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**Franco-British Council**

**France, Britain  
and the  
Crises in the Middle East**

**Report of a seminar  
June 2006**

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## SUMMARY

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The Franco-British Council seminar in Paris on 29 June 2006 on the crises in the Middle East was going on at the very same time as the serious clashes between Israel and the Palestinian authority.

A number of British and French experts and public figures took part. It was sometimes difficult to draw conclusions from the different points of view. None the less, some progress was made.

1. The participants agreed that there should be greater coordination between the two countries, and joint action by them. Speakers on this topic noted that the two countries had similar histories, and that their leaders had a better knowledge of the case histories of the region than their other partners had. Even if it was generally conceded that the solution of the problems depended mainly on the US, several speakers expressed the view that the duty as well as the interest of the French and the British was evidently to bring their influence to bear on Washington.
2. Views were exchanged on the concept of the threat. Attacks on stability had serious consequences for the Western powers, particularly because the flashpoints of the crises were areas where Britain and France had responsibilities. It was pointed out that the Middle East crises, however serious, had not taken on the scale of those caused in the past by Hitler and Stalin. It was further noted that in the eyes of the peoples of the Middle East, the threat came from Israel, the US and Western European countries. In this context, it was important for our two countries to get down to defining a common policy such as to take the other members of the European Union along with them, and act on Washington. Several participants emphasised how important it was that Westerners should express themselves to the Arab World in Arabic.
3. Did the way out of crisis depend on troop withdrawals? Several British speakers supported this idea. These views were picked up by contributors who envisaged various formulae which could be acceptable to the participants in the conflict. The idea of restoring sovereignty to the government in Baghdad was put forward. Iraq would have its independent status guaranteed by its neighbours under the aegis of the Secretary-General of the UN. The first step would be the withdrawal of foreign armed forces. Their withdrawal should go hand in hand with a clearly expressed policy decision that it should be the Iraqis that had control of their own oil resources.
4. The situation would be stable only if the peoples of the Middle East could reap the benefits of democracy and good government. Views were exchanged on the trade-off between stability and democracy. The concept of "democracy" must be properly defined and not used as an alibi. Elections were not the whole story and, for example, did not justify violations of human rights. All the same, most of the speakers judged that democracy was perfectly compatible with economic and social progress. The fact remained that, in the words of one participant, democracy was a luxury. It must be the result of a choice; what right did the West have to impose its own conception of democracy? One might have doubts about democracy. But if there was anything worse than an excess of democracy, it was the absence of democracy.

The seminar ended on this rather pessimistic note. But it showed once again the case for detailed thought and coordinated action by the two governments.

# REPORT

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## The Crises of the Middle East – British and French views

After an introduction to the seminar by *Jacques Viot*, Chairman of the French Section of the Franco-British Council, *Jean-Pierre Lafon*, Ambassador of France and former Secretary-General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, opened the proceedings and underlined the timeliness of the meeting which he was to co-chair with *Sir Harold Walker*. The British and the French shared common experiences in the Middle East, as well as a deep insight into the problems. The Council's objective in holding this seminar was to spur the two governments into playing a more active role in the crises which were disturbing the region.

*Sir Harold Walker*, the co-chairman, and former British Ambassador in Bahrain, the UAE and Iraq, asked the participants not to underestimate the importance of the US. The second George W. Bush administration was certainly different from the first, and the British and the French were getting a better hearing. Nevertheless, America was playing a game on a great global chessboard, while the French and the British had more concrete views, which were based more on the realities on the ground.

### 1- THE THREATS

*Frank Gardner*, of the BBC, opened the debate on the threats which our two countries were up against. The situation was really complicated. We had to define the threats. A first aim should be to reduce violence if we wanted to improve the situation and contain the threat. This was true for Pakistan as well as for Iraq. Violence was better understood by the Europeans than by the Americans. Many Americans thought their presence in Iraq was a response to 9/11. At the other extreme, some Arabs thought 9/11 was the work of Mossad. Such perceptions had their place in the conspiracy theories which fed on the idea that the coalition wanted to stay in Iraq. So the idea of a threat was relative – was it a threat from only one side, in particular from the Arabs? We must do everything to get rid of the suspicions which flourished due to Western interventions in the region, at least since 1967. The peoples of the Middle East, when one talked to them about weapons of mass destruction, thought that the assumption that they existed was a way of justifying the presence of coalition forces on their territory. The perception of a threat was thus not understood at all in the same way in the West and in the idle East. Islamic extremists cited the actions of the West to support their conspiracy theory. This reaction gave rise to the phenomenon of radicalisation, which explained why it was so easy to find volunteers for the Jihad. So it was necessary to engage in dialogue and to inform people through the media. The absence of dialogue led to radicalisation and the hardening of attitudes.

