

FT

FINANCIAL TIMES | Saturday January 3 / Sunday January 4 2009 | EUROPE

WEEKEND

LIFE & ARTS

Middle East middleman



S ometime in the late 1980s, a British embassy vehicle was inching its way through the mountains of Balochistan in Pakistan when angry tribesmen barred its path. The tribespeople were in dispute with the government over water rights and when they caught sight in the car of what they assumed was a British diplomat – who happened to be en route to a meeting with the district commissioner – they couldn't resist the idea of seizing him as a bargaining chip. Shortly afterwards the district commissioner's office took a call. "This is Alastair Crooke. I'm afraid I might be a little late," he apologized. "I've been kidnapped."

The district commissioner sent 12 Pakistani troops to retrieve Crooke, but they found him in no hurry to leave. He was, he said, going to stay put until something had been done about the tribesmen's complaints. The soldiers went away, but returned with reinforcements. In the meantime, however, news of the hostage-taking had spread to nearby villages and several thousand tribesmen, many of them armed, had turned up. Still, he refused to budge until his captors had a chance to air their grievances. The diminutive Crooke sat on a rock and read a book until the Balochis were happy for him to leave.

Crooke, who didn't tell me this story himself, plays down the kidnap now, attributing it to bad luck. He is certain of one thing, though – had he walked out of the Balochi village with those 12 Pakistani troops all of them would have been shot. Even if the tale has been embellished over time, it is revealing. Those tribesmen would scarcely have guessed it, but their hostage was not a "proper" diplomat. Working under the diplomatic cover of the British High Commission, he was in fact an agent of MI6, the British secret intelligence service, helping Mujahideen fighters to take on the Soviet army in Afghanistan.

In 30 years of British government service, Crooke worked in trouble spots as varied as Northern Ireland, South Africa, Cambodia and Colombia, collecting intelligence and often planting the seeds of negotiation with rebel political groups. In 1997, Tony Blair plucked him from MI6 and lent him to the European Union as special security envoy to the Middle East. In April and May 2002 he helped to negotiate an end to the Israeli siege of Palestinian militants taking refuge in the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. From 2001 to 2003 he brokered a number of ceasefires between Israel and the Palestinian movements Fatah and Hamas. None lasted beyond a few months, but Crooke emerged as one of the few foreign diplomats capable of winning the respect of the main Palestinian factions.

Not everyone, however, was content. In August 2002, perhaps because Crooke was seen as too sympathetic to Palestinian groups, the Israeli newspaper Ma'ariv outed him as an MI6 agent, poking fun at how slight this real-life James Bond was compared with his fictional counterpart. In 2003, after another ceasefire collapsed, Crooke was recalled to London. In a typically English fudge, he was given a CMG in the 2004 New Year's Honours List for services to "the advancement of the Middle East peace process" – and sacked from MI6. He was, he said, ushered into a meeting with a low-level clerk and told to pack his bags – probably because his perceived sympathy with the Palestinians had embarrassed the British government.

Not long afterwards, Crooke went freelance, drawing on his intelligence and political contacts to set up Conflicts Forum, a think-tank whose aim is to help western governments understand Islamist groups and their military resistance to Israel. In 2005 he moved to Beirut, where he lives with his partner, Aisling Byrne, an Englishwoman who previously worked with Palestinian refugees. Twenty years after his brief detention in Balochistan, some conservative critics in the UK say Crooke has let himself be captured by a different local interest – becoming an overfriendly interlocutor working on behalf of Hizbollah and Hamas. Dean Godson, research director of the rightwing British think-tank Policy Exchange, wrote in Prospect magazine in 2006 that: "Hamas, at least as refracted through Crooke, is little more than an Islamist form of Lib Dem pavement politics." He even went on to say Crooke was suffering from something akin to Stockholm syndrome. So what does Crooke himself think he is doing, and why?

