

Oral Evidence Taken before the Foreign Affairs Committee on Tuesday 29 January 2013

Members present:

Richard Ottaway (Chair)
Mr Bob Ainsworth
Mr John Baron
Sir Menzies Campbell
Ann Clwyd
Mike Gapes
Mark Hendrick
Andrew Rosindell
Sir John Stanley
Rory Stewart

Evidence heard in Public Questions 65 - 114

Examination of Witness

Witness: Sir Alan Munro, Honorary Vice-President of the Saudi-British Society and board member of the Arab British Chamber of Commerce, former Under-Secretary of State for the Middle East and Africa, and British Ambassador in Saudi Arabia (1989 to 1993), gave evidence.

Q87 Chair: As colleagues know, there is an important vote at two minutes past 4, so we aim to end this session at 4 o'clock. I welcome our next witness Sir Alan Munro, who is the honorary vice-president of the Saudi-British Society and board member of the Arab British Chamber of Commerce, former Under-Secretary of State for the Middle East, and British ambassador in Saudi Arabia. Is there anything you would particularly like to say in opening remarks?

Sir Alan Munro: Yes, if I might. I have, for better or worse, been involved quite closely with Saudi Arabia for 35 years, with one brief intermission in a socialist and military Algeria. I have known the kingdom in peace and war. Out of that comes a conviction that our relationship with Saudi Arabia remains and has long been of the first order.

There was an interval that many may not recall of 12 years of no diplomatic relations at all, between 1953 and 1965 over the Bahraini episode in the Empty Quarter, the boundary dispute and the initial search for oil and so on, where Britain undertook to support its protected regimes in the form of Abu Dhabi and Oman and aroused the intense irritation of the al-Saud. There was also a certain glitch in the mid-1970s in our relationship. For all that, it remains for this country a relationship of the first order in diplomatic, political, economic and cultural terms, and at the public level, with all the interchange that I am glad to say goes on.

The present leadership under King Abdullah has been engaged, certainly for the past 10 years, in an unprecedented, steady but ever-cautious programme of change and modernisation. There used to be an old joke about Saudi Arabia about 30 or 40 years ago being dragged reluctantly into the 14th century. It is now taking its own lead in putting more than a toe into the 21st century. That remains of major significance for this country and the Saudis, as they recognise, in that this very close and rather personal relationship and the history behind it, enables us in judicious fashion to play a real, if not necessarily to be publicised, part in the context of helping forward, encouraging and reinforcing various aspects of this important period of change and reform.

Q88 Andrew Rosindell: Sir Alan, how do you feel the UK is perceived in Saudi Arabia by the Saudi royal family and by the people of Saudi Arabia?

Sir Alan Munro: There are two categories. You must remember that Saudi Arabia is increasingly becoming, in society terms, a somewhat polarised country. This to me is a sign of change. It is not

generally accepted or recognised, least of all by parts of our media, that the regime remains in the vanguard of reform, albeit very cautious reform. As a former Chair of this Committee once said to me, "Saudi Arabia is not a monarchy, it is a diarchy." It has a clerical establishment which is powerful and represents the opinion of-goodness knows-50% or more of its population, male and female, and which has to be taken into account in any attempt to put across-to sell, if you like-the process of change on which the regime is launched.

The regime has many members, including some of the younger ones now coming through the ranks, who enjoy close contact with this country and who have, in many cases, received various stages of education here, from which they claim to have benefited. So I believe that in many respects we are regarded not only as a long-established and historical friend, which goes back to the first world war, but also by the younger generation as a source of partnership and as a society whose standards are regarded as respectable and in which they place a certain amount of trust and seek to emulate.

At the senior level of al-Saud governance and the senior ministers involved, we are held in respect, and there is undoubtedly a wish to see us as major and ongoing partners. At the more public level there is a mixture of what I call ignorance and attraction. The attraction comes increasingly through the social media, which are going to play a greater and greater part in the momentum of change coming from below as well top down in Saudi Arabia today.

Q89 Andrew Rosindell: Following on from your comment about Britain being a historical friend and that they look to us for so many things, does it strike you as strange that Britain has not encouraged either Saudi Arabia or any of the Gulf States to join the Commonwealth? Do you think that would be a positive way of bringing the Gulf States into a framework where countries have developed into democracies?

Sir Alan Munro: The only Arab state that we might at one time have thought would qualify and, indeed, was interested in becoming a member of the Commonwealth was Aden-and we know where that one got us. Britain's historic relationship, not so much with Saudi Arabia but with the smaller Gulf States in the days of the Protectorates, was never as intense as that which prevailed in former colonial territories or in the dominions. Egypt is another case in point where vicereignty was only superficial. I do not believe that it has ever been seen by successive British Governments as appropriate to try and incorporate the states of the Arab community within the British system of standards of justice, language, exchange and so forth.

