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## Foreign Affairs Committee

### Oral evidence: The FCDO's approach to state level hostage situations, HC 166

Tuesday 17 May 2022

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Members present: Tom Tugendhat (Chair); Liam Byrne; Henry Smith; and Royston Smith.

Questions 1 to 52

#### Witnesses

I: Rt Hon Alistair Burt, former Minister of State for the Middle East at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and former Minister of State at the Department for International Development.

II: Rt Hon Jeremy Hunt MP, former Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs.



## Examination of witness

Witness: Rt Hon Alistair Burt.

Q1 **Chair:** Welcome to this afternoon's session of the Foreign Affairs Committee. We are very lucky to have with us an old friend and former Member of this House, Alistair Burt, one-time Minister in the Foreign Office. Alistair, thank you very much for agreeing to come and talk to us; I am very grateful for your time. We are talking about hostage taking, predominantly in Iran, and the decisions the Department made over the years, including in the time when you were in post. Could you please tell us what efforts were made during your time in office to secure the release of UK dual nationals in Iran, and why they failed?

**Alistair Burt:** It is a question that could take up an awful lot of time, so I will try to cut it down, but there are two things I would like to say. The first is to set our relationship with Iran at that time in context, because it is important, and then I would like to say a little bit about the efforts, so let me do both.

I returned to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in 2017, which was not too long after diplomatic relations had effectively been restored following the sacking of part of our embassy in Tehran in 2011 and the removal of the Iranian ambassador to the UK. Those relationships were restored in 2015, but it was still at an early stage.

The big issues in relation to Iran when I got back in the office were the dual nationals—we are going to spend a lot of time on that—and the nuclear issue in relation to the JCPOA, which was under threat at that time. President Trump had been elected. His declared electoral aim had been to end the US's participation in the JCPOA, which the British Government took to be the wrong move, and we were therefore already in negotiations, both with the US and Iran, about the implication. A third issue with Iran was its regional activity, which was broadly unhelpful and sometimes positively dangerous, as the Committee is well aware.

The context I was re-engaged in was to work on this new relationship with Iran. I developed a relationship that was based broadly on no excuses—no justification for Iran's activities—but an awareness of how Iran saw the UK and the world, which is really important. Some people in the United Kingdom have a terrible tendency to see the world as they want it to be and to remember history as they want to remember it, rather than what it actually is. In many places in the Middle East, that does not work. People remember their history. We have a long history with Iran; parts of it are not great. Jack Straw's seminal book, "The English Job" is a really good introduction to that.

There is more recent history, of which the Iran-Iraq war is tremendously important. The United Kingdom armed Iran's principal opponent, Saddam Hussein. There were chemical weapons attacks on Iranians, to which we



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turned a blind eye, and they lost nearly a million people. These things are absolutely fundamental to how Iran sees the UK and the rest of the world, so broadly, it is a relationship of distrust to be navigated. Into all this were pitched the issues that I have just mentioned, and what we had to try to focus on.

To turn, therefore, to the dual nationals and efforts on them—because we will come back to the JCPOA, I think—what efforts did we make? First, every physical effort that we could. I visited pretty regularly in 2017 to 2019. I visited first in August 2017; I went to the inauguration of President Rouhani. It was the biggest thing that the UK had done with the Iranians for some time, and it was designed, again, to show that even at my level, at Minister of State level, trying to re-engage was a good thing to do. I had already spoken to the Deputy Foreign Minister.

I went repeatedly; I had repeated calls. I was able to go to the Foreign Office last Friday to look at my notes and the sensitive material there, and I have made whatever notes I could. I did check, and the dual national issue was raised in every single meeting without exception—not as a side issue, but as a significant briefing point to be made in telephone calls or visits. Not only did I visit Tehran, but the relationship I formed with deputy Minister Abbas Araghchi meant that I met him in Brussels, Vienna, New York and London. Physically, the effort to raise the issue and to talk was made.

In relation to those efforts, how did I and the British Government at that time try to win over a situation in which the dual nationals could be released? I put it this way: first, it would help Iran in their international relations if they were not seen to detain dual nationals. Secondly, after Nazanin was due for parole following her sentence, I took the view that I could push for her release on the basis of parole without necessarily criticising the judicial system in Iran. I was not telling them they had been wrong—I did not make any comment about that. I said, “Even if Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe is treated as an Iranian citizen, and even if there is no criticism of the sentence, she would now be eligible for parole, so why not, even under your system?”

