

- My Lords, in moving this Motion I should declare an interest as I am on the advisory council of the Kuwait Investment Office here in London.

First, I thank all those who took part in our inquiry, which gave birth to this report before the House today, especially our absolutely excellent clerks, our many witnesses and, of course, all my colleagues on the committee. I also thank the Foreign and Commonwealth Office for its just-in-time response to the report—it came through last night—which is broadly supportive, although, needless to say, it does not accept all our strictures or suggestions and, in my view, misses one or two key points to which I will return.

It is customary when debating reports from your Lordships' committees to say that the report and the debate are timely but, in this case, both our report and this debate have been hard pressed to keep up with the onward rush of chaotic events in the Middle East region. Since we published this report back in May we have seen, first, the horrors of Syria grow even worse, if that is possible, with a quarter of a million people dead, with Russia drifting into growing conflict with America and the American-led coalition of which we are part, and where we still seem to be fighting, confusingly, on two fronts, against both Daesh and Bashar al-Assad, and in collusion with some very strange allies. Then we have seen President Trump go down to Riyadh, where he was received royally, although undoubtedly by his words he helped to raise the temperature between the Gulf states and Iran.

Meanwhile, the GCC states themselves have now fallen out with various parties lining up for and against Qatar; Iran has started firing missiles into Syria; and President Assad has received one "punishment" dose of American missiles and has now been again accused of planning chemical weapons attacks and has been threatened with, as it were, a repeat-as-necessary dose. The Libyan chaos has deepened and the killing and cholera in Yemen have spread further.

One more-positive development is that the ISIS caliphate story is reaching closure, or seems to be—at least in a territorial sense—as coalition forces close in on the heart of the old city of Mosul. Tabqa in Syria has been liberated, and hopefully Raqqa will soon be next. But the franchised violence round the world of a stateless Daesh is proving just as poisonous—of which we have had a terrible and tragic taste here in Manchester and in London in recent weeks. Meanwhile, 4 million-plus refugees languish in camps in Greece, Turkey and of course in Jordan and Lebanon, and others flow from the Maghreb through Italy—12,000 last week alone. Millions, even tens of millions more—so we were advised by witnesses—are to come.

We have to ask: can we disengage or stand back from this maelstrom? Our report concludes that we cannot possibly disengage, even if we wanted to, but that our engagement must develop in radically changed ways in a radically changed Middle East region. Technology is unravelling the whole global world order, including in the Middle East, and if I have one reservation about the government response, it is that it does not seem quite to fully recognise this colossal development.

Our report addresses these changes at three levels. First, looking at the longer cycle of historic change over the last century, the Middle East is clearly no longer the vital and dominant oil and world energy source it was, although it is still significant; the states which were born 100 years ago from the line-in-the-sands carve-up between France and Great Britain have been and are being challenged; and Russia is of course back in the region with a vengeance.

Secondly, coming up to more recent times, we are seeing Syria and Iraq fragment in hideous civil wars. We have seen the Israel-Palestine conflict harden, and the problem of Hamas remains unsolved, although some interesting talks are beginning. We have seen the ill-named Arab spring—which the Foreign and Commonwealth Office admits caught it by surprise—turn to ashes everywhere except, I hope, possibly in Tunis. We have seen the great country of Egypt go through the full cycle, from autocracy to warped democracy and then back to military rule and some kind of stability, which we must devoutly hope survives. Iran has become a little more amenable although we cannot be sure how deep that goes. That is certainly not the view held by some of the Gulf states, which see Iran consolidating an arc of power across Syria to its Hezbollah surrogate in Lebanon. Meanwhile, the whole region is looking much more to the East for its markets, investors and allies so that its stability—or gross instability, which is what it is—is no longer just a western issue in this post-western age.

Then we come up to the present moment, to the boiling edge of now, when the whole scene is shifting again. President Trump's America is emitting uncertain messages, posing for us the question of whether we need to reassess the relationship. The government response seems to think working with the USA just carries on as before. Our report in fact disagrees to a certain extent. Meanwhile, Russia and Turkey are patching up their past quarrels, although which way Turkey is going remains hard to assess. Is Mr Erdogan's NATO allegiance now in question? We do not know. Turkey has certainly given up on EU membership.

