



Working to prevent violent conflict

## BRIEFING

# Preventing conflict through building peaceful societies

## Briefing for House of Commons debate on the Middle East, North Africa, Afghanistan and Pakistan, 16 May 2011

*"The events in Tunisia and Egypt remind all of us that stability can lead to immobility. Betting on stability alone therefore cannot be the ultimate answer. There is a difference between stability and sustainability. The latter has its foundations in economic results and social justice, in freedom and democracy. A political system which does not allow for peaceful change will remain weak at heart. I think this realisation deserves more attention in our foreign policies, in our expectations, and not only in the Middle East."*

- Herman Van Rumpuy, President, European Council

### Introduction: What do recent developments abroad mean for the UK?

The countries of the **Middle East** and **North Africa** each face different sets of political, economic and social challenges which vary both within and between societies. While there have been common threads running through the popular uprisings commonly referred to as the 'Arab Spring', no two countries are the same. Likewise, **Afghanistan** and **Pakistan**, while sharing some common challenges, each have their own histories, cultures and political nuances. There is no 'one size fits all' solution for bringing peace and stability to these diverse regions.

Nonetheless, the present political unrest in the Middle East and North Africa, the longevity of the conflict in Afghanistan and ongoing instability in Pakistan raise some common questions for policymakers in the UK and elsewhere, challenging long-held ideas about what promoting 'stability' really means if it is to be sustainable and lasting.

In its Strategic Security and Defence Review (SDSR), the Government announced that it would "increase significantly our support for conflict prevention... through an integrated approach that brings together our diplomatic, development, defence and intelligence resources." As part of this work, the Government is currently developing a cross-departmental Building Stability Overseas Strategy<sup>1</sup>, which will need to take on board the lessons learned from events playing out in the Middle East, North Africa, Afghanistan and Pakistan, while keeping in mind that the UK's approach in each of these countries must be carefully tailored to the particular context.

Authoritarian regimes that have done little to meet the needs or expectations of many within their populations are experiencing widespread popular unrest despite being seen as the 'best bets' for stability by many in the West. Away from the immediate media spotlight, the practices of authoritarian regimes from **Ethiopia** to Sri Lanka and the chronic insecurity experienced in countries such as **Yemen** and **Somalia** should give us pause to consider whether a new approach toward promoting stability overseas could be more sustainable and effective.

In navigating this complex, multi-polar world to promote upstream conflict prevention, the best compass the UK can have is a clearly defined commitment to its core principles. There is of course a balance to be had between meeting short-term objectives and long-term goals. Saferworld believes that getting this balance right could be aided by a strategic approach that prioritises the systematic reinforcement of actors genuinely committed to human rights, good governance and sustainable development; the pursuit of objectives through multilateral legal frameworks; and consistent concern for the wellbeing of people affected by conflict and fragility.

## **Stabilisation or prevention?**

Much of the public debate around the UK's engagement in **Afghanistan** has focused on the need for 'stabilisation', and in the context of **Iraq**, there has been considerable debate about the UK's contributions to 'post-conflict stabilisation'. Saferworld would support a more co-ordinated and effective approach to stabilisation but the UK must be clear about what it is trying to achieve. 'Security', 'stability' and 'conflict prevention' are all terms that mean different things to different people, often radically so.

If 'stabilisation' in this context is to mean a relatively short-term activity with a strong military involvement (such as recent engagements in Afghanistan and Iraq for instance) then we would stress that this must be complemented by a coherent and effective long-term preventative approach designed to promote the development of more resilient, peaceful societies too. Helping to stabilise the patient must not come at the expense of helping to treat their ailment. Indeed, there are many parts of the world for which expensive 'boots on ground' stabilisation operations would be inappropriate. **Somalia** and **Yemen** would be two good examples of such contexts.

**While stabilisation as practised in Helmand may be suitable in a small range of contexts, the Government should ensure its capacity for this kind of work does not come at the expense of a coherent, comprehensive and long-term vision of conflict prevention which goes beyond stabilisation alone.**

While it is sometimes assumed that 'conflict prevention' is only appropriate in countries which are not already in the midst of violent conflict, in fact taking a preventative approach can be valuable whether a country is peaceful, experiencing or emerging from conflict. In contexts such as the current situations in **Libya** and **Afghanistan** where armed violence is still on-going, taking an upstream, preventative approach which addresses the root causes of conflict is crucial to the process of creating and maintaining peaceful societies in the longer term. Similarly, in **Egypt** and **Tunisia**, where authoritarian regimes have recently been overthrown, addressing the widespread grievances which led to those popular uprisings will be key to preventing further violence.

Preventing violent conflict may sometimes involve short-term diplomatic crisis management to avert violence at the 'eleventh hour', and ensuring our diplomatic service has the capacity to do this well is extremely important. But, crucially, 'conflict prevention' can also be understood as the process of supporting longer term societal change – helping countries to become more cohesive, resilient and able to manage conflicts without resorting to violence.