On a warm October morning in Beirut, Crooke stood in the lobby of the Albergo, one of Beirut's finest hotels. It was the second day of a Conflicts Forum seminar and he hovered around the 50 or so delegates as they took their places in the restaurant that was acting as a conference room. Half of those attending were from the west: serving or former politicians, diplomats and advisers. They included a member of the House of Lords, a former US State Department official, an adviser to Silvio Berlusconi and a former British ambassador. The other half were academics or advisers from the Middle East; a good many from Iran. One of the subjects under discussion was the financial crisis and its implications for the Middle East. It would, thought a visiting academic from the University of Tehran, presage a "major shift in the balance of power" in the region, perhaps precipitating a switch from the dollar to the euro as the preferred currency of exchange. A panel of speakers assessed the demonization of Islam in the western media; a Qatari in the audience argued that the speakers themselves were guilty of regarding Muslims as one homogeneous category. Another delegate piped up to wonder: "Who was behind September 11? Still it isn't clear."

Towards the end of the morning, Crooke, a beaky, impish man with big ears, summed up Conflicts Forum's mission. There was a thirst for reliable information about the Middle East, he said, which went deeper than the usual Manichean categories thrown up by the "war on terror". Crooke often closes his eyes when he talks politics, making him look slightly imperious, as if weary of explaining complex matters to lesser mortals. His accent is so posh that he sounds like he's from an earlier era: he pronounces "off" as "Orff" and says "reelly" for "really". At one point my ears pricked up when he appeared to mention the Israelis – noticeably absent from the conversation thus far – but it turned out that he was only saying "is really".



He was withering about organizations that thought they could make progress towards peace by putting all the protagonists in the same swanky hotel room and hoping for the best. Conflicts Forum was different, he said, because it didn't think it could resolve conflicts. Instead it sought to build greater understanding on all sides, but would not renounce its sympathetic approach to political Islam – movements such as Hizbollah and Hamas. It accepted, said Crooke, "the correctness of resistance, and that it can lead to political solutions". It was the best and most vivid speech all day, but Crooke seemed a little bored. Later, he admitted to loathing seminars and conference chatter, mainly for their lack of productivity.

Israel Defense Force soldiers watch as a wounded Palestinian is carried from Bethlehem's Church of the Nativity. Crooke, in his role as EU special security envoy to the Middle East, took part in negotiations to end the four-week siege in 2002

He was selling Conflicts Forum short, not least for its occasionally startling delegates. The previous day Usamah Hamdan, a member of Hamas's governing council, turned up with six armed security guards. As the curtains were drawn to guard against snipers, Hamdan and Crooke embraced warmly. But when the security team saw the FT's photographer, and alcohol on the tables, a minder forbade photography. The next day, there remained an unreal and mildly conspiratorial air;

most delegates didn't want to be mentioned, never mind photographed. A former high-ranking UN official implored me three times not to mention that he was here. "I'm invisible," he called after me as I disappeared into a lift. "I don't exist." Crooke, whom I'd never spoken to before the conference but had invited to take part in an event at the London Institute of Contemporary Arts, where I direct the talks programme, later invited me to join him for lunch, alongside a former US military attaché to Lebanon and a Hizbollah fixer/translator. The conversation was oblique, each participant dancing around a subject and no one going quite so far as to say what they actually meant. When talk turned to the myths surrounding the Afghan war against the invading Soviet Union in the 1980s, I wondered aloud, given that the CIA was already dispensing mountains of cash and arms to the Mujahideen, what British intelligence had been doing there. Just giving advice, perhaps? "Something a little more lethal than advice," smiled Crooke.

A few hours after lunch, Crooke ushered a small group of western delegates into two cars and we were driven to Dahiyeh, a Shia area of Beirut controlled by Hizbollah, to meet Sayyed Nawaf Moussawi, a jovial, bearded man who is the Islamists party's international relations chief and a member of its Shura, or governing council. We stopped at a building that looked like a library or a school, where six armed Hizbollah security men, all wearing identical brown suits, received us. Upstairs, we surrendered our mobile phones before being ushered into a room furnished with ornate sofas and a low table loaded with sticky sweets. Moussawi, who had met delegates the previous day, was waiting for us. On the wall were pictures of Ayatollah Khomeini and Hizbollah's military strategist Imad Mugniyah, who was killed by a car bomb in Damascus in February 2008. An arty photograph of the damage caused to the Dahiyeh area of Beirut by the Israeli bombs of 2006 bore the slogan: "We rise in the midst of rubble."

