



Conservative
Middle East Council

CMEC ANNUAL POLICY LECTURE 2016

THE MIDDLE EAST AND UK FOREIGN POLICY

THE FOREIGN SECRETARY
THE RT HON PHILIP HAMMOND MP



February 2016



INTRODUCTION

The Conservative Middle East Council was honoured to have The Foreign Secretary, The Rt Hon Philip Hammond MP, deliver our 2016 Annual Policy Lecture, and it gives me great pleasure to publish the transcript here.

Over the past five years, the CMEC Annual Policy Lecture has become well established as a serious policy event drawing highly distinguished speakers as well as a superb audience, and we were very pleased to see that tradition being continued this year. We were indeed delighted to welcome the entire Arab diplomatic corps, with whom we enjoy an excellent and warm friendship, to the lecture.

Our Foreign Secretary is making a tremendous contribution to UK foreign policy, our place on the world stage and our safety and security at home, and we are hugely grateful that he could make time in a hectic schedule to address our members and supporters. It was an enormous privilege to hear such a thorough and incisive description of the current situation in the Middle East and our policy responses.

The CMEC Annual Policy Lecture and indeed all of the work that CMEC does is more important than ever before, and we are particularly grateful for the generosity of Dr Assem Allam and Professor Magdy Ishak for their hugely generous sponsorship of this year's event. There are no quiet times when it comes to the Middle East, but the region is of almost unparalleled importance at the moment, and it is imperative that Conservatives seek to understand it and to think deeply about what our response to it should be.

Whether on Palestine, Syria, Egypt, the Gulf or any other critical issue, CMEC will continue to actively engage with parliamentarians to facilitate a greater understanding of the things that matter and to allow them to travel to different parts of the region to see it for themselves.



THE RT HON SIR ALAN DUNCAN MP
Chairman
Conservative Middle East Council



THE MIDDLE EAST AND UK FOREIGN POLICY

The Foreign Secretary

The Rt Hon Philip Hammond MP

delivered at The Institute of Directors, Waterloo Room, on Wednesday 10 February 2016

It is great to be here, and to see so many of you here. Thank you all for coming along this evening and allowing me to make these few remarks to our good friends.

Thank you Alan (The Rt Hon Sir Alan Duncan MP) for that introduction. As Khaled (HE Khaled Al-Duwaisan, Ambassador of Kuwait) knows, I have asked his foreign minister on many occasions, ‘When they are going to replace him in London?’ They told me they can’t, because they are at the top of the diplomatic pile at the moment and they don’t fancy starting at the bottom all over again.

I am very grateful to CMEC for organising this evening, for all the work you do to promote Middle East-UK relations and, particularly within the Conservative Party, to ensure an understanding of the critically important issues in the Middle East that are so important to the UK, both economically and strategically.

I suppose, as I come here this evening, it perhaps is a bit of a reflection on what is going on in our political life at the moment, that after an afternoon with the European Scrutiny Committee, I have been positively looking forward to getting my teeth into the “relatively simple” challenges of the Middle East.

The Middle East and Britain's longstanding and vital interests in it were badly neglected by the last Labour government. Since 2010, we have been working hard to re-engage with the region – some would say ostentatiously re-engage, which some would say was needed: picking up the very deep historical relationships and deep pools of understanding that we have got around the region, and trying to work out with our partners to translate these deep and historic relationships into modern forward-looking relationships that can work for us all in the 21st Century, when the climate is difficult, where the security issues we face are different from the ones we faced in the past and where the challenges of maintaining our mutual prosperity are also different.

The UK of course has a huge stake in the region: a million British visitors travel to the Gulf each year, 160,000 Brits live there and hundreds of thousands of Gulf nationals visit the UK for business, to study and for tourism every year.

Of course the key thing is that the Gulf is absolutely essential to the security of the UK. I am afraid to say that many of the threats and challenges we face are linked to the challenges that countries in the region face. The collaborations that we have developed with countries around the Middle East, particularly our friends in the Gulf, are crucial to keeping Britain, the region and Europe safe. We are developing a Gulf strategy which sets out how we intend to expand our cooperation across all areas: defence and security, trade and investment, foreign policy, as well as culture, education and healthcare: economic sectors where we are seeing very dramatic increases in the level of British action in the region.