*Gilles Kepel* took the same view as the previous speaker. He did not want to dwell on the reopening of old wounds by the conflict in Iraq to which *Jacques Viot* drew attention. He wanted to discuss the situation in Britain and in France. France had been the victim of waves of terrorism linked to Islamic fundamentalism, whether in The Middle East or in Algeria. Yet such actions had found only a weak echo among the North African population. There had been no terrorist incidents in France for some years, but there had been some in Britain. The question now was whether the motive for terrorism was more to do with an external threat – with beliefs linked to international politics – or with an internal threat. There was a time when Britain was spared from Islamic terrorism. During this period, relations between the British authorities and the Islamic community living in Britain were managed by intermediaries. France, on the other hand, was more directly involved in its relations with its Muslim minority. French non-intervention in the Iraq war seemed to have benefited France, while external motives would explain the appearance of fundamentalist acts of terrorism in Britain, linked with British participation in the Iraq war. It followed that the threat took

a different form according to whether it was motivated by external objectives or for internal reasons, which were often linked with social discontent. The result was to question whether a European policy was conceivable.

*Sir Brian Crowe* warned against equating Islamic fundamentalism with the Arabs. After all, in Britain the terrorists came just as much from the Indian sub-continent. The Iraq context also had to be distinguished from the Palestinian context. The former was the case of a state considered to be a threat and the latter a case of two peoples fighting over territory for justifiable reasons. The problem was not only religious but perhaps also political and territorial; there was a danger of fusing these two problems together.

*Sidney Shipton* reported that the organisation he ran was involved in encouraging dialogue between the three great monotheistic religions and had an Advisory Board of Leaders of the three Abrahamic Faiths. Why, he asked, was there such hostility against the West? Why was there so much hostility between Christians, Jews and Muslims? Speaking as someone at the grass roots, he emphasised that these populations did not mix, did not talk to each other, and did not really know each other. Stereotypes persisted. There were certainly some signs of improvement, particularly among young people. Dialogue was needed, and it must go on at the grass roots.

*Mona Siddiqui* said that the question of Muslim hostility to the West had been raised, but she did not share this view. There was talk of a plot, which meant that Muslims did not believe that they were uniquely responsible. There had been numerous Western interventions in Islamic territory. The reactions had been rejection, even hostility. The share of responsibility in conflicts was more evenly balanced than people in the West thought.

*Bassma Kodmani*, taking the same line, pointed out that we were thinking about symptoms, while we should concentrate just as much on the causes and the reasons for the hostility between the two sides. Terrorism was the expression of deeper crises; land for the Palestinians, a wish for power on the part of Iran. One should distinguish between political crises and religious discourse which enabled the relaunch of institutions, and the restructuring of crises and territorial conflicts. This distinction was not easy, because conflicts were in effect being Islamised. Religious discourse was profitable and popular. It translated and reflected the failure of political institutions.

*Christopher Segar* thought one could only attack the symptoms, however much one wanted to work on the causes. There were certainly territorial and political conflicts, but religion was an undeniable fact. Our first obligation was to reduce violence and organise dialogue.

*Lord Temple-Morris*, returning to the opening presentations, pointed out that Frank Gardner had given priority to the external and international dimensions of the problem, while *Gilles Kepel* had focussed on the internal aspects. These two approaches were complementary. In choosing the former the British had been less cautious than the French, who gave priority to the internal aspects. The role of the British alongside the Americans had resulted in the British Muslim community feeling vulnerable. One could not do without the Americans. But the French had analysed the local situation better. True, Arab political institutions were very fragile. One way would be for the British and the French to work together to influence the US itself to bring pressure to bear on Israel.

*Paul Stevens* said that there was much talk of God, but it was the economy which suffered most, in the Middle East as much as in our own countries. If society was not backed up by a healthy economy, both society and the structure of the country were in danger. In terms of relations with third countries too, the problem was one not so much of religion as of the economy and social stability. We had failed in this area.

*Michel Massih* invited the French and the British to cut the umbilical cord linking them with the US. The US must be made to acknowledge that there was no logical reason for the invasion of Iraq. Anyway, the Palestine question was the central one. The decisions made unilaterally by Israel were unjustifiable. Our principles were frustrated. Young people had the impression that the Western media were always trying to excuse the Israelis. We gave them the feeling that the Israelis benefited from permanent impunity. This was not how we would put an end to terrorism.

