

William Hague calls for moderation in Middle East Crisis

Speaking in the debate in the House of Commons on the Middle East Crisis, Shadow Foreign Secretary, William Hague, said:

(Check against delivery)

“I am grateful for the Foreign Secretary’s speech and to the Leader of the House for arranging today’s debate, albeit a shorter one than would have been ideal. It would have been strange indeed if this House adjourned for the summer without debating the matters which are currently the central concern of all of us – the tragic situation of Lebanon, the heavy and daily loss of life in both northern Israel and southern Lebanon, and the ominous portents for the Middle East and the peace of the world of this latest outbreak of fighting.

I will keep my remarks as short as possible so that as many Honourable Members as possible may take part in the debate and I want to come on to the possible wider lessons for our policy towards the Middle East. But I will start, as the Foreign Secretary did, with the immediate situation. The immediate origins of today’s crisis are clear – Hezbollah’s unprovoked attack on Israel. The Prime Minister has been clear about where responsibility lies and about the right of Israel to defend itself and we agree with him on that.

One of the first concerns of all of us in this House has been the safety of British citizens caught up in the conflict, and I want to congratulate our embassy and consular staff and the members of our armed forces who have been working around the clock to evacuate those people. We trust that this evacuation work will continue to gain momentum and that British citizens will be removed from harm’s way. Some criticisms have been made regarding the transmission and quality of information provided by our embassy in Beirut, and if there have been any deficiencies in this respect I hope that Foreign Office has now taken steps to rectify the situation and to learn any appropriate lessons for the

future.

When the Minister winds up the debate I hope he will be able to say when he expects the evacuation operation to be completed and whether he is confident that those still in the country have access to the information support which they undoubtedly need. Perhaps he could also confirm how many British citizens are trapped in areas that have been currently put out of reach, and what discussions are taking place with the Israeli government about ensuring their safety.

But while our first concern is always British citizens, we must not forget the plight of hundreds of thousands of Lebanese people currently trapped between the incapacity of their own government to tackle the terrorist threat within their midst and the resolve of Israel to attack that threat. It is fair to assume that there will soon be a serious humanitarian crisis in parts of Lebanon, added to the deteriorating humanitarian situation in the occupied territories in the aftermath of the election of Hamas. Since Lebanon has only recently begun to emerge from nearly thirty years of the devastation of civil war and to remove a little of the instability that lurks behind its recent transition to democracy, such a situation represents the most desperate tragedy. One of the most dangerous outcomes to the current crisis would be civil war breaking out again and a democratically accepted government in Lebanon becoming once again unviable. If that happens, Israel could be left with an even worse situation than the one it currently faces, a possibility which surely underlines the need to take urgent action now.

That brings us to the immediate issue of what can be done without delay to bring an end to the current bloodshed. The right of Israel to defend itself is clear and its desire severely to damage the ability of Hezbollah to attack the Israeli civilian population is wholly understandable. Calling for an unconditional ceasefire on the part of Israel, as the Prime Minister pointed out yesterday, is futile – there is clearly going to be no ceasefire unless kidnapped soldiers are returned, rocket attacks on Haifa and other locations ceased and some hope provided that the international community will assist Lebanon to have a stable future and one without the presence

of armed militias inside its borders. But it is not clear that it is in the interests of Israel, let alone anyone else, to delay for one moment the effort to bring about a ceasefire with these and other conditions. Criticism of the proportionality of the Israeli response, including attacks on Lebanese army units and such enormous damage to the capacity of the Lebanese government, damages the Israeli cause in the long term. And it is by no means clear that a continued bombardment of Hezbollah areas will result in military success from Israel's point of view. The idea therefore that it is somehow in the interests of Israel or of a longer term solution to these matters for the fighting to go on for several more weeks may prove to be woefully misguided.

To say this is not to underestimate the immense difficulties for anyone trying to bring about an agreed ceasefire in a conflict where one party is a terrorist organisation with its primary links being with countries such as Iran and Syria which are already at loggerheads with most of the international community. Yet it was undoubtedly very dispiriting that the G8 summit in St Petersburg produced so little unity and so little will to take action. The Prime Minister's famous 'Yo!' conversation with President Bush meant that the headlines were once again about those two leaders being too close together while the real story was surely that the G8 leaders as a body were not remotely close enough – indeed the evident failure of the leaders of countries with a huge influence in the Middle East region, including France and Russia, to overcome their differences even to the extent of being able to take some co-ordinated initiative, was the most enduring impression of the G8 summit.