On the other hand, as previous speakers were saying, we have an historic image which is, by and large, a positive one. I have sometimes been surprised-this came up again in what I regard as the ill-fated Iraq adventure in 2003-that the opinion of Saudis who wish us well, and some Algerians who had less in common with us, was: "Well, this has been a wrong thing to do. It doesn't make sense. It's not going to get anywhere, but thank goodness you are there", because-here we go again-"you understand us." "Yes," I say, "and look at the mess we made." Look at Iraq, and here we are back again in Iraq. That was one of the reasons why many of us advised not going through to Baghdad, if I may say so, in 1991.

Q90 Chair: I think that we had better concentrate on Saudi Arabia.

Sir Alan Munro: They take the view that we do have a stake in their societies, and they wish to see us exert that familiarity with their own objectives and systems of governance.

Q91 Mark Hendrick: Sir Alan, could you perhaps compare and contrast the UK's current relationship with Saudi Arabia to when you were an ambassador there in the late '80s and early '90s during the first Gulf war?

Sir Alan Munro: We are talking 20 years of interval, when I have been returning in one capacity or another. The pace of change in the social picture, in the extent of freedom of speech and journalistic independence and in the spread of education, particularly within the female community-there are now more female students at undergraduate level in Saudi Arabian universities than there are male-

illustrate the degree of change that has been taking place. It has been at the political level, too, ever since King Fahd established the national council in 1993. The whole picture now is one of greater confidence and self-confidence and more outward looking than it was in 1993, although it was already perceptible.

Q92 Mark Hendrick: Is the relationship stronger or weaker than it was then? Do the Saudis see more dependence on us, or do we see more dependence of them, given our political, economic and trade terms?

Sir Alan Munro: There is an interdependence here in the various fields that I have indicated. The Saudis undoubtedly continue, as their whole political scene evolves, to look to us to put across standards in civil justice and parliamentary behaviour; I believe that the President of the Majlis al-Shura is about to pay a visit to this city. These are the areas in which they look to us increasingly, as they open up their chrysalis, to play a part.

I must say that it also, increasingly, comes through in the area of higher education. At the time I left in 1993, they said that there were some 200 Saudi students-military and civilian-in this country in higher education. The number now, I gather from the Saudi embassy, is around 1,600.

Q93 Mark Hendrick: I was chatting with one of the previous witnesses who said that when students come from Saudi Arabia to this country, on the one hand can see our culture and democracy, but they also see adverse aspects of our culture, such as drunkenness on the streets, fights and crime. Do you think that British culture and the British people are a good advert for democracy and the British way of life?

Sir Alan Munro: By and large, yes. But there have been instances where, in particular the more conservative among Saudi youth-they do exist-have been shocked at what they find here. They probably go back with a negative opinion. There are elements of that, but for the great majority, it is a stimulating experience, as I understand that from continuing to talk to them through the Saudi-British Society and others. We have a Saudi youth element within the Saudi-British society and they are a very positive group indeed.

Q94 Mr Baron: Sir Alan, how important are defence sales and the defence relationship between our two countries to the bilateral relationship? For example, if we stopped, or severely restricted, sales, would that have a meaningful impact? What factors are at play?

Sir Alan Munro: It would have a major impact on our broader relationship, it would have a major impact on our own defence manufacturing sector and it would have a major impact on the military competence of certain elements of the Saudi armed forces, notably their air force. Remember that it is also the training-engineering training, pilot training and so on-that comes, and has done ever since the late 1960s. This goes way previous to al-Yamamah, may I say. It is a treasured element in the minds of the Saudi military establishment. We are very important to them, and they are very important to us.

Q95 Mr Baron: In your view, it is the biggest bit of the relationship, although there are other bits as well.

Sir Alan Munro: No, I do not think it is the biggest bit, and I think it is becoming a lesser and lesser element in our relationship, but it is important. This was touched on earlier, and goes back perhaps partly to my time in the Ministry of Defence, when I looked after defence co-operation with Saudi Arabia. At strategic level, the Saudis like to see us and treat us, with the French-certainly so far as their naval forces are concerned, but not necessarily elsewhere-as a kind of second row player to the Americans. They know, and they have had experience, of occasions when they have been about to go overboard in some American deal and, as somebody mentioned, Congress has tripped them up or threatened to trip them up, in which case they have turned to us. That is indeed how the Lightning deal in the 1960s came to be, and that is how, let it be said, the Tornado deal came to be. There was another one, which luckily did not come to me, which had to do with Nimrod.