In that way, I presented it to Iran as a potential win: they were not doing it because the British asked them to, which is not necessarily the way to get a response, but because it was up to them—it was their sovereign decision. I suggested this might be a way forward. I suggested it would not do any harm, as we were dealing with the United States in relation to the JCPOA, to demonstrate that their worries that Iran had not lived up to the expectations of 2015 JCPOA were being met by Iran taking this action.

I made a case on humanitarian grounds for all the dual nationals in their various situations: some had medical problems that needed treatment and care and, of course, Nazanin was separated from her young daughter. Lastly, I made the case that it would open up the opportunity for a better relationship between us. In terms of physical efforts, raising the case, trying to find the right angle for the discussion and giving them the opportunity to make it their decision, which I thought was psychologically



important—those were the efforts that I, officials and the UK Government made.

Q2 **Chair:** All that is very useful background. Can you move on to why they failed?

**Alistair Burt:** I think that they failed, essentially, because it was up to the Iranian system to decide when to release the dual nationals. Nothing more, nothing less. It is up to them. It is not related to external pressure or anything else. Iran will release people when it is good and ready, straightforwardly. And it was not in a number of cases. It was in some others.

As the Committee will be aware, there were people detained during the period we are speaking about and released. Some are known to the British Government, and cases were dealt with privately. In some cases, the families involved had asked for no involvement from the British Government at all. In some cases, they wanted publicity, and in some cases they wanted no publicity. To my recollection, and looking at the notes, British officials responded to those requests from families appropriately. Not all efforts failed, but if you are asking me what the trigger is—what makes one thing successful and one not, I cannot give you an answer on that, because it seems to be purely arbitrary.

Q3 **Chair:** There was no common theme on successes and no common theme on failures?

**Alistair Burt:** I don't think so, no. If you could, you would then work all the time on the line most likely to get people released, but there was not. That is part of the system.

I would also add, as the Committee will know, the United Kingdom mostly deals with Ministry of Foreign Affairs. That is not the only centre of power, if it is a centre of power at all, in Iran. The key centre of power is, of course, the Supreme Leader, supported by the IRGC, the Revolutionary Guard. There is Parliament as a centre of power and there is, of course, the judiciary, and hardliners there. They all have authority, to some degree, in a very complex structure and system. The United Kingdom deals mostly with the external face of Iran, which is the MFA. We know all the time that we are not necessarily dealing with people who are making decisions, but they are our interlocutors.

In answer to your question, if we could, we would have found a single line and said, "If we do x, y and z, we will get results," but that was not the case. Of course, the unique feature for some years in relation to Iran and its hostages was the IMS debt, which we will get into.

Q4 **Chair:** We will come to that, but may I go back to some of the issues from the earlier stage? Let me absolutely clear: I think the sole responsibility for the detention, punishment and cruelty towards individuals such as Nazanin lies with the Iranian state. That is absolutely clear. However, questions arose at different points—you will remember them—including in 2017, when the impact of the words of the then



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Foreign Secretary, now Prime Minister, to the predecessor of this Committee were connected by the Iranian state to the treatment of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe. What is your assessment of those words? Were they actually relevant or was it just another excuse?

**Alistair Burt:** I have obviously thought long and hard about this. I think there were two main impacts. The first was in relation to Nazanin herself. She is by far the best narrator and advocate of how she felt about those words, as she has been saying over the weekend following her meeting with the Prime Minister last Friday, and I do not gainsay any of that. It was obviously devastating for her to hear what the then Foreign Secretary had mistakenly said to your predecessor Committee, and to have those words thrown back at her with all the implications that she spoke about over the weekend. I do not think for a second that any of us can deny that what she has said about that is absolutely correct and that she is articulating what she felt and what was said to her.

The second impact was the real impact on the Iranians themselves. That is more difficult to gauge. There would certainly be some who would seize upon what the Prime Minister—the Foreign Secretary at the time—said, say “Aha!” and use those words publicly to say, “We have this person bang to rights.” Those who knew the case would not be affected at all, because they would know that there was nothing in it. My overall impression was that, in the end, it did not make a huge amount of difference to those who were holding her. By that stage in 2017, it was perhaps becoming a little clearer that, as an individual, her case was attracting more attention, and that was attracting the attention of the Iranians. Why was this particular detainee getting such attention? Was it that she was more important than the British had previously let on?

It was impossible for us to tell whether those words had any impact on those who were holding her; we did not know. Did it completely change the nature of her case? No, I do not think it did. Was it used against her there by elements in the Iranian regime? Yes, of course it was. But did it ultimately make any difference to her case and to the date of her release? I do not believe so. I think that was conditioned by other factors.