*Alain Dejammet* questioned the idea that an Arab Muslim community had come out into the open in the French suburbs in November 2005. The demonstrations were more by young Africans with no religious affiliations. It should be recognised that the French and the British positions had diverged, whether in the Iraq-Iran war in 1980, or in the case of Kuwait in 1990. It was said that we should defend our values, which might mean that we should not pass over in silence some practices which made our statements difficult to understand for those on the other side. We should put an end to the threefold linkage of conspiracy, provocation and initiative. It served no purpose to see conspiracies or provocations everywhere, just as we should stop expecting salvation from some new initiative in which the only new thing was its name.

*François Nicoullaud* returned to the idea of a threat. This was understood differently according to which side one was on. If it was true that there was a threat the question was whether it was of vital importance. This was a matter of doubt. There had been much more serious threats in the past, whether they were from the Nazis or Stalin or elsewhere. The scale was not the same. The threat that we were being asked to analyse was differently perceived according to which side of the barrier one was on. The peoples of the Middle East could consider themselves to have been victims of the West since the end of the Ottoman Empire. On the Western side we were trying to justify our interventions, while on the other side they were understood as permanent interference in the region's affairs.

*Jacques Viot* expressed similar views. He noted that when the agenda of this meeting was being drafted there had been a question whether the threat from the West should be included. The thought behind this was that our lack of knowledge and absence of understanding of the peoples and problems of the Middle East had adverse consequences for the stability of the region. Was it not the duty of the French and British meeting in the seminar to promote better knowledge of the problems of the area?

*Patrick Seale* wanted to add a simple rider to the views of the earlier speakers, with which he broadly agreed. There were actually few terrorist attacks in comparison with the violence and brutality of the Western armed interventions in Iraq and those of the Israelis in Palestine. Given the weakness of the governments in the region, there were two different scales of measurement in the treatment of problems. We should act more by dialogue than by diplomacy; not intensify military measures, but try to reduce the degree of violence used. The British and the French shared a heavy responsibility. They had to free themselves from the links which bound them to the Americans, because we obviously did not want to live with a powder-keg on our doorstep.

*Maurice Fraser* thought that a solution could be envisaged only if the countries of the area benefited from better governance. It was the lack of good governance which mainly explained the chaotic nature of the situation in the region. Certainly we had responsibilities in a very dangerous situation, but they were not our only responsibilities, and we should not blacken the part we are playing. A good deal of the present difficulties was linked to the weak governance of the states in the region.

*Jonathan Steele* thought the main cause of the present crises lay in the interventions which the West had perpetrated in the Middle East over the centuries. The result was the feeling of hostility from which the Muslims suffered, and the lack of understanding on the part of the West. One only

needed to remember the low level of importance attached to the big demonstrations of opposition to the 2003 invasion of Iraq. It was a peaceful, multicultural opposition – an opposition against what British Muslims considered to be their government – in the hope that their appeal would be heard. It followed that the British and the French should distance themselves from the Americans.

*Dominique Bromberger*, who was an eye-witness of the November 2005 incidents at Clichy and in the other Paris suburbs, confirmed the view of another speaker that these were not ethnic or religious riots, as they had often been presented, but the result of social disturbances. There was certainly an Islamic flavour, but this was not the fundamental motive; the causes were unemployment, and the lack of future prospects. The speaker referred to the events of the night of the 28-29 June in Palestine, and condemned the arrest of half of the democratically elected Hamas government of Palestine. He asked whether such an action should not be condemned by the seminar participants.

*Yossi Mekelberg* referred to the hatred of capitalism and the US so commonly expressed in the Arab Muslim world, and to the condemnation of Israeli actions, which went hand in hand with the attraction to the modern, capitalist world of populations in process of pauperisation that had no hope. The failure of understanding was not based only on the facts – such as the incident on a beach in Gaza – but on imagination or rumour. Some conflicts were resistant to any solution. In 1993 we thought we had finally ended up with a solution. But the two sides had opposite approaches, even if 70-75% of the population in Israel and in Palestine thought the solution must include two States – a solution which the extremists on both sides were vigorously resisting.

*Sami Khiyami*, the Syrian Ambassador in London, speaking at the invitation of the British Section of the Council, deplored the misunderstandings which caused Westerners and Middle-Easterners to oppose each other. The attitude of the Westerners was perplexing. Were people ignorant of everything the Middle East had contributed in terms of culture and history? For example could one regard Estonia as one of the builders of European civilisation while excluding people which had historically contributed far more significant messages? No one could deny the influence of the Arab World on Europe.