As we stand here in 2016, I guess we look back to the so-called Arab spring just five years ago and think of the hope that was raised in many hearts by the sign of people across the Arab world looking for a better future and thinking about engaging with the rest of the world, and how those hopes have turned to fears as Daesh has spread its tentacles in Syria and Iraq and across the region to challenge and threaten peace and stability in many areas.

Where the hope of 2010 still burns, we are supporting it and we will support it. I think one of the great achievements of the last 12 months has been an understanding by many of our European partners, and indeed the EU as an organization, that it is not enough that we step in when a country is in trouble, when the problems have already taken hold but that we need – and this was brought home to us very robustly by the terrible attacks in Sousse last summer – to identify those who are heading in the right direction, who are doing the right thing but who are fragile and who are challenged, and we need to get behind them and support them with security assistance, with economic support, with technological help to build capacity and capability across government, and I hope that lesson has now been soundly learned.



As we look at the challenge of extremists and violent Islamism across the Middle East, I see this as a challenge to us to support our partners in the Middle East as they reclaim their religion from an organisation and an ideology that is manipulating it and abusing it for political purposes. We have to be clear that we are standing with the 99.9% of Muslims who reject everything that the extremists and fundamentalists stand for, and we will work with them to reclaim that religion and to ensure that it plays its proper role in the civilization of the world. And if that challenge wasn't a big enough one for us, we now have to struggle with the additional complexity of the economic consequences of oil at \$30 a barrel, and while British consumers may be breathing a short term sigh of relief as petrol prices tumble below a £1 a litre, the reality is that many of our partners and friends around the region have dramatically expanded their expenditure in the wake of 2011 and have made long term commitments to a level of social infrastructure in their countries that perhaps could never have been dreamed of a decade ago; those commitments need to be funded, and at \$30 a barrel oil, that is going to be a continuing struggle, and there will be a continuing tension, which I know some countries in the region are already having to respond to in terms between the need for investment and security and the need to maintain the kind of social infrastructure that has been built over the last few years – not dissimilar to the challenge that the mature democracies of Western Europe have also had to face.

As I look around the region, of course, I have to conclude that the crisis in Syria is the main focus of attention; there are many other areas of challenge but this must be the major focus of attention, and I want to just say something about the specific challenge that we face in Syria now. We all know the statistics: hundreds of thousands of lives lost, millions displaced, tens of thousands facing a humanitarian catastrophe. Right now in real time, the noose is closing around Aleppo in an act that could deliver us literally a million more refugees streaming across Asia Minor and across Europe. The brutality that we have seen, both from Daesh and from regime forces supported by an ever more ferocious Russian engagement, has led to unappalled levels of suffering among the civilians. Russia went into Syria telling us that it wanted to join the fight against Daesh. Do not believe Russian propaganda; I have no dispute, no doubt that the Russians despise Daesh just as much and as fiercely as we do, but they have a completely different view of the way in which to meet the challenge. I have no doubt that Russia's priority at the moment, above all else, is to bolster the regime and extinguish the moderate armed opposition – a strategy which will have the effect of reinforcing the very enemy that it says it wishes to defeat.

In October, Russia carried out 100 air strikes in Syria. By January this had reached 3000. In one day last week, they carried out 320 air strikes on the Aleppo supply lines alone. The pace and intensity of Russian engagement has stepped up even as their rhetoric around a political process and peace talks has also stepped up. The challenge for us is to disengage these two processes. We need Russia to be involved in a political process because Russia has unique leverage over the Assad regime, but we cannot realistically expect the opposition who are fighting and dying under a rainstorm of Russian bombs to come and sit down at Russian sponsored talks in Geneva while they are being slaughtered wholesale on the ground in Syria; somehow we have to square this circle, to use the Russian leverage over the regime but deter Russia from pressing its advantage to deliver yet more humanitarian suffering on the ground.

Now the situation in Syria is of course ultra-complex because there are multiple conflicts playing out in this piece of space: there's the war against Daesh, Daesh versus virtually everybody else, there's the Syrian regime against the Syrian opposition, there's Turks against Kurds, there's Iran playing out a game with Saudi Arabia, there's the United States versus Russia – superpower stuff – all layering over each other in a way which makes this conflict incredibly complex to address and so far impossible to resolve.

