Dear David

HEARTS AND MINDS AND MUSLIMS

1. Thank you for copying me your letter of 20 April to Nigel Sheinwald. FCO and SIS have already had some discussions in this area, and I understand that MOD have also done some work on information operations in the Islamic world (on which we would be interested in knowing more).

2. Seen from here, the potential for information operations backfiring on us is even greater than during the Cold War, when IRD and US counterparts had a mixed record. Dealing with Islamist extremism, the messages are more complex, the constituencies we would aim at are more difficult to identify, and greater damage could be done to the overall effort if links back to UK or US sources were revealed. The only sources that will be listened to are those with impeccable Muslim credentials. But the question is valid: can we play any role other than bystander as the various currents within Islam contest for hearts and minds of Muslims worldwide?

3. Our view is that actions will affect views in the region far more substantively than any form of massage. Given that we will never eradicate extremist tendencies, the key question is: what action is most likely to marginalise them, and deprive them of the (often only) passive support they need to do real damage? So far, too many Middle Eastern regimes are sticking with the wrong answer: suppression and gerrymandering of superficial bits of democratic furniture, instead of bringing moderate Islamist tendencies into the power structure while they are still moderate, and confronting them with the realities of power and responsibility.

4. That does not fully answer the question about whether, in parallel to our reform efforts, there is scope for more effective and coordinated delivery of key messages. I think we need to make a clear distinction between messages that will bolster moderate, Western-oriented currents of thought in Islam (which is something that can be done overtly, through Ministerial and other public diplomacy, and which also needs to include genuine two-way dialogue) and messages aimed at more radicalised constituencies who are potential recruits to terrorism. The latter won’t be convinced by calls for the Middle East to become a zone of peace and prosperity, or for market reforms in Arab countries to increase living standards (though they would be moved by it actually happening). They might, however, listen to religious arguments about the nature of jihad that, while anti-Western, eschew terrorism. The latter may be a more appropriate sphere for information operations.

5. I believe SIS are already talking to their liaison in the Arab world who are engaged in ‘hearts and minds’ activity, to see what we can learn, and if we can help export models used by eg Egyptians or Saudis. We should recognise that these governments are always likely to have a more sophisticated understanding of the ideological issues, and more potential conduits for the message, than we do – but there may be scope for channelling these efforts more productively.

6. The McCoil paper also mentions Cyberspace. I presume there are opportunities for engaging in the debates on Islamist websites, unattributably. But whoever was doing this would need a carefully worked-out script. There may also be ways to disrupt or impede extremist websites. I hope some proposals on all this will emerge from the ongoing cross-government work on setting up better systems for monitoring websites.

7. So we would not rule out developing new work in this area, some of which may spin out of our programmes on Engaging the Islamic World. But as always we are up against the problem of resources, in particular linguists and experts. Perhaps a first step would be a one-off meeting between the relevant Departments and Agencies, to see if a common way forward can be adopted. Would you be interested in chairing such a meeting?

8. I am copying this to recipients of your letter.

Yours sincerely

[signed]

William Ehrman
Director-General (Defence & Intelligence)