*Jean-Pierre Lafon* underlined that even if the Arab Muslim world represented a real threat, it was nonetheless true that for the Arab Muslim world, the threat came from Western interference.

Returning to the opening session, *Frank Gardner* noted that divergent views had been expressed. It was in fact policies, not individuals who exacerbated relations. Like it or not, we were concerned by the imprint of American policy. In spite of its efforts, Russia could not act independently of American policy. There had been Russian victims of Islamism, because of the Chechen crisis. The discussion had confirmed that the peoples of the Middle East, for example the Gulf Arabs, felt the fascination of the West. It was not modernisation which was rejected by the peoples of the Middle East. There was no connection between poverty and terrorism. The suicide bombers of 9/11 came from well-off families, because of the frustrations they had experienced. In these conditions, one had to recognise that, as *Patrick Seale* had said, conflicts must be settled at the grass roots. People no longer believed in meetings with go-betweens, such as those at Sharm-el-Sheikh and elsewhere. They were about words, not about actions. We must improve communication without waiting any longer, and make it clear that strong condemnation of coalition policy could come from the Western side. It must be made known that there were people in the West who condemned their leaders' policy of intervention. It was not true that, as George W. Bush had said, that the Arabs did not like our lifestyle. What counted was our intervention, which must be ended. The speaker did not expect a rapid change of attitude. The pictures of Gaza strengthened the Jihad, So we had to work patiently on dialogue with the Arab world. We must admit our mistake – our mistakes, in the plural. Wasn't the first priority to learn the language of the other side?

*Gilles Kepel* drew a different conclusion from the debate on threats. It was important that Western specialists in Islam should more than ever appear in the Arab media. Communication with the Arabs must be maintained, and not only in order to defend Western values. There was not enough of it, and we must make it clear that Westerners did not follow the party line, but could express themselves freely, possibly in support of an Arab Muslim point of view. People saw each other, but not enough. There were juxtapositions of hostile identities, but intercommunication too. At one time, frontiers, metaphorically speaking, were well defined. This was no longer the case. One should consider the consequences of the fatwa against Salman Rushdie. We had to understand each other if we wanted to live together. We returned to the classic debate between French and British; the former in favour of a model of integration, the latter for a social and community-based model. Each of these two models had its advantages and disadvantages. We also had a common problem in our relationship with The US. The Middle East had become the Near East. It raised problems which had become more internal than international. In France, it was not only the Minister of Foreign Affairs who was the only minister really involved. The main competence lay in the hands of the Minister of the Interior. This was particularly true of the relationship between France and Algeria. Similarly, in Britain, several MPs were forced to speak about Islam in terms which might affect their chances of re-election. The situation was different in the US. The Jewish community in the US had succeeded in keeping the Arab Muslims out of the American political debate. The context was different in Europe where the debate went on for or against Israel.

## **2- THE WAY OUT OF THE CRISES**

*Sir Marrack Goulding* was asked by *Sir Harold Walker* to open the second section of the seminar on the problem of how to get out of the crises. He observed that the crises mentioned in the agenda concerned Iraq, Palestine, Iran and Lebanon coupled with Syria. Afghanistan, mentioned in the first section, was not picked up in the current section. This was not right, because Afghanistan was at present the scene of a conflict in which insurgents were attempting to overthrow a pro-Western government. It had to be said that interventions in that country had never in the past been successful, particularly in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. The Afghans had always succeeded in getting rid of external influences. The last to fail were the Soviets. Afghanistan should therefore not be neglected.

He asked whether the conflict between Syria and Lebanon deserved a different strategy. Certainly the French had interests there, but was Syrian pressure on Lebanon a threat to peace in the region? One might doubt whether it was. He thought we could take that crisis off our agenda, but Iraq, Iran and Palestine should stay on it. How should we construct a strategy for each of these crises? Naturally peace should be the aim – peace with neighbouring countries, peace based on good governance. One might doubt whether this aim could be achieved. We should therefore be pragmatic. We had the experience of Iraq, and the attempt to intervene in a violent and corrupt country to show that this intervention had made the situation even more catastrophic. What strategies could we think of from this point on? In any case no permanent solution could be guaranteed in the region as long as foreign troops remained in Iraq or Afghanistan. He noted that in Palestine elections, which could be regarded as free, had had serious consequences. It was in effect the extremists who had been elected. The West did not accept this verdict. The situation had suddenly become worse than before the elections. But we should not lend our support to measures which would result in the starvation of the Palestinian people.