The world is entitled to expect some intensive, continuing and co-ordinated action after the G8 summit but it is not clear that the actions now being taken are co-ordinated. I hope the government can tell us more about the apparent plans of the US Secretary of State to travel to the Middle East, about whether there is any possibility of the Prime Minister travelling there, since he clearly offered to go in his conversation with President Bush, and whether the announced visit of the French Prime Minister to Lebanon is in any way co-ordinated with British and American diplomatic efforts. It is also important to hear much more about the proposal

floated by the government, for an international force to act as a buffer in southern Lebanon. We should have an open mind about such a proposal, but not forget the immense difficulties faced by such a force in the 1980s, which was resulted in heavy loss of life and mounting resentment against the West. To avoid the limitations of UNIFIL, such a force would have to have a robust mandate, operate on a large-scale, be well-equipped and be made up of good quality troops. Given that the British army is stretched to the limit, and American forces could not fulfil a peace keeping role in this context, it is not clear where these forces are to come from. I hope the Minister will be able to say more about what discussions are taking place with our allies, particularly the French, whether these proposals are being worked up in detail, and whether it is understood that, to be useful, such a force would have to be involved in actually disarming Hezbollah, an obviously difficult undertaking.

Of course, we all hope that the meeting of the UN Security Council will help to produce a stronger impetus for a co-ordinated approach from the world's leading powers, particularly one involving Russia and France, given the importance of influencing Syria and Iran. We all fully realise that the government cannot bring about such co-ordination on their own, but the efforts of the British government in calling for it should be vigorous, and clear. So far, the failure to produce an international initiative is ominously reminiscent of the early stages of the Balkan crisis of the 1990s. One of the reasons this is so worrying is that the crisis in Lebanon is likely to make the other problems of the Middle East harder to deal with and these problems taken together, are becoming by far the single greatest foreign policy challenge for us and our allies. It should be a sobering thought for all of us who deal with foreign affairs, in government or in opposition, that instability in the Middle East could become seriously worse in the coming years: whoever wins the next election in this country or in the United States could easily face a nuclear-armed Iran, continued violence in Afghanistan, a still unstable Iraq, a stalled Peace Process between Israel and Palestinians and major instability in one or more of our major Arab allies, all at the same time. And all of these conflicts have the potential to feed into or be hijacked by forms of international terrorism.

Such a combination of factors could present the most alarming outlook for world peace since 1945. It is therefore vital to keep in mind, even though this week's urgent news is from Lebanon, the many other components of the darkening scene in the Middle East and to develop a clear strategy for the coming years.

In Israeli-Palestinian relations there is an urgent need to find a route back to a genuine and equitable Peace Process on the basis of a two-state solution. Clearly this requires the new Palestinian Authority to meet the international community's demands to renounce violence, recognise Israel and accept previous agreements, and it also requires Israel to preserve the Palestinian institutions and infrastructure which will form the basis of a future Palestinian state. The security barrier erected by Israel, which many of us have visited, has for the moment brought greater security for Israeli citizens but it is now clearer than ever that long-term peace and security for Israel can only come from agreement with its neighbours.

Is there anything more the government can tell us about any progress at all in these matters and any more that can be done to ensure that the necessary flow of humanitarian assistance to the Palestinian people is taking place?

In parallel, we have the continuing standoff over Iran's nuclear programme and we certainly welcome the decision to return this issue to the Security Council. Britain has been at the forefront of efforts to generate and maintain consensus over Iran, and we hope that the united front that the permanent members have shown to date will be maintained now that we are approaching a crucial juncture in our dealings with Iran. Perhaps the Minister can tell us, when he winds up, whether we can be confident of the robust support of all members of the Security Council at this stage and whether Russia and China have indicated their willingness to support a resolution that would pave the way for meaningful sanctions, should Iranian intransigence continue.

At the same time we continue to face a very difficult situation in Iraq, with the UN assessing the number of civilian deaths as 6,000

in May and June alone. The Minister of State for the Armed Forces has conceded that the threat level in Basra has increased and the Prime Minister has recently stated that Iranian armaments have caused the deaths of British soldiers. It would be a disaster to do anything now which would make the job of the democratically Iraqi government most difficult, and the one encouraging factor is that they have been able to take over control of larger areas of their own country, but are Ministers satisfied that there are sufficient patrols along the Iran-Iraq border and that the security situation in southern Iraq will not deteriorate further?

Simultaneously in Afghanistan the government has admitted that British troops in Helmand have suffered far stiffer resistance than was anticipated. More troops are being sent. But given the serious possibility that further troops will be required for the Afghanistan mission to succeed, wouldn't it be a good idea for the government to be making the case now to our NATO allies that the consequences of failure in Afghanistan would be catastrophic and that a much larger contribution may be required from the rest of NATO?