Q5 **Chair:** Thank you. You will recall that on 14 November 2017, you had a meeting with our friend Tulip Siddiq, who is in the room behind you—welcome, Tulip. What is your recollection of that meeting with Tulip and the Ratcliffe family?

**Alistair Burt:** It is not much. I looked at the minutes last Friday at the now FCDO, and they were fairly straightforward. It was an opportunity for the then Foreign Secretary to explain what he had said and to tell the family and Tulip Siddiq that clearly he had got it wrong in what he had said.

I have seen the report referred to, but I don't have copious personal notes of that meeting. I have no reason to disbelieve the recollection and what Richard Ratcliffe said about it afterwards. If I left the meeting abruptly, I probably had another meeting to go to. Was I frustrated at what the Prime



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Minister had said? Yes, I was, of course, because I knew it didn't reflect what the situation was.

However, I thought that the meeting was, broadly, pretty constructive, and my understanding was that Richard felt that as well, in trying to explain the background and also explain what the renewed efforts of Boris Johnson would be going forward. He was due to go to Tehran quite soon afterwards, and therefore it was setting the scene for that.

If I recall the meeting correctly, it was a meeting to discuss everything that we knew about Nazanin's case at the time, explain the background to the remarks at the Foreign Affairs Committee and say that they were wrong, and give an impression that we would continue to do everything we could after that. Beyond that, I don't really remember anything else particularly about it.

- Q6 **Chair:** The FCDO's approach was predominantly to alternate between quiet and loud, or rather to choose one or the other. Do you think that the public comments made by Ministers were consistent with the approach?

**Alistair Burt:** Yes. First, as Tulip Siddiq is here, I would say to her, as I think she knows, I very much appreciated the efforts she was making with her constituent, on her constituent's behalf. I hope I tried to give her appropriate private time to explain that there were sometimes occasions in the House of Commons when I could not say everything publicly that I would say elsewhere. I think this Committee would appreciate that as well. It may mean that in my evidence to you there may be things that I don't say either. Remember, everything that we say here will be read very carefully in Tehran, so I am conscious of that.

I tried, therefore, to maintain a consistent approach when I was speaking. As far as I could, I tried not to link publicly the IMS debt with any of the dual national cases. I emphasised what we were trying to do on behalf of the dual nationals. There was an agreed position. Remember, I was the Minister of State. There was a Secretary of State, there was a Prime Minister and there was an agreed position of the British Government in relation to dual nationals, and I agreed with that approach. I did all I could to support it, believing that consistent engagement and trying all the different approaches that I mentioned a couple of minutes ago, and that officials mentioned, was the best way of achieving action, because it was against a background, as I say, where some people were being released and others were not, so you keep on trying.

I hope I maintained a consistent line, even if, in relation to the linkage, I may have been saying things in the House of Commons, whereas I may have been writing something slightly different privately and internally to colleagues in the FCO, which I think is a perfectly responsible position for a Minister to have.

- Q7 **Chair:** You have sort of covered this, but just before I hand over to Royston, to be clear, do you think there are any factors that may have



expedited hostage releases before they happened?

**Alistair Burt:** There is one, as we will go on to talk about—the IMS debt.

**Chair:** We will come to that in a second.

**Alistair Burt:** As far as other things are concerned, really no. There was local contact. Because we are dealing with dual nationals, by that very definition they have family in Iran, and family in Iran were also involved in making representations to Iranian authorities. As I indicated earlier, there were some occasions where those known to the UK were told by the families, “Leave this be. Don’t get involved. Don’t emphasise the British side. We will deal with the Iranian authorities ourselves.” Sometimes that may have been a more successful approach.

It is also important to remember that everything was pretty well calculated, and is calculated, to put pressure on those who do not agree with the regime in order to give the regime an advantage. So if there was discomfort for the British Government, that was not a problem for those in Tehran who did not wish us well. It was a problem for those in Tehran who did and do wish us well and want to see a different relationship. We were all the time operating in that difficult atmosphere.

Was there any other single thing that we could have tried? There was already economic pressure on Iran through various sanctions. The United Kingdom had been forthright in its support of JCPOA. We had been forthright in saying that, even if the Americans walk away, we would stick with it.

I was told by the Iranians, “No, you won’t. The Americans will tell you to leave. Of course you will leave. You’re British. You always do what the Americans say.” I said, “No, we will stick to our element of the JCPOA. We will do our best within what will be a new sanctions regime from the Americans.” We tried everything we could to give the Iranians the sense that we wanted to work with them, and that it would be a good thing for that mutual relationship if there was no impediment through the dual nationals and if their cases had been dealt with. I really, really tried, and I know officials and others tried as well.

