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23 June 2005

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Dear John

ENGAGING WITH ISLAMISTS

1. I have seen by chance accounts of two discussions in Paris on 1/2 June about engaging with Islamists in the Arab world. The first was from Frances Guy, and the second from Angus McKee. Both go to essentially the same point: where and how we should engage with "political Islam". Angus gives some reasons as to why, and Frances suggests points of possible agreement as to action. I attach copies for ease of reference.
2. When I was in London three weeks ago I discussed the same subject with you. I also had a meeting with experts from across and outside the Office on the internal political situation in Egypt, which went over some of the same ground. The intention then had been for AINAG to produce a paper on political developments in Egypt to include the Islamist issue. I am not sure where that currently stands, but I still think it would be a good idea. In the meantime I am slightly concerned that we are getting ahead of ourselves, and that discussions may be pursued with partners which could land us in unnecessary difficulty, especially during our EU Presidency.
3. Obviously it is desirable to talk to Islamists if we can. As already established, doing so when they fail to renounce violence is likely to prove a bridge too far for our ministers. In other contexts we might gain useful information. I suspect that there will be relatively few contexts in which we are able significantly to influence the Islamists' agenda.
4. But I also detect a tendency for us to be drawn towards engagement for its own sake, to confuse "engaging with the Islamic world" with "engaging with Islamism"; and to play down the very real downsides for us in terms of the Islamists' likely foreign and social policies, should they actually achieve power in countries such as Egypt.
5. This is a big subject, and Frances' and Angus' records raise a lot of questions, beyond those which are directly relevant to the extent of our own engagement. The idea for example that the debate between "laicistes" and religion is largely redundant in this part of the world sits oddly with my nightly viewing of the Orbit discussion programmes which are de rigeur in Egypt.



6. But my main purpose in writing concerns the operational conclusions drawn from these meetings. If we get ourselves into a position where we are stating as a matter of principle the importance of "engaging political Islam" we will run into specific difficulties in particular countries, including this one. Seen from here we will do better to position ourselves country by country as required to advance our overall reform objectives. The general principles should be ones of universal application (democracy, freedom of expression, respect for human rights etc).

7. My second point is that it would not be sensible to instruct EU Heads of Mission across the Arab world during our Presidency to initiate discussion of contacts with Islamists. The fact of the discussion would in itself be a signal. Whether such a discussion was likely to be useful might vary from post to post. But we need to recognise the porosity of the 25. Once a paper or subject is launched among Heads of Mission, certainly in this post, it will be in the hands of our hosts within the hour (cf recent experience in relation to the ENP Action Plan). We will then be running to put out brush fires out with Aboul Gheit to the exclusion of real business. The collective response of my colleagues might well be that we should have no truck with the Brothers. But I would be labelled – as I am to a certain extent already – as agitating in the other direction. Discussion is more likely to be useful in informal fora. G8 Ambassadors here have recently compared notes on contacts with Islamists at our instigation. I attach the relevant paragraph from the record.

8. Underlying all of this – here at least - is a question about what the real possibilities for forward movement on political reform are at the moment, and how signalling greater readiness to talk to the Muslim Brothers would impact that. The Brothers are the regime's red line. Mubarak has it is true been dragged over other red lines. But this one is existential, not just for the leadership but for the class from which they are drawn and for the vision of society to which they subscribe. They can be encouraged to accommodation on it (see for example my record of my meeting with Governor Mahgoub in Alexandria over the weekend). But we need to judge the message very carefully. Pressing for legalisation of the Brothers as a political party, or dealing with them ourselves directly (as opposed to seeing their MPAs or sympathisers like Fahmy Howeiidi, to whom I introduced Kim Howells), will panic the horses. In my judgement it would seriously impede our ability to influence them on other aspects of political reform – more transparent elections, access to the media, freedom of assembly for opposition candidates etc.

9. I am not starry eyed about the commitment of the regime here to political reform. The old guard – Safwat Sherif, Kamal al Shazli and their like – continue to try to cook things in a thoroughly unscrupulous way. Abuses are manifold, and will be repeated any number of times in the coming months. But the stated vision of the regime – democratic choice, freedom of expression, a stronger secular opposition – is respectable. They wrap themselves in the banner of "no religion in politics". Many oppositionists including in Kifaya take the same line. As the US Chargé here says that is not so very far from the basis of his constitution, and the Americans for the moment seem disinclined to challenge this particular red line. You will have seen from our reporting that Condoleezza Rice went out of her way during her visit here to deny the existence of US contacts with the Muslim Brothers – "we respect Egyptian law" – though she was very firm about transparent elections, freedom of assembly, human rights abuses etc.

