable fact that it has actually occurred. So although there may well be more local pain, and worse, the horror which is Syria, the long term of a process in which people are more engaged in deciding their lot in life than having it done to them has got to be ultimately more stabilising than the alternative. I believe the UK has been right, and in good company with the EU, to declare that, whilst there is no single model of governance which fits all, where there is freedom of assembly and of the media, where human rights are respected and the role of women is full in society, and where in some manner there is a measure of the consent that a people offer to their government, then this is more likely to lead to long term stability than the contrary. I also think it has been appropriate to support such progress by offering to states in transition, through the UK's Arab Partnership, a variety of institutional capacity building choices, not at our behest, but at the request of those who know their states and people best.

In some places that process has been obvious, and brought about by dramatic events, and in each of these places the people and the process deserves support. In Tunisia today, the deliberations of politicians continue to find a pathway through the tortuous balances of secular politics and moderate Islam given political expression. It appears clear that they both watch the developments in other states carefully, whilst recognising that they have an historical position to protect, and want to make their move away from dictatorship one which will last, and be fully inclusive of all shades of political opinion. In Libya politicians and militia find their way in a political landscape left scorched and barren through forty years of dictatorship and occasionally bizarre rule. Egypt finds a new way down a not unfamiliar path, after Tahrir Square 2, as its process of revolution seeks to create a new constitution balancing rights and freedom of expression with security considerations. Slightly away from the glare of publicity-for now, but watch out if things go wrong, Yemen

has wrestled extraordinarily with a democratic process encouraged by the GCC and other friends to lead its people away from a legacy of warring rulers.

But I don't think we should confine our concept of governance change to the dramatic part of Arab spring. It is not, in my view a zero sum game between Arab Spring style revolt and same old repression. The more gradual process being followed in other places is worth much more than a passing glance, which leads to my next point in favour of a belief that implosion can be avoided.

At an early stage following the Tunisian revolution I offered a memo to the FCO – how presumptuous I was- on the concept of governance which was being challenged by events. Recognising that democratic expression was manifested in more than just the Westminster model, how would we make our own judgements on progress? I wrote to WH

*I hope there might be some chance for FCO to lead discussions in some forum or other about the concept of consent in Govt, and how Arab Spring might affect it. Recognising that each Arab country is different, we must assume that the constitutional outcome is different in each, from North Africa to the Gulf. A newly defined concept of consent may help provide some intellectual underpinning for apparent inconsistency.*

There are no Arab states which have not been affected by Arab Spring in some way. There are a number for whom the Arab Spring has provided a new impetus towards change or reform of some sort in which they have been engaged to a greater or lesser extent in the years leading up to 2011.

In North Africa, Morocco continued with a series of reforms instigated and backed by the King. These have led to a change of government personalities, some of whom are clearly different from the past, and an accommodation with moderate Islamist parties, of which the new PM is from one. Algeria has responded more cautiously, the pain of its civil war still all pervading, and offering a narrative that maintains its own Arab Spring came some years earlier. But its Presidential election this year will undoubtedly contain clues to where it sees itself going in terms of further change and reform.

In Jordan, once again a monarchy is leading reform efforts, both political and economic within its own context, but doing so whilst also handling the pressures of the refugee crisis from Syria.

The Gulf demonstrates a different pattern of response, and of course a different history of government, and that measurement of consent to which I referred earlier. But the UAE has expanded its electorate to its Federal National Council under my good friend deputy FM Dr Anwar Gargash. Kuwait has a longer standing Parliament than most, and has also made electoral reforms. Oman's great advances over recent

decades exhibits a further manner of ensuring consent between monarch and people. But in many places there is a wariness of the motives of those professing political Islam as a banner.

Bahrain has been touchstone for many. A complex picture, the UK has chosen to recognise and support the efforts at reform made over a lengthy period, and the extraordinary open response, unique in the region, to the events of February 2011, in which lives were lost. We continue to believe that the response of moderate leaders there, both in Government and Opposition, by keeping talking and working on a path of reform laid out in the independent Commissions report, present the best opportunity for stability. Despite immense difficulties, and interruptions, people keep talking, as the UK does there to all.