The day before, Moussawi had argued that Hizbollah felt under siege because of the west's refusal to engage with it. We are ready to talk to anyone who wants to talk to us, he had said. Now he asked delegates how they thought the political situation might develop. A few people spoke, addressing Moussawi as "Your Excellency". When the conversation began to flag, Crooke took over. He hoped, he said, that after the US election, both major American parties might "recalibrate their attitude to the Middle East".

Moussawi was keen to stress that Hizbollah posed no threat to anyone outside Lebanon's borders. While the Palestinians were brothers in arms, he said: "Experience teaches us that the best people to liberate the Palestinians are they themselves. Our position is not to interfere in the internal affairs of any country."

...
Every so often a copy of Britain's Official Secrets Act is delivered to Crooke's Beirut flat, along with a reminder that he is still bound by it. This is why his CV for 1972 to 1997 merely states: "contributed to mediation, management and resolution of conflict in Ireland, South Africa, Namibia, Afghanistan, Cambodia and Colombia". There are good reasons why, even now, Crooke will neither confirm nor deny that he ever worked for MI6. To talk about the specifics of his work would be to invite prosecution.

The afternoon after the seminar I visited his elegant rented apartment in Ashrafiyeh, central Beirut. The flat doubles as a makeshift office for Conflicts Forum and, in between supervising the Lebanese nanny who cares for their eight-month-old daughter, his partner, Byrne, was checking e-mails and firming up Crooke's meetings. Sitting on the balcony and looking over the Beirut traffic, we took tea and talked about his past. He is 59 and was born in Dún Laoghaire in the Republic of Ireland. Even after 30 years of British government service, he still carries an Irish passport.

Shortly after his birth, his parents emigrated to what was then Rhodesia, later sending their son to a boarding school in Switzerland. Crooke then read moral philosophy and political economy at St Andrews, and went from there into the City. At St Andrews he had been asked to join the intelligence services, but declined. A few years later, however, he received a call asking whether he might have changed his mind. He had.

One of Crooke's first postings was to Ireland, in the chaos of the early 1970s, where he cultivated a range of contacts in and around the IRA. One former high-ranking MI6 agent told me that the Secret Intelligence Service strategy was to build discreet long-term relationships with reasonable people within radical movements and then, over a long period, use those relationships to separate moderates from extremists and thus "influence the situation". Crooke confirmed that this was indeed the general approach, though he feared that patience was increasingly being sacrificed for expediency. "You can lose a relationship in a day and it might take you 20 years to repair it," he said. In postings to Pakistan during the Afghan war and to South Africa in the years leading to the end of apartheid, it was a lesson that Crooke took to heart. "The point is to understand the people who it is hardest to understand," he said. "It is easy to talk to people who you might want to have around your dinner table."

Could he imagine negotiating with al-Qaeda, I wondered? "Never say never," he replied, though he couldn't really see the point. Groups such as al-Qaeda only get a hearing, he said, because of the failure of more mainstream political Islamism to speak to the Muslim world.

Though proud of his work for the British government, Crooke admits to a period of reassessment after he was sacked. His views appear to have undergone something of a sea-change. Unusually for a former British spy, Crooke sprinkles his lectures with references, for example, to the work of Marxist postcolonial thinker Frantz Fanon. He believes that Hizbollah is a key factor in the renaissance of Islam – particularly its Shia variant – in the Middle East. The fact he remained in Beirut throughout the Israeli bombing might have stoked his sympathetic approach to Israel's enemies. From his balcony he pointed out where some bombs fell, even criticising the Israeli Air Force for poor targeting and outdated intelligence. His sympathy for Islamism extends beyond the political. Islam, he believes, has a valuable “imaginative, intuitive” approach to the individual that has been lost in the west. He views the 1979 Iranian revolution as progressive and enthusiastically explained obscure theological differences between its main Islamic protagonists. In the past two years he has visited Iran regularly – at one point he said “our view”, before correcting himself: “the Iranian view, I mean”.