*Antoine Sivan* thought the prospects were a bit more optimistic. Since the 20<sup>th</sup> April 2005, one could say that the crisis which divided the West in Iraq in 2003 was behind us from now on. The aim from now on was to encourage the political process, in other words to make the Iraqis masters of their own destiny. Our objective was that the Iraqis should once more benefit from their independence and their sovereignty in an environment that was under control. We had voted for

resolutions in the UN which went in this direction. We had reduced Iraq's debts and invited other creditor countries to do the same. There was a lot to do together under this heading. We must help Iraq to train the Iraqi forces. We were not favourable to a more important role for NATO in this area. We were favourable to the idea of an "international compact" put forward by Iraq, which did not yet have a precise content. As we saw it, this must be a political and contractual initiative, of course with the Iraqis and the international community and not only with countries contributing to the re-establishment of the Iraqi economy. We should help our British friends to get out of the Iraqi hornets' nest without falling into it ourselves.

As for the Palestinian conflict, France and Britain should agree to intervene with the Americans. The absence of solutions bred terrorism, and this has been the case for the last 50 years. Any policy based on assuming the worst about Hamas risked ending up by strengthening it. The status quo was no longer a possibility; if there was no improvement, the situation would deteriorate. That is what the Americans must be made to understand. Could one not get the European Union or the Quartet of which our two countries are members to pass on the message? Franco-British cooperation on the Iranian case had been very good. A new European proposal had recently been made by *Javier Solana*, together with three European political directors. The French and the British had welcomed the American decision to support the European initiative and the co-ordination with the Russians and the Chinese. Relations with Lebanon were very fruitful. The attitudes of the French and the British were absolutely equivalent in this area. We should begin by strengthening the structures of Lebanon, put the UN resolutions into effect, talk to Syria and make this a condition of the improvement of relations with Damascus.

*Jonathan Steele*, leaving Afghanistan on one side, thought that the Iraq and Palestine crises should have priority. In the former case, we should work for the departure of the foreign troops stationed in Iraq according to a precise calendar of withdrawals, in the framework of an international agreement, to which the countries of the region should be parties. Without this no country would want to agree to help an Iraqi government not considered to be representative. There would be a transition period; the Iraqi government would be sovereign only if it could negotiate an agreement. As for Palestine, the balance of responsibilities had to be restored; at the moment the Palestinians were being asked to make all the concessions. They had no partners for peace. The Israelis must acknowledge not only the right of the Palestinians to get a government, but also to get a government that worked. For this purpose pressure had to be exerted on Ehud Olmert. Any formula less advantageous than that agreed to by Ehud Barak at Taba would be quite simply unacceptable. Israel had to give up its "targeted attacks". There had to be goodwill on both sides. The French and the British had to defend the proposition that concessions must not be unilateral.

*Mona Siddiqui* emphasised that the word dialogue was meaningful only if your partner was listening. If you refused to talk to an interlocutor, the word dialogue no longer had any meaning; we had to accept the interlocutors thrown up by the present situation. Should we be afraid if Europe somewhat increased its distance from the US? On the contrary, in this case France and Britain could play a bigger part. We should take note that Iran expected international support from China and Russia, for example if sanctions were envisaged.

*Jacques Huntzinger* put forward some thoughts about the current situation of Israel. This State had always considered its geographical environment in the Middle East to be dangerous and hostile. This state of affairs had become the fundamental basis for the explanation of Israel's policy. Israel once feared the military threat from some of its neighbours. This fear had disappeared, and Israel could count on maintaining its present superiority. But today it had three threats to face – the terrorist threat, after the second intifada, the nuclear threat (the country is surrounded by countries which have or are trying to obtain nuclear weapons), and finally a demographic threat, at the heart of an area with a high fertility level. Israel had chosen separation, in other words the creation of a Palestinian State, to deal with the third and most dangerous threat. A separate Palestinian State

was the only way to ensure the long-term survival of Israel. The Palestinian State was Israel's only life raft.

The current dialogue between France and Israel was based on mutual interests. Two subjects had brought the two countries together; the Iranian nuclear programme, and relations between Syria and Lebanon. Progress should be thought of in the context of dialogue, not unilateralism. The peace process was linked with Israel's willingness to act in the next two months to achieve a separation which would not be unilateral. The debate was actually being conducted within the Palestinian community, with Hamas and Fatah on opposing sides. The Palestinian problem was tremendously complicated, and Israel's unilateralism would depend on success or failure in solving it.