## **A vision of 'upstream' conflict prevention**

*"Recent events in the Middle East have demonstrated why it is critical that the UK increases its focus on helping countries to build open and responsive political systems, tackle the root causes of fragility and empower citizens to hold their governments to account. It is the best investment we can make to avoid violence."*

- Andrew Mitchell, Secretary of State, DFID

Violent conflict and insecurity are not 'visitations' upon societies but a product of dynamics that can, with time and effort, be understood and influenced. 'Upstream' conflict prevention is, in part, about developing a thorough understanding of what generates conflict within or between societies, and why that conflict turns violent rather than being managed peacefully. Responses need to address both the underlying drivers of conflict and the factors that lead it to become violent.

**Preventing violent conflict upstream will not come from policies designed to 'keep the lid on the pressure cooker'. Rather, it is crucial to support countries to develop more responsive and accountable governments, more inclusive societies and a stronger relationship between both state and society. In this way, societies can be made more resilient and better able to manage conflict peacefully.**

### A principled approach to international co-operation

Successfully addressing the causes and drivers of violent conflict will require a principled and strategic approach to international co-operation across the board. Through its commercial, diplomatic, defence and development engagement, the UK can seek to support democratic principles, good governance, social justice and human rights. The UK should be consistent, principled and strategic in offering real dividends to governments who support these ambitions and withholding them from those who do not. A balance should also be struck between support to build state capacity and support to build the capacity of citizens to hold their governments to account.

**Supporting authoritarian regimes, either overtly or tacitly, is not a sustainable approach if those regimes do not just fail to address grievances amongst their populations but are actually helping to generate them.**

For example, while the UK is providing support to the Government of **Yemen's** counter-terrorism efforts due to the UK Government's legitimate interest in protecting its own citizens from the threat of Al Qaeda, strengthening the state-level security apparatus could risk exacerbating conflict. This is because state security mechanisms are perceived by many in the local population as an aggressor that threatens their livelihoods and wellbeing - security assistance will not contribute to stability if the public fears the military and does not want it strengthened. Instead, security and justice reform should empower Yemenis outside of political elites and outside of Sana'a to become meaningfully involved in decision-making on and oversight of security and justice services to ensure they are capable, accountable and responsive to their needs. This should be part of a broader package of measures that seek to address some of Yemen's other economic and political challenges.<sup>2</sup>

In **Pakistan**, local authorities in Khyber Pukhtoonkhwa (KPK) province have responded to the inadequacies of a policing system with a narrow focus on counter-terrorism activities. Their newly developed 'Beyond Terrorism' strategy will move emphasis away from simply fighting terrorist groups toward providing basic public security for communities, thereby helping to prevent the community-level insecurity that can lead to violence and radicalisation. The strategy provides a positive example of a preventative approach which puts the needs of communities at the heart of public security services. However, this work is at a critical stage and will require financial and technical support in order to be properly implemented. As the UK Government allocates its considerably increased aid budget for Pakistan, supporting such programmes should be a key priority.<sup>3</sup>

In **South Sudan**, while the newly formed state will require assistance with setting up state institutions and delivering basic services, donors such as the UK can also help by supporting communities and civil society organisations in South Sudan hold their government to account, thereby assuring it is responsive to citizens' needs. While the Government of South Sudan will require direct budgetary support, the UK and others should make prolonged support conditional on evidence that planning processes for peacebuilding, statebuilding and development include and are accompanied by civil society organisations, involve the public and respond to public needs.<sup>4</sup>

**The key to lasting stability lies in consistently pursuing coherent policies designed to promote 'positive peace' – the absence of overt violence *and* meeting of people's genuine social, economic, political and security needs.**

### Understanding context

Understanding the perceptions of those affected by and participating in conflict is vital for developing appropriate responses. Involving affected communities in the design and delivery of those responses is equally important if they are to have the buy-in and ownership needed to be effective. Former head of ISAF operations in **Afghanistan**, US General Stanley McChrystal, summed up this point:

*"In Afghanistan, things are rarely as they seem, and the outcomes of actions we take, however well-intended, are often different from what we expect... If you build a well in the wrong place in a village, you may have shifted the basis of power in that village... If you build a well and contract it to one person or group over another, you make a decision that, perhaps in your ignorance, tips the balance of power, or perception thereof, in that village. Therefore, with a completely altruistic aim of building a well, you can create divisiveness or give the impression that you, from the outside, do not understand what is going on or that you have sided with one element or another, yet all you tried to do is provide water."<sup>5</sup>*

## UK arms exports

Taking a principled and strategic approach to international engagements in pursuit of upstream conflict prevention is about much more than the export of UK defence and security equipment to authoritarian regimes. However, the UK's defence and security exports do give one clear and measurable benchmark of the UK's commitment to matching its rhetoric with action.