**Chair:** Can we come on to the IMS debt? Royston, you wanted to ask about that.

Q8 **Royston Smith:** Your argument for the IMS debt being paid earlier is well documented and known, but does the payment of the debt with the simultaneous release of the detainees make it more likely that future hostage situations will be worse and that it will be more difficult to get people released? Will it be seen as a ransom?

**Alistair Burt:** I take the position that this debt was unique. If the family had come to me asking the United Kingdom to pay a ransom, I would have said no. I would say no now. The United Kingdom must not pay ransoms. All you do then is put other people at risk. We know other states pay ransoms—sometimes those that do not talk about it. I would be firmly





against that. This was a unique situation. The Committee will know the background and history of the debt, so I will not go into it, but, for other people who are listening, it goes back many years to the start of the Iranian revolution. The key salient points were that the dispute between Iran and the United Kingdom had been settled by a court of arbitration, which had ruled against the United Kingdom's position. Accordingly, we had an international judgment against us that we should pay. It is Foreign Office policy—it was, and I think it still is—to settle debts in such a way that the United Kingdom is on the right side of the law.

It was complicated—rightly complicated—by the fact that the debt was originally owed to the MODSAF, the defence establishment in Iran, which was under sanctions post the revolution and post other matters. Legally, although we had a judgment against us, we could not pay it. We therefore had to try all sorts of things to get round those sanctions.

One of the most important elements, as I am sure the Committee is aware, was that in November 2017, Foreign Minister Zarif wrote to the Foreign Office and said, "As far as Iran is concerned, this money is no longer owed to the defence industry. It is owed to the Central Bank of Iran, and I can assure you that this money will be used for civil purposes in Iran." Insofar as you can, notwithstanding the fact that everything that goes into a Government is ultimately fungible, the Foreign Office accepted that this assurance was as straightforward as it could get.

So we had a debt that we owed. We had an assurance that the money was not going to a sanctioned entity. It seemed that people were agreed that it ought to be paid, and we were looking for a mechanism to do it. Mr Smith—Royston; we are all among friends—it is unique. That situation does not exist, as far as I am aware, anywhere else. So, in answer to your question, I do not think this does provide an opening for others to say, "The British are going to pay ransoms." As I say, others do. We do not, and we must not, and I hope this Committee would endorse that. Had that been the case, I would not have supported the payment.

**Q9 Royston Smith:** Did the MoD and Treasury have consistent positions on whether or not the money should be paid, and did their positions change over time? Did it begin to align with your stated position?

**Alistair Burt:** This is where we get into some stuff I genuinely do not know, which I am sure will be part of the Committee's inquiry. Both the Treasury and the Ministry of Defence had reasons not to support the payment of the debt.

The Treasury, in the first place, was understandably concerned about whether or not it was a breach of sanctions. It had to safeguard the UK's banking reputation. We knew that after the Americans left JCPOA they introduced new sanctions, and these were very far-reaching—really far-reaching. They affected countries way beyond the Americans' jurisdiction—it was another element of poor judgment by the Trump Administration. The Treasury was concerned that any payment through a banking system





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would affect others in the British banking system. It was worried about that, so it looked long and hard.

I saw in my notes, which I confirmed to myself on Friday, that at various stages the Chancellor was looking at the licence position. The Treasury seemed to look at it for a long time and I was not aware of all the deliberations. I made my feelings known, but I was not part of the discussions.

It was right that the Treasury was concerned. Again, at the end of this conversation, I am interested in what changed that enabled the Treasury to pay that it was not possible to change three, four or five years earlier.

The Ministry of Defence was understandably concerned that £400 million or so going to Iran would end up in weaponry. Iran's activity in the region is well known to this Committee. We and others applied sanctions to try and limit arms going to Iran and its ability to use arms in the region, not always very successfully, but the Ministry of Defence was concerned that if money found its way to the IRGC, it could be used in weaponry that would ultimately find itself pitted against UK nationals and UK forces. It was not unreasonable for the Ministry of Defence to raise that case.

I discussed it with Gavin Williamson when Gavin was the Minister—

**Chair:** Defence Secretary.

**Alistair Burt:** Sorry—when he was Defence Secretary. I wrote to Boris Johnson in May of 2018—

**Chair:** When he was Foreign Secretary.

**Alistair Burt:** As this is a letter from me to the Foreign Secretary, I do not believe it is over-privileged; it just explains what I felt: "I had a conversation with Gavin Williamson yesterday. He confirms he will not support a decision to return the IMS money to Iran. I think this is a decision he has taken in principle. Accordingly, no further attempt at persuasion or delay is appropriate. I repeat therefore to the Foreign Secretary my view that the Prime Minister should be asked to make the decision, and as soon as possible. The Defence Secretary has also said he would accept being overruled."