In a parliamentary answer this week to my right Honourable friend, the Shadow Defence Secretary, the Defence Secretary states that neither the Taliban nor the range of illegally armed groups currently pose a threat to the long-term stability of Afghanistan. It would be interesting to know whether this assessment is shared by Foreign Office Ministers. While an enormous amount of good work has been done in Afghanistan, the overall picture after five years is still of a country with weak institutions, widespread corruption and a deteriorating security environment. It seems to us to be of paramount importance to give renewed vigour and co-ordination to the international reconstruction effort, which alone can give hope to people in Afghanistan that there is an alternative to warlords and narcotics. We have advocated the appointment of an International Co-ordinator of such efforts with a powerful mandate. The government have said this is a constructive suggestion but I am not aware of anything being done about it. Given the persistent reports of poor co-ordination, waste and corruption, this seems to me to be a matter of the highest urgency.

All of these issues have common threads – the same countries appear again and again, deliberately working against our efforts to secure peace in the Middle East and adding to the instability; the same grievances of Western bias and inequitable policies are voiced by parties in the different conflicts. They all require a firm, clear and hard-headed approach from the British government but the fact that there are so many interlocking conflicts underscores the need for this country to develop a clear and coherent foreign policy towards the Middle East and to pursue it consistently over many years. Our genuine influence seems to be at a low ebb and no Foreign Secretary can be satisfied with that.

Such a strategy must include serious economic and security initiatives accompanied by a major effort to raise and sustain the level of our contacts through the region. A glance at our relations with the Gulf States illustrate the point, and the need. Countries like Qatar and the United Arab Emirates could play key roles in our dealings with Iran. They are our natural allies. Yet in nine years of highly active foreign policy, the Prime Minister has never visited these countries. There maybe much more to do to help them with their own regional security framework. There is almost certainly more that we could do to boost trade and economic ties, which are in any case expanding. There is a great deal more we could do to foster links between our parliaments and educational institutions, promoting cultural links, encouraging civil society, and developing closer policy exchanges and dialogue on all the threat we face – terrorism, religious radicalism, climate change and nuclear proliferation.

I received a written answer from the Foreign Secretary today saying that if any security initiative is to be successful leadership must come from the region. That may be true, but much more could be done to stimulate it. Such contacts should be one of the highest priorities of our Foreign Office. The Foreign Secretary is new to the job – indeed we are all fairly new to foreign affairs – but when I asked her at the end of May what discussions she has had with her counterparts in the Gulf the answer was none. This region does deserve a higher priority and the personal envoy of the British Prime Minister should not be his fundraiser, however well intentioned: the personal envoy of the Prime Minister should be the

Foreign Secretary, relentlessly backed up by our Ambassadors.

Other instances of what could be done include elevating NATO's Mediterranean dialogue, which includes such countries as Algeria, Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia to the level of genuine partnership with selected countries in the broader region of the Middle East. An enhanced Mediterranean dialogue could contribute to regional security and stability, border security and greater practical co-operation in fighting terrorism. At the same time we could reach out to other countries through the Istanbul Co-operation Initiative, by promoting practical bilateral co-operation with interested countries, perhaps starting with the Gulf Co-operation Council producing closer co-operation on a whole range of issues.

These things and probably much more are required if the UK is to make its diplomacy in the Middle East a strong priority. Despite our traditional ties and considerable knowledge of the region we have experienced a decline, alongside the United States in popularity and influence. Yet Europe's engagement in the Balkans, in Macedonia, and with Turkey has demonstrated the importance of soft power – as in encouraging other countries to 'want what we want' and to share our goals and to offer incentives for reform and tangible benefits from co-operation. We now need to develop a parallel approach to many of the countries of the Middle East.

Finally, we need to ensure that the machinery of government in our own country is properly equipped and designed to deliver such a co-ordinated approach. Three weeks ago in the House of Lords, the noble Lord, Lord Owen, a former Foreign Secretary, delivered a speech which ought to be read by all Members of this House arguing that the changes introduced by the Prime Minister to the way in which the Cabinet are involved and informed about foreign and defence policy has contributed to a series of miscalculations. He pointed out that the introduction of Cabinet Secretariats inside No. 10 no longer serving the entire Cabinet, pointing out that other Senior Ministers are thus denied access to the full flow of information flowing back from Army Commanders in the field or from the Foreign Secretary to the Prime Minister, leading to issues not being evaluated and decisions not taken in a properly balanced way. Given the abysmal lack of planning for reconstruction in Iraq

and the evolution of policies so far in relation to Afghanistan, such issues need to be addressed. Our armed forces have never let us down and it is not acceptable if the operation of government is doing so.

To drive a reinvigorated and long-term policy of British engagement in the Middle East is a major challenge for the Foreign Secretary, but it is one that she ought to take up for we know full well that even when the immediate crisis has passed, the forces which have precipitated that crisis and will create many more are becoming stronger all the time.”

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