Serious flaws in the UK's arms export control regime have been brought to light in recent months by events in the Middle East and North Africa. The Committees on Arms Export Controls<sup>6</sup> have concluded that governments both past and present "misjudged the risk that arms approved for export to certain authoritarian countries in North Africa and the Middle East might be used for internal repression," resulting in the UK Government "vigorously backpedalling" by revoking 156 export licences to the region in recent weeks.<sup>7</sup>

Saferworld supports this conclusion and so welcomes the Government's decision to carry out a review of its export licensing policy, the results of which are due to be announced shortly.<sup>8</sup> However, Saferworld is concerned, firstly, that the scope of the review may be too narrow and, secondly, that it is considering the views of stakeholders only from within Government.

The Foreign Secretary stated that it would consider the export of equipment that might be used for internal repression, in particular crowd-control goods.<sup>9</sup> It is unclear what the focus on crowd-control goods "in particular" will mean in practice. Governments of countries such as **Bahrain, Libya, Syria** and **Yemen** have used crowd-control equipment, for example tear gas and rubber bullets, to attack peaceful protesters, while military equipment including aircraft, armoured vehicles and live ammunition has also been deployed, most notably in Libya. The scope of the review should therefore unambiguously include all types of conventional weapons.

In order to ensure the review is thorough and effective, Saferworld encourages the Government to make the process as transparent as possible. Recent reviews of export control policy, such as the 2007 update to the Export Controls Act, have involved close and constructive consultation with external stakeholders such as NGOs and the defence industry. We would strongly encourage the Government to involve other stakeholders in further stages of the current review to ensure it is thorough and considered, and benefits from a broad range of differing perspectives. A full parliamentary debate on the initial recommendations of the review would also be an important element of a more extended, consultative process.

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## About Saferworld

Saferworld is an independent, international NGO that works to prevent violent conflict and promote co-operative approaches to security. We believe everyone should be able to lead peaceful, fulfilling lives free from insecurity and armed violence.

Through our work in the Horn of Africa, South Asia and Eastern Europe we aim to understand what causes violence by talking to the people it affects and then bringing together communities, governments, civil society and the international community to develop solutions. Using this experience, we also work with the UK, EU, UN and others to develop ways of supporting societies address conflict and insecurity.

We always seek to work constructively with others and do not usually engage in public campaigning. While we are not a traditional development agency, we seek to understand and influence the relationship between conflict, security and international development.

We have over 60 staff based in London and abroad – with registered offices in Brussels, Colombo, Juba, Kampala, Nairobi and Pristina, and a permanent staff presence in most of the countries we work in. Our funding for 2008-2009 was around £4.7million – mainly in the form of government grants from Canada, the EU, Germany, Sweden, the Netherlands, Norway and the UK.

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<sup>1</sup> For Saferworld's full recommendations for the Building Stability Overseas Strategy, see Saferworld, *Promoting sustainable security in a complex world: Saferworld submission to HMG Building Stability Overseas Strategy (BSOS)* (2011), <http://www.saferworld.org.uk/Saferworld%20submission%20to%20BSOS%20-%20March%202011.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> For a recent briefing on the situation in Yemen, see Saferworld, *Exclusion, violence and public protest in Yemen* (2011), <http://www.saferworld.org.uk/downloads/pubdocs/Yemen%20parliamentary%20briefing.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> According to DFID's new operational plan for Pakistan, "The UK's aid to Pakistan could more than double, averaging £350 million a year until 2015, to become the UK's largest recipient of aid" – DFID, *Summary of DFID's work in Pakistan 2011-2015*, p 2, <http://www.dfid.gov.uk/Documents/publications1/op/pakistan-2011.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> For more on the situation in Sudan, see Saferworld, *Sudan: Hoping for the best, preparing for the worst?* (2010), [http://www.saferworld.org.uk/Sudan\\_hoping%20for%20the%20best,%20preparing%20for%20the%20worst\\_final.pdf](http://www.saferworld.org.uk/Sudan_hoping%20for%20the%20best,%20preparing%20for%20the%20worst_final.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> General Stanley McChrystal, Address to the International Institute for Strategic Studies, October 2009.

<sup>6</sup> The Committees on Arms Export Controls consist of four select committees meeting and working together: Business, Innovation and Skills; Defence; Foreign Affairs; and International Development Committees.

<sup>7</sup> Committees on Arms Export Controls, *Scrutiny of Arms Export Controls (2011): UK Strategic Export Controls Annual Report 2009, Quarterly Reports for 2010, licensing policy and review of export control legislation* (2011), p 10, paragraph 29.

<sup>8</sup> Alistair Burt MP has said that the Government will report to Parliament "after Easter" – *House of Commons Hansard*, 26 April 2011, column 378W.

<sup>9</sup> Foreign Affairs Committee, *Developments in UK Foreign Policy - uncorrected evidence - 16 March 2011* (2011), <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmselect/cmfa/uc881-i/uc88101.htm>.