The picture in Iraq – I never thought I would hear myself say this – is a little bit more promising, a little bit more straight forward. There has been modest progress against Daesh in Iraq. The UK of course has played a role from the outset in the coalition and Daesh is losing ground; it has been pushed back in important areas. The result of the situation in Tikrit has been very positive. The post-Daesh situation on the ground is better than I think many would have expected when the city was liberated. Progress has been made across a number of areas and continues to be made. Reports suggest that Daesh are struggling with manpower and have had to cut salary payments – are withholding and delaying payments in some cases – and of course they are equally affected by the low price of oil. So there is progress being made in Iraq, and I am clear, as we said 18 months ago, that there will be a resolution of the problems in Iraq;



we said then it would take three years, and I still think it will take three years, another 18 months before we see Iraq largely freed of the menace of Daesh. At least we have a plan and the plan is beginning to deliver. What we need to do as friendly powers is remain behind the government (in Iraq) and reinforce its stated commitment to reach out to the Sunni population in Iraq and make them feel like genuine partners in the nation of Iraq, because only by doing that can we create a sustainable future, post-Daesh, in the Sunni populated areas.

The problem in Syria with Daesh is the interaction of civil war with the fight against Islamist extremism. We can't defeat Daesh without a political transition away from Assad because the people who we need to defeat Daesh on the ground are currently at war with each other. We have to have a political solution to the civil war in order to resolve the problem of Daesh in Syria, and that means a transition away from Assad, and therein is the problem. The Russians, for all their positive rhetoric, fundamentally reject the proposition that Assad must go as part of a transition. The Russians talk about a unity government, not a traditional government in Syria. The opposition, on the other hand, cannot accept a process that allows Assad to remain in place; as we gather in Munich tomorrow night for yet another international Syria support group meeting, that will be the challenge before us: how to reconcile a Russia buoyed by military success, believing that it can achieve its objectives through military means and disinclined to give any inch on the Assad question.

The opposition can only attend peace talks in Geneva if they are able to deliver something on the ground for the fighters who are taking the punishment and if it can say to its people that this process will lead to the departure of Assad. Now that the Russians are a reality, we have to deal with them, we have to be pragmatic in order to stop the suffering and the stream of refugees. What we mustn't do is trade with the Russians the basic obligations that they already have under international humanitarian law. There are obligations not to carpet bomb civilian areas, not to target medical infrastructure, to allow humanitarian access, not to use siege as a weapon of war; these are obligations underlined by Russia's signature of UNSCR 2254. We must demand of all parties who are involved in the ISSG – the political track – that they meet without condition their obligations under UNSCR 2254 and under international humanitarian law. So we have to call out the Russians, and frankly I have done that already and had my wrists slapped by *Sputnik* and *Russia Today* for my temerity. Despite Kremlin propaganda, what the Russians are doing is attacking non -Daesh targets – 80% of Russian air strikes are not targeted against Daesh.

In Turkey a couple of weeks ago, I met a group of Syrian civil defence workers, people who have been trained by Britain to work in opposition held areas of Syria – rescuing people from the aftermath of air strikes – and they described to me what has happened since Russia's presence on the scene. They told me they don't fear regime air strikes, they're paltry, insignificant by comparison; what they fear is Russia's systematic destruction of cities, towns and villages that they hold. They described to me the targeting of hospitals, of aid convoys, of ambulances and of rescue workers. They told me that in Syria they have removed the red crescents from the roofs of buildings and vehicles because they are not deterring air strikes but being used as targets in air strikes. They told me how they had lost colleagues when carrying out rescue work in buildings because Russian jets always come back for a second strike 40-45 minutes after the first raid, killing the rescue workers and the medics who were seeking to aid people caught in the first strike. As we call out the Russians for this behaviour, we look to our partners in the region, Arabs and non-Arabs, to step up the pressure against Russia because it is all too easy for Russia to paint it (UK and US reactions) as a sort of hangover Cold War kneejerk behavior; it can't just be the West, it has to be all of us identifying this unacceptable behavior and challenging the Russians head on over what they are doing in Syria and the contribution they are making to the suffering and the carnage.

I want to make another point as well about Russia, which won't have escaped many people in this room: this isn't just about Syria; Russia is making a more strategic move in the Middle East here; over the last three to four months, Russia has re-established itself as a power in the Middle East and that has been noticed around the Middle East. As a country, Russia is able to project military power and it has the political will to deliver that military power when it believes it is in its interests. As Russia would see it, it has stood behind its client (Assad) when the going got tough and backed him with military power. What the Russians are doing in Syria now is not just bombing the moderate opposition, not just fighting Assad's war for him; they are building new air bases, military hospitals, command and control infrastructure, all the artifacts of a long term Russian presence in Syria, and it seems to us in our strategic analysis (to indicate) a long term Russian role in the affairs of the Middle East in a way we haven't seen certainly since the end of the Cold War. So there is



more than one challenge to be faced here; there are short term imperatives but there are also long term issues that we need to think very very carefully about and all of you in the Middle East need to think very very carefully about.