*Sir Brian Crowe* thought it would be too simple to think that inventing a solution would be enough to carry it out. The question was to know how to get out of the crisis. It was good, but not good enough to draw up a timetable. There had to be a good reason to act. The date of departure of the coalition armies from Iraq, and the organisation of the evacuation, were concrete themes which could be worked on, while planning the details with the help of the international community and Kofi Annan, to give a degree of legitimacy to the exercise. The question was to know what part the countries of the region could play in this process. What policy did the Arab countries want to pursue? As for Palestine, the speaker took the view that Tel Aviv should renounce the use of violence, and targeted attacks. Quite apart from the fact that such actions were reprehensible in themselves, they led nowhere. Our two governments were sure that nothing was possible without the Americans. Our positions within the European Union were different. France had been more far-sighted. It was still true that together we could use our weight to arrive at a European position. We could thus hope to work for peace by means of a European policy.

*Michel Massih* approved this proposal, but it did not reflect the present attitude of Tony Blair's government. However, Europe should be able to make itself heard. At present the Palestinians were still being asked for concessions. But where were the Israeli concessions? There were international tribunals to prosecute leaders who had not respected their commitments nor human rights; why were Israeli politicians not being called before these tribunals? We had recently put the case for the creation of a Palestinian State, but it had not been pointed out that the Palestinians have for centuries been at home in Bethlehem, Nablus and Jericho. Should the Christians of Nazareth be moved out? It would be shocking to create a Palestinian State for the sole convenience of Israel.

*Alain Dejammet*, recalling Franco-British cooperation in the Middle East over a long period, thought we could contemplate working together. In Afghanistan the fight against drug smuggling was no doubt the priority. The dominant feature of Iraq was suspicion between rival factions over oil extraction. We should abandon any idea of going into the Iraq oil market, and undermining the Iraqi government's wish for independence. If we did not accept further penetration of the oil majors in Iraq, it would have a good effect, and make us more credible. As for the Near East, the speaker recalled the progress made in 2000, the date of the Camp David meeting. The talks on Jerusalem had failed. Could Britain and France not think about this? It was a question not of the old idea of internationalising Jerusalem, which had no future because neither the Jews nor the Arabs would agree to give up their capital. On the other hand, there was the idea of an international status not for the city but for the holy places. This was an idea to be more closely examined. A result in this area would be real progress.

*Sami Khiyami* referred to the opening up of negotiations to the regional powers, and said that three partners should take part; the Palestinians, Israel and Iran. There would be one partner missing in such a meeting – a fourth pillar, a partner representing the Security Council and the international community.

Summing up the proceedings on the way out of the crisis, *Antoine Sivan* emphasised the coming about of convergence between the French and the British, which was evident in the discussion of the withdrawal of coalition forces in Iraq. This withdrawal should take place in full co-ordination with the Iraqi authorities and within the UN framework. It would be a long process, during which our two countries could co-ordinate their actions. As for the Iran problem, it needed closer analysis. The isolation of the country did not make dialogue any easier. We should nevertheless put forward the idea of an “architecture” of regional security. There was no inevitability about nuclear weapons. The Iranians and the Europeans should be encouraged to talk to each other, including by means of discreet contacts.

*Sir Marrack Goulding* said it was not enough to talk about the withdrawal of foreign troops from Iraq without knowing what should be done after their departure. How could we ensure the survival of the Iraqi government in these circumstances? Was there not a danger of the break-up of Iraq? As for the Palestinian problem, there was a remarkable gulf between the Palestinian people and the Israeli government. Could we work for a better balance between the two sides? Could we find a point of balance between the Palestinian position and the demands of the Israeli government? Was it possible to be impartial and neutral on this subject?

### **3- SUPPORT FOR DEMOCRACY AND PROGRESS**

*Jonathan Steele* thought that the idea of democracy needed to be more precisely defined. Many people in the Middle East thought that they could pick out the parts of democracy that suited them. But democracy was like a chain, which became useless if one of the links is missing. Democracy was a whole which was founded not only on elections, but also on state justice, human rights, political parties and non-violence. But some young Arab leaders wanted to bring in regimes badly founded on the kind of simplistic democracy which suited them. Political Islam was making advances. Its supporters might hope to take power by means of elections. The US was encouraging the advance of democracy. However, they were doing so cautiously, because it was not impossible that the “democrats”, once in power, might cease to respect the rules which had enabled them to achieve it. Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood represented two such attitudes to power. It is still desirable that the Islamists should have some share in power. Europe should support those who were fighting for democracy. One formula could be to encourage and finance NGOs working in favour of justice and human rights. But the NGOs should not be part of US activities. This would be really suicidal!