So the path of political reform, of how states may remain stable, whilst accommodating the changes that their people may want, is an individual one, with the best prospect of success in 2014 likely to be more around the slow and steady, rather than the sudden and spectacular.

As if the processes of internal upheaval, political reform, and urgent economic and development were not enough to cope with, all this must be played out against the backdrop of the most intricate of regional relationships, in an area of vital importance to countries on the other side of the world, where almost every nuance of change is impactful, at a time when the world's superpower is experiencing pressures and tensions as a result of its previous engagement with the region, and whilst one of the most chilling and outrageous acts of civil warfare is being played out. If perfect storms were political as well as physical, then we might well be looking at one.

But there are ways out. The first is Israel/Palestine. I said earlier that Arab Spring was not about Israel, and it was not. There were no anti Israeli banners on the streets of Tripoli, Tunis or Cairo. But that this long running, emotional dagger of a dispute remains at the heart of the middle east should be missed by no commentator. If the chance is taken this year to end it, there can be every opportunity for a new future. If not, then the assessment is very bleak indeed.

A few weeks ago, at a Wilton Park conference, and may I take this opportunity to thank Richard Burge and his team, and through them all those who engage in the quiet, unsung but vital work of meeting and talking in third countries during difficult times – I suggested to yet another conference on the future of the MEPP, that perhaps instead of looking at all the stumbling blocks which we all know very well, suppose we held a conference which imagined an agreement between the Prime Minister of the State of Israel and the President of the Palestinian Authority had been signed the day before. What then? What if we worked through the responses? For Arab States as part of the Arab Peace Initiative, when would recognition follow?

What economic benefits would flow from the absorption of Israel's economy and talents into the commerce of the region? What mutual security might there be, not least for a Palestinian State which might face rapid challenges from terrorists and extremists?

For the EU – what more assistance might flow to Palestine in terms of trade advantages? What access to markets for the new industry making its way to now undisputed territory, underpinned by the new investment as part of the Kerry package?

And if we thought about what could happen, instead of what penalties and sanctions would befall the area further depressing the economy and giving the victims of enmity for generations on both sides yet more misery to come, and fearing the opportunity thus given to those whose creed is only violence, could we make success a self fulfilling prophecy, making the day after an agreement a day so enticing that no sane negotiators could ever turn it down?

Of course it's a huge ask, but when would it ever not be? And can we truly imagine or bear another defeat on this, in a region beset with not just old suspicions and enmities but new threats to all? We must continue to wish Secretary Kerry well, and our old friends Saeb Erekat and Tzipi Livni as they do their work, take comfort from the fact that little is leaking and with so much else going on at least they can get on with the job somewhat out of the glare of publicity. But it is no sideshow. The consequences of failure for both peoples are bleak. The status quo is not strong enough to hold back the consequences – for the sake of the Middle East, it is time that those who are partners for peace, who have demonstrated such to their own sceptics, despite provocations to each, to make the agreement that we all want to see. Then the world must pile in behind it, and Arab states will have as crucial a role as any, to make it work and hold off those who would derail it.

If this does not happen, then I'm less sure about implosion.

But even if this part of the jigsaw is finally put in place, this will not be enough on its own. I think no longer it is the case that if only Israeli and Arab came to resolution all else in the region would be well.

Lebanon and Jordan will need to retain their remarkable stability, despite all the pressures which they have been enduring. Iraq faces the challenges of Parliamentary elections in the teeth of severe internal political disagreements and appalling attacks from Al Qaeda designed to plunge the country into civil war, whilst having to balance pressure from Iran on the one side and the implications of Syria on the other.

We can go no further with our considerations now without a view on Syria, the catalyst for so much else which is taking place in the area.

Can the region remain stable with the crisis in Syria continuing? Appallingly, probably the answer is yes, but surely only for a short and finite time. Yes, other parts of the region have endured long drawn out and costly struggles, but the crisis in Syria is becoming of a new order, seeing the dismemberment of a state, and a people.

The figures for death, 130,000 and disruption, 9m displaced either internally or externally, we all know well. This is all bad enough, but states surrounding Syria are just managing to stay apart from the worst, though it cannot be ruled out that the conflagration would spread. Surrounding states, whose generosity towards refugees has been remarkable, though not without cost, are already affected one way or another.