Tens of thousands mark last year's eighth anniversary of Israel's withdrawal from south Lebanon, the occupation Hizbollah was founded to resist

At the end of the conference Crooke held a dinner at a restaurant for a few friends. He was on playful form, pretending to feed Amistis, his daughter, some alcohol. Sitting opposite me was Tom Clark, a gruff, bearish man who seemed dissatisfied with the seminar's direction. There was, he felt, too much talk of theology and “the other”, and not enough about the politics of who should meet whom and what could be done. Clark is a financial supporter of Conflicts Forum's work, and so his opinion matters. (He is a member of the extended family that owns the bulk of the shoemaker Clarks.) Long sympathetic to the Palestinians, his peace activism got him thrown out of Israel a few years ago. Shortly afterwards, he heard Crooke talking on the BBC's Newsnight about the Middle East peace process. The first time he met Crooke, he said: “He was wearing a plaid shirt, a jacket with arm-patches and a stringy tie. He looked like a geography teacher from Chipping Norton.” It wasn't long before Crooke invited him to Beirut. The first Hamas officials he met told him, “Any friend of Alastair is a friend of ours.” And that was it, he said. “I became one of his groupies.”

Clark's support is important. When Conflicts Forum launched in 2004, the rhetoric about the war on terror was at its most heated, and funding was difficult to secure. Some money trickled in from private donors in the west and Middle East; most wanted to keep donations secret. A few years ago it won more respectable sources of funding when a small grant came in from the Institute of Peace, a US federally funded organisation, and then the EU gave Crooke some money to run a series of seminars.

Bob Baer is the former CIA officer whose experiences inspired the George Clooney film *Syriana*. He spent much of his career in the Middle East but met Crooke only once, by chance. **That was five years ago, when Baer happened to be in the lobby of the Albergo helping to scout locations for *Syriana*.** The problem with intelligence types such as Crooke who set up on their own, he said, is that they continually have to struggle to keep their contacts book up to date. The only reason Hizbollah and Hamas talk to Crooke, he said, is because they see him as a valuable back-channel to western governments in much the same way that MI6 acted as a back-channel to the IRA. A Foreign Office spokesman confirmed that the British ambassador in Lebanon had met Crooke recently, “to share perspectives on conflict issues in Lebanon”. An Israeli government spokesman said he could find no one to comment officially on Crooke's work. Nobody in Israel's security establishment, he added, wants to criticise Crooke openly because no one can be sure that he isn't involved in an unofficial capacity, maintaining contacts on behalf of some western interest.

Crooke laughed off that suggestion – Hizbollah and Hamas were talking to him long before any emissaries from the west showed up, he said. However, Beirut is at the centre of a proxy war between Israel, Iran, Syria, Saudi Arabia and the US and is a tinderbox where regional tensions between Sunni and Shia Muslims are in constant danger of sparking open confrontation. At the Conflicts Forum seminar there was much talk of the growing influence of armed Sunni jihadi factions, mostly Salafist groups, whose purist interpretation of Islam is akin to that of al-Qaeda and whose influence in Lebanon is rising, especially within the Palestinian camps.

Whatever Crooke says about talking to al-Qaeda, it is clear that if he or anyone else in his position tried to talk to radical Sunni jihadi groups such as Fatah al-Islam, he would, as Baer put it, “come back with his head cut off”. Some will bristle at the suggestion, but compared with those militant Sunni groups, Hizbollah and Hamas are moderates. In that case, Crooke's mission to Hizbollah and Hamas is not so different from the work he conducted as a British spy, attempting to separate moderates from extremists and seeking to draw the former into the mainstream fold.

Despite his enthusiasm for what he sees as an Islamic renaissance, the paradox of Crooke's mission to Beirut is that he cannot divorce himself entirely from the traditional “Great Game” long played by western diplomats and intelligence spooks in the region – “influencing the situation” in ways that might help, but equally might make matters worse.

After we had sipped tea on his balcony in Ashrafiyeh, Crooke had explained why he traded banking for spying. He wanted the excitement of not knowing where his career might take him – not for him the middle-aged sense of shrinking horizons. Perhaps he has become dependent on the power that comes from playing the “game” of sotto voce diplomacy.

To Crooke, Beirut is more exciting and intellectually stimulating than anything he could hope for in London. “There is real politics here,” he said. “It’s not about interest rates and the price of sheep.” Nor has he “gone native” – he speaks no Arabic, for example, and although he has written approvingly of T.E. Lawrence in the Lebanese press, he resists the orientalist caricature. “I certainly would not like to end up like he did. He effectively misled the Arab forces, and that haunted him afterwards.”

‘Cyberbia: The Dangerous Idea That’s Changing How We Live And Who We Are’ by James Harkin is published in February by Little, Brown