

REPORT FROM 10TH DOHA FORUM

By Michael Ancram

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*'Oh the gift that God should gi'e us
To see ourselves as others see us'*

When Israel invaded the flotilla sailing to Gaza, leading to violence and loss of civilian lives, I was a speaker at the 10th Doha Forum in Qatar. The delegates attending came from all over the world and from every continent. The reaction against Israel was predictable and hostile. The reaction to the response of the US and the UK was, however, of more immediate concern and interest to me because it reflected on the international credibility of these two nations, particularly (but certainly not exclusively) in the Middle East and Gulf Region.

In relation to the US it is easiest to quote the editorial in the *Gulf Times* which neatly summed up the strength of feeling I was experiencing around me.

'As the rest of the world was shouting from the rooftops condemning Israel's illegal assault, the land of the free was happy to express "deep regret" while trusting the perpetrators to carry out an impartial inquiry. Worse was the statement, "Ultimately, this incident underscores the need to move ahead quickly with negotiations that can lead to a comprehensive peace in the region." It was as if hope really had sprung eternal. Even the European Union emerged from its usual state of somnolence to express outrage. Up the road from Washington the UN was also finding its high-pitched voice while virtually all member countries were swift in their public condemnation. Indeed across the world there was a revolving door of Israeli envoys called in to explain their country's disdain for human life. So apart from Barack Obama's whimpering words the world was united in anger.'

Even discounting predictable bias and hyperbole, what I was reading and hearing amounted to a considerable breach in the confidence created by President Obama's Cairo initiative of a year ago. That should concern all those who genuinely seek conflict resolution and peace in the Middle East. It was a real blow to the comprehensive mutual understandings required to make progress. It was a major step backwards.

While not in print, the reaction I witness to the UK's response was not much different and not far behind. It was seen as initially overcautious and hedged, and even when subsequently strengthened, still fell short of the EU's response and those of many of its members. In a Forum and in a part of the world where the UK still enjoys credibility and respect, we do ourselves no favours by appearing to mince our words.