Q96 Mike Gapes: May I ask you about the internal politics in Saudi Arabia? The level of public protest, civil society and political movements is very different in Saudi Arabia from that in some of its neighbouring Gulf states, and certainly in other parts of the Arab world. How do you explain that?

Sir Alan Munro: Saudi Arabia is not, as yet, a politically conscious society, partly because it has always been-although it is less so now-a cocooned society, cocooned from hardship and living within, as other oil-producing Gulf states have, a mega welfare state. With the growth of social media and the spread of education there has come a greater querulousness or questioning of the norms of Saudi society, particularly among younger elements. That is buttressed on the other side by a hard-line conservative element-the ultra pious, as it were-some would say the more fanatical side. That being said, the regime itself and its present leadership, notably King Abdullah, are popular. The change that people press for is change within the system, not outwith it.

Q97 Mike Gapes: Does that apply also to the regional issues and the Shi'a populated areas?

Sir Alan Munro: The Shi'a minority in the eastern province has been until recent years a quiescent element, and the nearest thing to a national labour force that Saudi Arabia ever had. There is a society with a deep and somewhat bigoted religious culture, although not a violent one. The Shi'a are regarded with suspicion by the Sunni establishment and by Sunni teaching. The King has taken considerable steps to break that barrier down in recent years, and has had some success domestically in bringing more and more Shi'a into more senior and responsible roles. The new list for the Majlis al-Shura has Shi'a members, including one Shi'a woman, for example. The governor of the eastern province, who actually just resigned the other day after many years, Mohammed bin Fahd, son of King Fahd, has done a great deal, as I have seen at first hand, in his-gracious-25 years as governor of the eastern province to break the glass ceiling for the Shi'a. As for the Shi'a element, there is still a dissatisfaction-in a sense, that goes with the way change is happening-but in my view, it is being very carefully and understandingly managed by the Saudi authorities.

Q98 Mike Gapes: You referred to the closed and conservative nature of the leadership. What is going to happen with the transition to the next generation? As I understand it, all the potential successors, one by one, are no longer there. There now has to be, in effect, a shift to a new generation. Is that going to go smoothly and how is it going to be done?

Sir Alan Munro: This is the sort of speculation that keeps us in business. Senior Saudis with whom I have had recent contact admit that the drop of a generation is not going to be a straightforward affair. This is a family that is not a divided one-there are one or two mavericks on the side-and they know that, if you like, they hang together or they hang together. They are an intelligent community. They see themselves as, and are accepted as, continuing to rule, and they will be putting a lot of thought into deciding which branch of the present range of the Abdul Aziz sons should eventually inherit the succession. But I have noticed, and Saudis have pointed out to me in the last couple of weeks, the decision only two weeks ago by the King to appoint two of the younger generation-two bright young sparks, one the son of Nayef; one the son of Salman, the current Crown Prince-to be governors of two of the key provinces. The eastern province has gone to Saud bin Nayef and the Medina province-the alternative holy city province-has gone to Faisal bin Salman, newspaper owner and a recent graduate with a doctorate from St Anthony's College Oxford in Gulf politics. That is a step towards identifying and bringing forward the idea of the younger generation, plus there is the very important fact that Prince Mohammad bin Nayef, who was deputy Minister of Interior, was appointed to that key position, succeeding his father as Minister of Interior some eight or nine months ago.

Q99 Ann Clwyd: Sir Alan, some people have argued that the FCO should be pressing more assertively for international human rights standards, such as, obviously, the rights of women, and the rights of ethnic and religious minorities. Do you agree with that, and what do you think of the speed of political reform? What should we expect within a certain time scale?

Sir Alan Munro: Two things. Political reform, as being orchestrated under an ailing-long may he reign, as I see it-King Abdullah, has moved to a pitch that has never been seen before. But at every

stage, given this deeply entrenched religious conservatism in that society, they have got to move at the pace that will carry the clerical establishment and the conservative constituency with it. That is a constant preoccupation. It is why the King, and indeed King Fahd before him, flew kites, and then nothing would happen. But in their system, this kite flying is very important. It starts to introduce some of those who would be resistant to change, or would like to go in another direction, to starting to think more seriously about the way the leadership wants to take things. Within those constraints, we are now seeing the regime, frankly, pushing at the doors of change with a force that I have not seen before. That is a welcome thing, but there are constraints.