What prospects peace from the Geneva process? Your guess is as good as mine, but it's the only thing we have going. I subscribe to the view that a military solution is unlikely due to existing balance of forces and the allies of those doing the fighting, but I don't subscribe to a view that the fighting on the ground is irrelevant to the politics, so I do hold the view that influencing what happens on the ground can influence the chance of an outcome. That is why I have taken a stance against Parliamentary will in the UK. I think that allowing the forces of the official opposition, recognised by over 100 separate states and entities, having demonstrated commitment to a pluralist, democratic future for Syria and human rights adherence, deserve to be allowed the chance to defend themselves by having access to weaponry which could limit attacks from the air, and ease the bombardment and blockades by the regime which is costing so many lives, and starving people totally contrary to international humanitarian law. Today's headlines merely confirm what we have all known to be the truth- this is a vicious regime determined to do all it can to retain power, being inadvertently protected by an inept international security system.

If it is only diplomacy which is the answer, why has Iran and Russia put so much hardware behind Assad? Why have Hezbollah been on the ground? What farce it must sound for some to say there must be no foreign intervention, when there are already boots on the ground and weapons in the hand from a number of foreign shores.

Unless the regime feels some pressure or threat, why should it negotiate to allow, what the international community agreed in Geneva 1, a transition of power process?

The Syrian slaughter cannot continue without both immediate, and longer lasting disaster for the region, and perhaps nothing today is quite as needed to avoid implosion for the region as finding a way to stop the killing now, and prepare for a new future engaging all those who want to see it, and isolating as far as possible, those who plainly do not. Then, alas, there is likely to be a new reckoning.



There can be no serious consideration of Syria, without straying into the issue of how external powers are seen, and what their intentions might be. Implosion of the region is more likely if there is a breakdown of international understanding and relationships, and the strains over Syria have tested these to the limit.

In no particular order: the US has some convincing to do over its foreign policy in the region. Recent forums in the UAE and Bahrain have seen senior US Government figures, Tony Blinken and Chuck Hegel, being fiercely questioned particularly by Gulf allies puzzled at the US position on Egypt and the Muslim Brotherhood, on the talks with Iran and the decision not to punish Assad with a military strike following his use of chemical weapons against his own people.

This is an unhappy situation. I do not doubt the continued engagement of the US in the region. We all understand that the needs of the US for Gulf oil are changing, but the need for a stable Gulf, for the allies of the US, indeed for the world, to have access to the energy it needs increasingly, is not going to go away. The US needs its allies there, and they need the US – and Secretary Kerry's recent visit to Saudi Arabia went well, and will have gone some way towards reassurance. I would not be surprised if there is a small price to pay for some of the difficulties, and tensions remains over the perception of lack of leadership at a crucial time, but it seems to me that each is bound to the other for mutual support in so many ways – I do not see this at risk, despite all the pressures, and remember Sec Kerry's extraordinary commitment to a resolution between Israel and the Palestinians rightly buys him credit.

And there are those who see in President Obama's decision not to resort to a strike against Syria a President conscious of his country's image in the Muslim world, responding not as anticipated, but offering a different narrative. Time will tell if that is an honest, but ill-timed gesture.

For Russia, this has been a good period. They got on the wrong side of Arab opinion with their veto in the UN, which meant the international community failed to respond robustly to the Syrian crisis, and their support of Assad. But, through gritted teeth, their commitment by word and deed to their ally, has been noticed. They appeared to outflank the US over chemical weapons. They secured a deal which is undoubtedly good, in that it removes, if adhered to, chemical weapons from the area, but on terms which will not have inconvenienced Assad, nor exposed him to what he will have feared most, a US plus one or two, strike. This latter of course allowed the conventional killing and other atrocities to go on. And the Russians also popped up in Cairo to tweak the nose of the US there too. Neither nature, nor the Middle East, can sustain a vacuum.

Geneva is a big test. If the Russians now can use their leverage with Assad to persuade him that his time is done, and can secure their interests another way, thus

ending this phase of conflict, they have much to gain. If they use this opportunity of diplomacy merely to confirm existing positions and encourage delay, they will miss an important chance of advancement.