Let me just say something about Iran, Libya and Yemen.

Of course the nuclear deal with Iran was a landmark event, and whatever else people think about it, I am absolutely clear and have no doubts that the mechanisms we have put in place will prevent Iran from getting a nuclear weapon. Now we have moved on from last year, it is worth bearing in mind how much more dangerous the present situation would be – how much more terrifying the standoff between Iran and Saudi Arabia earlier this year would have been – if Iran had been a power heading towards a nuclear weapon. So for all the criticisms that have been levelled against this deal, I believe that we have done the world and the region a great service by deterring Iran from this course of action. But the real prize is a much bigger and more strategic one.

Iran is a schizophrenic nation, there are moderates and pragmatists in Iran and there are extremists and fanatics in Iran. The ending of Iran's nuclear programme and the opening up of Iran's economy presents a moment of opportunity which is feared by the fanatics and the extremists, but must be seized by the pragmatists and the reformers, an opportunity to engage Iran in the affairs of the region and the affairs of the world in a positive way, an opportunity to get more business between the outside world and Iran, to get Iranian students studying in foreign universities, to get tourists travelling to and from Iran, normalizing our relations with Iran. And I say to Iranians, and I say to my Saudi friends as well, the reality in the Gulf is that we have two major powers: Saudi Arabia and Iran, and both of them are going to be there for a very long time to come, and they have to find a way of living together; they don't have to find a way of liking each other but they have to find a way of living together just as in other parts of the world where people have had to find ways of living side by side and manage their differences.

We have to build on what we have achieved with the nuclear deal with Iran while remaining absolutely alert to what Iran is still today doing in the region – illegal ballistic missile tests, illegal interference in other countries in the region, sponsoring of terrorist organisations in Lebanon and in other countries in the region, and we will stand firm behind the commitments we have made to our allies in the Gulf. Just because we have done a nuclear deal with Iran has not blinded us to the activities of Iran in the region. We will support our allies in the Gulf and we will work hard to show the Iranians that it is in their interests to scale back the activities – the interference that we've seen from Iran over the years – and to reengage with the world. The long term security and prosperity of the region depends on those with modern outward looking views triumphing over those with disruptive and inward looking views.

Much of the Gulf region has had its eyes focused southwards even while the action has been in Syria because of the challenge of the situation in Yemen. I wanted to just very briefly say this: we have been clear from the outset that the legitimate government of Yemen deserves the backing of the UK and other nations, and we have supported the Coalition's efforts in Yemen, but I am acutely conscious of the scale of humanitarian suffering that is occurring in that country, and I fervently hope that we are coming to the end of the military phase of this conflict and will be moving over the coming weeks into the political phase where a sustainable solution for the governance of the country – based on the principles of the gulf cooperation initiative – can be established, recognising that groups like the Houthis have to be involved in the future governance of Yemen, but that the governance must be a stable one that ensures that Yemen will not pose a risk to its neighbors to the north and to the east. At the same time, I am acutely aware of the criticism that's been raining down on us from NGOs and others about alleged breaches of international humanitarian law during this conflict, and there have been allegations of breaches on both sides of this conflict.

We have been clear with the coalition partners from the outset about the importance of compliance with international humanitarian law and I have said in Parliament, and I will say again here: we have looked at every allegation of breach of international humanitarian law, and we have found no evidence of breach of international humanitarian law, and we urge the coalition to go onto the front foot, to investigate when there are allegations and be open about what they find. Things happen in war, mistakes get made and one should be honest about mistakes when they are made. I was delighted to see the recent conference given by the Saudi armed forces Sunday before last, which explained how they manage allegations of breach of international humanitarian law and recognised openly one



infamous incident – the Médecins Sans Frontières hospital incident, where a mistake had been made and the hospital building had been hit because of that error. I think it is hugely important across the Coalition, as this campaign comes to an end, that all allegations are investigated, when mistakes are made, they are admitted to honestly and openly; that is the right way to fight modern warfare. I believe the coalition countries have the capability and the sophisticated weapons that allow them to comply with international humanitarian law in a way that frankly we haven't always seen in Syria where, as we saw today, the Russians are dropping dumb munitions unguided bombs on areas with large civilian populations.