*Jean-Claude Cousseran* was equally critical. He claimed that at present the Islamists had a favourable image, and benefited from an undeniable legitimacy. They put forward a project for a conservative society, a democracy far removed from our Western concepts. Furthermore, the Islamists were hostile to the West. What forces were operating in favour of democracy? First, there was a diverse group of liberals and intellectuals which could be called the party of modernisation. The second group consisted of Islamists who benefited from a good reputation in public opinion, for their rigid morality in particular. The Islamists acted very cautiously, and were always ready for compromise. A third group was made up of traditionalists who were still powerful in the region. For many Islamists entry into society was a form of ostracism, in Syria for example. In other countries space was opening up in favour of the modernisers or the Islamists. Leaders such as those of Jordan and Morocco were following the aim of moderation. The US once encouraged an opening towards the Islamists when it was a question of fighting Communism.

The West did not know how to promote the integration of the Islamists into society. Was it up to us to put the case for democracy? Should we impose it? There was a vacuum between Islamism and power. The West could play a part but must not use the wrong language. The religious debate

was not our problem. We should legitimise contacts with Islamists, but rely on civil societies, which should evolve through the reform of the state and good governance. These were doubtless rather weak groupings, but it was in our interests to seek support from them. The West can act through the intermediary of Western political parties, which could provide the means for training, reform and encouragement of the judicial system. An effort must also be made in the field of information. It was a pity that the 20 million euros promised at Barcelona to change the image of our countries in the Middle East were not being used. It was regrettable that not a single French audiovisual company was producing programmes designed to change our image in the eyes of the Middle East mass audiences.

*Bernard Dorin* reported to the seminar on his recent mission to Kurdistan. He found a very calm situation, without forgetting that there were still threats to the Kurdish community, which had been subjected to trials by Saddam Hussein, as well as by the Turkish government.

*Katerina Delacoura* took Turkey as an example. Here was a country where the Islamists had taken power, but that did not mean that Turkey was opposed to modernisation and democracy. To make progress one had to take the Islamists into account. They wanted to be recognised as players in the game of democracy. This was an excellent principle, but it had to be carried out in practice. The West was relying on the traditional parties to limit the influence of the Islamists, but they were getting weaker.

*Lord Temple-Morris* pointed out that the only democracy that existed in the Middle East was that of Israel. Could one impose democracy on those who did not practise it, he asked. It should be encouraged but not imposed. Democracy was to some extent a luxury. The democracy proposed to us is perhaps a bit lacking; we should think of the democracies in Russia, Pakistan and India. Democracy must be made desirable and shown to allow better progress and better governance.

*Sami Khiyami*, who took part in the “Damascus spring” in 2001, was able to see on that occasion how far Syria was from the Western model. Syria was losing part of its elites; its bankers were working all over the world but hardly at all in Syria. The reforms of the Syrian regime had remained very theoretical, Syria had few examples to follow. Lebanon was a multicultural state, and Israel had an apartheid regime. There remained the Turkish example, but it was hard to know whether it was really an example. A staged timetable was needed. In a second stage, after a political choice, a market economy should be introduced, in which the West would have an interest. Once again, the Turkish model was relevant.

*Sidney Shipton* came back to the meaning of the word “democrat”. He doubted whether Hamas was democratic. Its constitution was worrying, from what one knew of it through its internet site. If Hamas does not and will not recognise the existence of the state of Israel how can dialogue be possible?

*Christopher Segar* agreed with Lord Temple-Morris. Stability had a higher priority than democracy. Democracy was not a simple political game in which the winner took power.

*Bassma Kodmani* tried to take a concrete approach to support for the Middle Eastern peoples on their road to democracy and progress. Was interference in their internal affairs positive or negative? There were three levels – governments, NGOs and universities, with the latter two as part of civil society. Interference could be an irritant – aid conditions, for example. But it should be acknowledged that this approach succeeded well enough with regard to the respect of human rights and the defence of political prisoners. Results could be obtained if the warnings were serious. On the question of a “top-down” approach to democracy, it should be noted that authoritarian governments paused for thought before taking action or using repression. They took

into account retaliation that could be used against them, particularly if it was going to cost them a lot. We all wanted to see democrats get into power. We had to go through elections, which had to be scheduled, and were indispensable to give the sanction of universal suffrage to the democratic process. The renewal of Islam was needed. We should proceed to a new reading of the texts. However, Islam will reform itself of its own accord. We had to develop a critical dialogue on all the points dear to us, such as human rights. If we did not mobilise the forces of moderation we might have to face partners who would turn their back on dialogue.