If we look at the whole range of it all, where might change most readily come? The area of women's rights has rightly now been put by the King right near the top of the agenda. That can only be seen as a positive step. Again, personalities come into it. One of the personalities involved here-this is where you have to trace the family a bit, because it is a family country-is one of King Abdullah's daughters, Princess Adelah, who is a leading reformer on women's rights. She plays a large part now in developments and is responsible for women's education. Her husband, from another branch of the al-Saud, is the Minister for higher education.

There is one of the daughters of King Faisal-a very reforming King, whom you may remember was eventually assassinated by a younger cousin who was steamed up, frankly, about the introduction of television. I will digress for a moment. I remember the late Crown Prince Sultan once talking to me about some of these episodes, and King Faisal's move for change against a much more intensely conservative society. He said, "I was waiting to go in to see King Faisal on one occasion, and the Mufti"-the head of the clerical establishment-"was in there and I could hear all sorts of raised voices. Then he came out looking storm-faced. I went in to see the King, and said, 'Pretty rough session, wasn't it?' And he said, 'Yes, I'm afraid it was all about the iniquities of television, and so on.' And I said, 'Yes, and it also gives you square eyes.'" So you can see where their hearts beat, really.

Q100 Ann Clwyd: Do you think that western pressure is having any effect on the speed of change? How strong is western pressure?

Sir Alan Munro: Take the women's case. Only last week, one of the women, whom I know well-her father used to be ambassador here for years-and who has now been elected, or chosen, to the Majlis al-Shura, took the line that I have heard other Saudi women take in conferences and public statements in this country and elsewhere. She said, "Look, we need your support, but don't rush us and don't make too much noise about it. You see, there is always the backlash factor. We are getting there. We are getting there in our own way. We want to know of your support, but don't proclaim it too loudly or you may make our own role more complicated. We do have allies, but we have to move at the pace this society of ours can take. It is happening. Thank you for your support." I would go along with that.

Q101 Ann Clwyd: When you were ambassador, how often did you meet with human rights organisations, for example?

Sir Alan Munro: In Saudi Arabia, there weren't formally established human rights organisations at that point. There are now. But numerous Saudis, male and female, including the younger lawyers-perhaps particularly in that area-undertook their own campaigns in this area, and nowadays publish openly in the newspapers. That is something that 20 years ago they would not have been able to do. I have here an article from one of the main English-language papers by the notable editor, Khaled al-Maeena, from just four or five days ago. His leader is headed, "There is no going back in Saudi Arabia." That is one of the main national papers-in Arabic and English-in Saudi Arabia. That couldn't have been the case 20 years ago.

Chair: Sir Alan, perhaps we could have a copy of that afterwards.

Q102 Sir Menzies Campbell: During your extensive engagement-if I can use that word-with Saudi Arabia, in your judgment how complementary have the foreign policies of Saudi Arabia and the

United Kingdom been? Kuwait is a very obvious illustration, of course. Outside that kind of cataclysmic event, in normal exchange, how complementary have the policies been?

Sir Alan Munro: Considerably. Indeed, you and I last met on the occasion of that war, or its aftermath. That was an occasion when we both found a commonality of interest, and the earlier bonds we had, including the military bonds, brought them effectively together in an unprecedented way.

Today, let us look around the region. Saudis have, in the past, and certainly with increasing strength, played a role that tends towards the encouragement of moderation. They use this influence. I had first-hand experience of it in 1993 over the Bosnia affair when the Saudis saw that certain led-by-Iran elements within the Islamic community were producing some troubles. And, of course, there were elements who had been in Afghanistan at the time and had come back and were forming their own rather tiresome brigade in Bosnia and so on. The Saudis called a conference of an organisation that is underrated but is increasingly important, and we ought to note it. It lives in Saudi Arabia and the Saudis created it. It is called the OIC-the Organisation of the Islamic Conference. That is a recognised and very respectable international body, a sort of non-aligned movement of Islam, if you like. The Saudis are its hosts and the Saudis have on various occasions called it together in order to mediate and moderate Islamic fervour in international affairs. They did it-I remember because I was under-secretary at the time-over the Rushdie affair here. They did it at the time of Bosnia, and they have brought it together on recent occasions as well.

So it is in these areas where the Saudis can play a moderating role that we have a common interest that is worth cultivating. On top of that there are specific instances where the present Saudi approach and activity run very closely to our own-Yemen, which was quoted earlier, is a case in point here. There are other elements. The Saudis played a supportive part, shall we say, in the overthrow of Gaddafi, a man for whom they had no reason to have sympathy at all. They continue to play, as I see it, a useful engagement with us over Syria and the approach to the opposition there, rather more useful perhaps than the Qataris. In counter-terror areas, their role is important for us and the liaison we have, the co-operation is very important, and of course they took a lead in setting up this international counter-terrorism organisation, which is based in Bahrain, but is a Saudi brainchild.