The whole Middle East and north Africa region is one of extreme youth with 60% of people aged under 30. Tens of millions are unemployed, although almost all of them are empowered by digital communications technology—the mobile phone, the web and social networks—the impact of which it is almost impossible to overstate. Also, there is

what has been described as a Cambrian explosion in cheap and lethal high-tech weaponry, in drones and missiles of all kinds, so that every tribal group and cell now acquires immense and lethal firepower which conventional forces find it almost impossible to cope with, as for example in Yemen at present. Of course, the Islamic religious divisions, which in past centuries were—from time to time—relatively quiescent, have now been disastrously inflamed.

Meanwhile, the Iran nuclear deal is now in question, thanks to President Trump and the US Congress; the Kurds are fighting for state identity as never before; and, as has already been mentioned, the GCC states are divided, with Qatar in the dock, although with allies from Turkey to Oman, and Kuwait seeking to be an intermediary. It is a very serious development for us since Qatar is a huge investor in UK infrastructure and assets—an issue on which we just cannot take sides.

So what is our way forward in face of this ugly and bloody tangle of issues? First, and obviously, there are no neatly comprehensive strategies for such a varied region, divided by staggering contrasts between massive wealth and massive poverty, and in so many other ways as well.

Secondly, post Brexit, we will need to carve out our own course and agenda and define anew our interests, with less automatic reliance on the USA in underpinning the whole region's security. I know that Henry Kissinger was reported the other day as saying that Brexit could bring the US and the UK closer together, but that depends on whether the USA turns away from protectionist, unpredictable and inward-looking policies. The government response to our report has nothing to say on this aspect, nor, while it talks of UK regional interests, is it clear as to how these may be profoundly changing.

Thirdly, after Brexit we are certainly going to need to work much more closely than ever with some of our neighbours, especially France, with her enormous experience in the Middle East—sometimes in the past pitted against us—and her world power status and position at the UN and so on.

Fourthly, we argue in the report that we should stick with the Iran nuclear agreement—the so-called joint comprehensive agreement—even if America does not.

Fifthly, we argue that the two-state solution remains the only feasible goal for Israel and Palestine. On that front the Trump ambitions to bring the Arab states and Israel much closer together may be in the right direction. Tony Blair, no less, suggests that this is an opportunity to change the whole dynamic of the region in a positive way. Let us hope so.

Sixthly, supplying arms so plentifully, as we do, to the Saudis involves us in the Yemen imbroglio and humanitarian crisis, whether we like it or not. We urge that a firmer line

should be taken with the Saudis about weapons use and if necessary some further export licences should be suspended, but I am not sure the Government agree with that.

Seventhly, we must strengthen our old bilateral links and secure new ties, or foster old friendships and new partners, as the Prime Minister likes to put it. With Jordan, Lebanon, Tunisia and Morocco we should cement our already strong friendships. Algeria, too, should be a friend. We should intensify our soft-power deployments on every front, not just trade and security, through our considerable intellectual and creative firepower. We should act through the spearhead of our universities to open minds and close down old hatreds, just as we already link up with hundreds of universities across the Commonwealth network today.

The Government are acting positively in some of these areas but we can do much, much more: by being as open as possible ourselves; by welcoming Middle East students, and indeed taking students out of the overall immigration figures, which we asked for—a step which the Government continue firmly to reject; by using our powerful communications networks to counter false and fake stories and insist on distinguishing between facts and shallow opinions; by resourcing properly our diplomacy and our main soft-power agencies, such as the British Council; and by maintaining up-to-date, agile and best-equipped Armed Forces for careful deployment where the opportunity for discourse or dialogue simply does not exist, as in the case of Daesh, which does not wish to talk, only to kill.

In the end, the battle is not between religions, sects of religions or states but between moderate and extremist futures—two separate narratives and visions—throughout the whole Middle East: one violent, one peaceful. There are clear limits to what we in the UK can do but we can play a strong part in that struggle both through our own example of tolerance here at home and through the utmost respect for the Muslim faith, as well as with constant and vigorous support for the rules-based global order, whether through refurbishing old institutions from the past century or helping to build new and parallel ones in a networked world, especially with the new Asian powers.

This report offers many other ideas and proposals for what is in effect a new panoply of world, and Middle Eastern, conditions. I have given the House a summary of the new realism we call for, and I hope it will find favour with your Lordships and more broadly. I beg to move.