Finally, on Libya: we live in hope. We have a huge interest in the situation in Libya, partly because of our recent history there but also because the Libyan coast is just 100 miles from the coast of Europe. Whether it is terrorism or whether it is migration, Libya matters hugely to Europe. It matters hugely to us and it also becoming increasingly clear that if we succeed in crushing Daesh in its stronghold in Syria, Libya will be the bolt-hole of choice, and that is not an acceptable outcome. So we strongly support the formation of a government of national accord in Libya. The sticking point at the moment – if I am reading between the lines correctly – is about civilian control of the military. It is not about who is in the cabinet or who is not in the cabinet; it is about whether there is a civilian defence minister appointed to have control over the Libyan national army. I very much hope that we will be able to get past this particular hiccup and see a government of national accord formed in the very near future, and I can comment from Britain's point of view – and I think I can also speak for our EU partners – that there is a readiness, even an appetite, to get behind the government of national accord with technological support, with military support, with economic support, to rebuild that country and do the work that will need doing because it will be no small challenge to go from a government of national accord formed in Tobruk to a government of Libya that is sitting in Tripoli; there's a huge challenge there but we are up for it and we will work with that government of national accord when it is formed .

I cannot finish these comments without mentioning the Middle East peace process; arguably the root cause of many of the problems in the region. I urge both sides to get back to the negotiating tables so that we can have a two-state solution in Palestine and Israel. But you know what the problem is? The problem is that right now, at the level of political elite, neither side really wants to be at the table, neither side really wants to be talking. So while the people on the ground are suffering, while actions on the ground are putting a two-state solution further and further from being achieved – and arguably risking making it impossible to achieve – the political elites from both sides, for internal political reasons, are quite happy with the status quo. I can hear a stream of flack coming from both sides for saying that, but I am afraid that that is how I see it. While this impasse continues, Gaza is festering, and those who we have always regarded as the extremists in Gaza are beginning – on the political spectrum – to look like the moderates. Yet more extreme and yet more dangerous people are gaining ground in Gaza and in the West Bank every day that this problem remains unsolved, every day that the political elites on both sides stay away from sitting down at that table and try to make progress to step forward.

This area of the world (the Middle East) is crucially important for the UK – for our security, for our prosperity and for our deep historical and cultural links with the region – and it is certainly up there as one of my three key issues: the EU renegotiation, the challenge of Islamist extremism and security in the Middle East and the challenge of an expansionist and aggressive Russia; those last two problems, which until a few months ago I was describing as two separate problems, have elided now around a single challenge in Syria. We have stepped up our engagement, we are playing a leading role and we intend to continue playing a leading role, but more now than ever we need to work more closely together to protect ourselves and countries in the region against the terrorist threat, to push back against the challenge that Russia's intervention is posing, to deliver humanitarian solutions as we are now doing in Syria and in Yemen and across the region, standing with our friends and supporting those who are at risk because we have a huge stake in this; we are doing this for their sakes and we are also doing it for our sake, we are in this together. As I said at Manama last year, “Your security in the Gulf is our security here in Western Europe, and especially in Britain. We know that, and that's why whatever happens come rain or shine, we will stand together in working with you to defend your security and through it defend ours.”

Thank you.



Conservative Middle East Council

Conservative Middle East Council

55 Tufton Street, London, SW1P 3QL

t: +44 (0) 20 7340 6007

e: info@cmecc.org.uk

w: www.cmecc.org.uk

@CMECCnews



THE FOREIGN SECRETARY
THE RT HON PHILIP HAMMOND MP

The Rt Hon Philip Hammond MP was brought up in Essex. He went to Oxford to study Philosophy, Politics and Economics in October 1974 and enjoyed a successful business career in manufacturing, consultancy, property and energy, before becoming MP for Runnymede and Weybridge in 1997. Mr Hammond has held numerous senior positions in Government. He was Secretary of State for Transport between May 2010 and October 2011, Secretary of State for Defence between October 2011 and July 2014, and was appointed Foreign Secretary in July 2014.

The views expressed herein are those of the authors not of the Conservative Middle East Council or the Conservative Party.