And what of Iran? Certainly an Iranian regime commitment to a nuclear programme deliberately forcing a confrontation with Israel and the US would have brought us significantly nearer implosion. That is not where we now appear to be, though I am in the camp of being extremely wary at this stage of a 'new' Iran. Breakthrough's are not always what they seem, though there is some limited evidence to date that the E3+3, where the contribution of Russia and China has not been negligible, together with a tough sanctions regime, has moved us closer to a resolution over the nuclear file than we might have anticipated. Enough to keep talking. But let us not be starry eyed. The damage done by this regime over decades, to its own people, to those affected by its sponsorship of terrorism, to those in Syria now feeling the direct impact on the ground of IRGC troops and Iranian induced Hizbollah fighters, has been immense. It is no surprise that many cannot easily accept that Iran has earned a place at anyone's table yet.

So what price will Iran extract for offering to be part of a solution to a problem which they and Russia have helped inspire?

Let me offer two final thoughts to complete my overview of the question, though I concede there may be many more. Whilst what I have sketched out, in terms of difficulties to be overcome, is plausible though difficult, there are threats which could tear any such efforts apart, for they are matters beyond the reason of diplomacy and calculations of best interest.

Any analysis of the regional picture must include the struggle for hegemony between Sunni and Shia, and Persian and Arab, and any analysis must include not only State actors but also the growing band of extremists and non state actors whose actions may yet wreck all that sane and rational people may aspire to.

It is not for those outside the Muslim world to be involved in the Sunni/Shia discourse, or to propose ways to resolve it. Christian believers know only too well the stains that the abuse of faith for power has left upon our own country, and upon the wider world. But no commentator can exclude concerns that the historical divide in the Muslim world is being played out today in a manner which belies generations of peaceful communities united in their Islamic faith rather than being divided by sect. The readiness of some to issue a call to violence is wreaking untold havoc on the lives of Muslims throughout the region.

There have been various calls by leaders, political and religious, to end this. All one can ask from here is that such efforts continue. There needs to be brave, unequivocal statements denouncing violence in the name of faith, and strong united

leadership to back up statements such as the declaration, led by HM King Abdullah of SA, in Mecca in August 2012 by the OIC, amongst others.

The spread of this violence towards other communities, notably Christians indigenous in the area for 2000 years is already the subject of much heartrending debate. Their RHs Prince Charles and Prince Ghazi of Jordan drew attention to this in an advent message last month, echoing the extraordinary summit of Muslim leaders called by HM King Abdullah of Jordan in September last year.

Religious tolerance, at least, is a core component of any society which wishes to make the most of its peoples, and encourage the diversity of society which contributes to its overall development. It does not demand the renouncing of a state religion followed by a vast majority, or any compromise on the key principles of anyone's faith. But it is time at least that we challenged a world where tolerance of another's faith is held to be more dangerous than its repression. That's when the lights go out.

The implosion of the Middle East is at least as threatened by misplaced religious fervour as any state activity. I have spent three and a half years being sickened by the cruelty and wickedness in its wake, which demonstrates not a humanity touched by God, but the nightmare of man without God lashing out in the darkness. Enough.

And on the back of all this, shamefully exploiting, sits the terrorist and extremist, crossing borders which mean nothing, taking any opportunity to spread a doctrine by force, and subject a populace to violence unless there is submission. From Mali to Iraq, and many points in between, this menace threatens us all. It thrives in ungoverned space, and will expose any flaw in governance in order to create a credible narrative for its existence.

I do not want to end on a low note. As a democratic politician I can easily be accused, and plead guilty to being an optimist. But my optimism comes from the young I have met, from young women playing football in a free Libya, from the excitement of a social media awards evening in the joyful mayhem of Beirut, from the earnest admonition of women on a British Council entrepreneurs course in Riyadh to let them move forward at their own pace, to young internet start-up wannabe's in Amman, from the enthusiasm of the young for the new in the Gulf, to the hope of the Kurdish women passing legislation against domestic violence in Erbil: - this is a Middle East of hope, opportunity and promise. It is up to us, an older generation still with our hands on the tiller, to help steer the ship to the calmer water which will give their hopes a chance.