*Paul Stevens* found that democracy and progress were generally linked, but this was not necessarily so. The two movements did not necessarily go together, as history showed. Was the vote in favour of Hamas the pay-off for the democratisation of the Palestinian authority?

*Michel Massih* thought the West should welcome the arrival of democracy, even if that democracy expressed itself badly and disconcerted Westerners. The election of Hamas had to be respected. The reaction of the international community had been such as to encourage terrorism, although we should try to open up a dialogue with Hamas.

*Sir Brian Crowe*, on the same subject, recalled that President Bush had declared in London that he would not support an authoritarian country just for its capacity to maintain stability. It was an incomprehensible statement! It could be understood only as political posturing. There had been talk of the 20 million euros aimed to reach the public opinion in the Middle East population by means of the media, but this would hardly advance the cause of democracy.

*Jonathan Steele* found a counterpoint between the ideas of democracy and stability. The movement should be from the bottom up. In spite of external pressures, the movement towards democracy in Spain had been a long process going at its own pace. But the transition had been peaceful. The democratisation of society was accepted as long as it did not threaten the powers that be. Democracy and stability should go hand in hand. It had often been said that democracy was not limited to elections. It required fewer external pressures and a developing society. There were no lessons we can give Middle Eastern societies, which were developing at their own pace. We must help them in the process under way. A lot of help was coming through different channels.

*Jean-Claude Cousseran* ended the debate with a fairly pessimistic conclusion. What legitimacy did we have to put the case for democracy? Anything could be challenged at the level of principles. Were we being honest or realistic in our proposals, he asked. When one participant said that democracy was a luxury, he summed up the debate. We might sometimes have doubts, but would the worst outcome not be if our doubts led us to choose the absence of democracy, which would for us be the worst catastrophe.

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**France, Britain and the crises in the Middle East**

29 June 2006 at the Western European Union, Paris

**09:00 Introduction by Sir Harold Walker and Jean-Pierre Lafon**

Both countries have significant experience and knowledge of the Middle East. Can they contribute any useful joint thinking and/or action plans given the importance of this region?

**09:30 The Threats introduced by Frank Gardner and Gilles Kepel**

- 1 Principal focus points: Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Israel-Palestine, Syria-Lebanon
- 2 Hostility towards the West
  - rejection of Western modernity: aspects of it offend, while it fails to bring justice
  - the image of the West as a new colonial power (foreign military activity)
  - consequent exacerbation of hostility of populations towards their own leaders
- 3 The growth of fundamentalism (causes; apparent and actual)
- 4 Transition from a sense of humiliation towards the search for power: military parity, terrorist weapons, nuclear weapons, oil as a weapon
- 5 The response to these threats:
  - lack of understanding and common will on the part of Western countries
  - divisions in the West and the European Union over Iraq
  - procrastination in the search for a peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians
  - overreliance on military means

Discussion

**11:00 Prospects for the future**

A: Strategies for crisis management introduced by Antoine Sivan and Sir Marrack Goulding

- Iraq – can everyone agree on the need for reconstruction?
- How can we work towards a settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict based on UN resolutions. America has the power to exert pressure on both sides. Does it want to? Can France and Britain encourage it?
- The challenge of maintaining pressure on Iran with a policy that has the unanimous support of all five permanent members of the Security Council, and which takes into account the wide range of influences in that country.
- Is it possible to conduct a dialogue with Syria with a view to creating lasting stability with Lebanon?

Discussion

**12:00 Lunch****13:30 A. Strategies for crisis management – Further discussion**

**14:30 B: Towards Democracy and Progress introduced by Jonathan Steele and Jean-Claude Cousseran**

- Will the uncertainty of actual electoral processes distract from progress towards democracy? Is it not more important to insist on the values which support democracy (human rights, respect for minorities)? How can these values be developed through education and community life?
- The need to take into account diversity of values, to avoid resentment of democracy as a tool of Western domination
- How can we encourage the development of the economic and administrative potential in the region?
- Is there scope for an overreaching security architecture?

Discussion

**16:00 Conclusion**

The role of France and Britain:

- the search for common ground at the heart of the European Union and with Washington.
- actions in combination with Moscow, Peking and other capitals

**17:00 Close**