Q103 Sir Menzies Campbell: We are faced with the tyranny of the Division bell, Sir Alan, but might I ask you this question? Saudi is clearly the largest, most influential member of the Gulf Co-operation Council. Does it take it seriously and do you think the GCC has fulfilled any of the hopes that attached to it, particularly in the period after the expulsion of Iraq from Kuwait?

Sir Alan Munro: In the defence field, for all the brave words, it has been an uneven record, partly because there are rivalries here and so on. I think that perhaps the Peninsula Shield Force, which was sent in to Bahrain to uphold the regime, as it were, as part of the GCC's *raison d'être*, as it were, is not one of the more successful areas, but, against that, in the social field, in the areas of industrial standardisation, particularly in a long-vexed and now negotiated free trade agreement with the European Community area, the GCC plays a significant and growing part. It now looks towards establishing more of a federal system. That, I believe, is a long way off. It is a lip-service exercise at the moment. But it is an important bonding affair. Remember, it was brought into being when they saw themselves in the 1970s and early '80s, following the Iranian revolution, faced with a threat from Iran. That they still perceive.

Q104 Sir Menzies Campbell: In a sentence, do I take it from what you say that Saudi Arabia takes it seriously, although by virtue of its size and its own other relationships, it is not exclusively focused on these things?

Sir Alan Munro: I once heard King Fahd say on this very subject, "Well, you know, we are the biggest. We can't tell the others what to do."

Q105 Sir Menzies Campbell: I wonder whether you agree with the expression I heard, which is that the GCC was to try to achieve military capability. It was expected that the Omanis would run it and the Saudis would pay for it.

Sir Alan Munro: Yes, that was in that very disjointed era after the first Gulf war, when even the Egyptians said "Please can we protect you," and they all ran a mile.

Q106 Rory Stewart: Do you think the Foreign Office today has put the right emphasis on language skills and area expertise? Are we as well served as we might be in terms of having the skills necessary to do our job well in the Gulf?

Sir Alan Munro: Mr Stewart, you put that question, I note, to my former colleague, Roger Tomkys. I read his evidence and I said, "Hear, hear." I speak as a former head of personnel of the Foreign Office.

Q107 Rory Stewart: I think we have another couple of minutes, so could you just expand a little bit on that? "Hear, hear," is very useful, but one of our jobs is obviously to monitor the Foreign Office's personnel procedures. Do you have particular advice or views on what could be changed or what might have gone wrong?

Sir Alan Munro: I'm sorry. I may be unreformed here, but I believe that a composite outfit of the scale and significance of the Foreign Office benefits from a measure of centralised, albeit consultative, career management. That has effectively been abolished.

On the language point, a few months ago somebody said that there isn't a single ambassador in the Gulf who speaks Arabic.

Q108 Rory Stewart: Finally, can you remember roughly how large was your UK-based staff in Riyadh when you were there?

Sir Alan Munro: Including the elements coming from all the other Departments? May I have a little time to count them? UK-based? I must have had about 20 and then there was the two in al-Khobar in the east, who were mostly looking after the very important trade element there and the oil side, which of course is another element in our relationship where we have coherent interest. There were another five in Jeddah.

Q109 Rory Stewart: So the FCO said that, including local staff, they reckon they now have about 110 staff, but that is including-

Sir Alan Munro: If you are referring to local staff, yes.

Q110 Rory Stewart: Is your sense that the political section is smaller or larger than it was when you were there?

Sir Alan Munro: I think it is slightly smaller, and that may be the case on a broader front now, too, in some of our most significant embassies.

Q111 Chair: Sir Alan, this has been very helpful. I thank you very much indeed. Getting your words of wisdom is very much appreciated.

Sir Alan Munro: You did not come up with it, but I want to say something about the important of our shared interest in Islam.

Q112 Chair: You have one minute.

Sir Alan Munro: The King of Saudi Arabia once said, "We are the Vatican of Islam." This country is regarded by the Saudi leadership, in its role as the religious leaders of Islam and the protectors of the two Holy Mosques, as the major western Islamic partner. We have the largest contingent by far that goes to the Hajj, and we are seen, again, as a very important partner in broader Islamic affairs.

Q113 Chair: Did you say that we were the largest contingent?

Sir Alan Munro: The largest western contingent. The largest "Christian" contingent.

Q114 Mike Gapes: There was that excellent exhibition and display at the British Museum last year.

Sir Alan Munro: Wasn't there, yes? Of the book and so on.

Chair: Sir Alan, thank you. If you have any further thoughts, please do not hesitate to let us know.

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