So, quite rightly, in Cabinet, the Defence Secretary was making his concern known, but it was a view that could be overruled by others.

I did not share the view of the Ministry of Defence because there was no apparent shortage of weaponry going to Iran one way or another—£400 million is a lot of money, but at the end of the day, it is dwarfed by a normal state's budget, and I thought there were more compelling reasons to pay the debt than not. If the Ministry of Defence position was to be that of the British Government, this debt would never, ever be repaid, or at least not as far as anyone could see into the future. It also meant completely discounting the view of the Foreign Minister of Iran, which the British Government had specifically asked for in relation to the assurance.



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So I made my views clear to all Foreign Secretaries, from when I returned to office—Boris Johnson, Jeremy Hunt—and then when I left office—Dominic Raab and Liz Truss. They were all consistent in my belief, which had grown over time, that repayment of the debt would be an assistance to the relationship between the UK and Iran, and also in relation to dual nationals.

Now, I genuinely do not know why the Treasury took so long to come to its view, whether it was consistent and what in 2021 made it change its mind. I was not certain, and I was probably unfair to Gavin Williamson. I thought he might have changed his position that he would not get in the way of a decision. That might have been me being unfair to him, but the Ministry of Defence's position was, as I said and as I believed, that it did not like it but would not get in the way. I do not know, at the end of the day, whether it did get in the way.

I do not know the answer to the question that I think is central to what the Committee is looking at. That question is why, when it became clear after some time—certainly after Gavin Williamson left—that the Foreign Secretary, Prime Minister and Secretary of State for Defence all wanted it to be paid, it was never paid from about 2019 onwards? To what extent their positions changed, Royston, I genuinely do not know. I think that is one of the questions that dual national families and ourselves are entitled to know the answer to—if senior Ministers feel able to give us one.

**Q10 Royston Smith:** Can I just ask one more thing? We cannot easily understand what was going on in our own Government, why decisions were not made earlier or why people changed their minds. From your meetings with Iranian Ministers and others, what sort of sense did you get of their position or thought process about what we thought and what was going on here?

**Alistair Burt:** Two things. It was my impression that the significance of the debt grew in the time that I was involved—2017 through 2019. I am not sure I could tell you exactly why. They read our media and newspapers; it was out there. They would tell me officially, and very clearly, that there was no linkage between the two. I would tell them there was no linkage between the two. There was no conniving between us. Both states took that view publicly, and both would repeat it to each other. None the less, in a conversation with Iran about bilateral issues, consular issues would be discussed, and then the next paragraph would perhaps be the IMS as a bilateral issue.

The issue for the Iranians became this, not least after the Americans left the JCPOA: "We, the Iranians, signed up to an international agreement. We are still in that international agreement. One of the parties—your friend—has left this international agreement, although they say publicly that we have not been in breach of its terms, and the International Atomic Energy Agency says that we have not been in breach of its terms. In return for us sticking to our legal agreement, the Americans have imposed maximum pressure sanctions upon us. You, the British, are asking us to stay in this agreement, even though all this has happened to us. At the



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same time that you are asking us to do this, you have a legal judgment against you, in our favour, that you are not doing anything about. Help us out here." That is what they would say, effectively. The relationship with Abbas Araghchi was about at that level. He had to answer to the hard-line authorities.

Of course, once a mental link was being made between the two, even though it was not public, it was going to be very, very hard for anyone to convince the hardliners holding any of the dual nationals that releasing them without this payment being satisfied was in any way justifiable as far as they looked at the world. So it got more and more difficult. As I say, the position between Ministers, the response of the Ministers and the interlocutors I dealt with was always the same.

We tried to work round it; there were two ways of looking at it. One was, "Why don't you release the dual nationals and then see what happens, because it would make the relationship so much easier?" The other was, "Why don't you pay the money first and then you see what happens?" If you look at it from two different points of view, you see why we get into that situation.

Remember that we are dealing with some in another Government who do not see any point in doing anything that will be to the advantage of the British Government and enable them to be seen in a better light—quite the contrary. In all this, we had to deal with the bilateral relationship and the other aspects I have mentioned.

What was in the brief every time—often at the top of the agenda—were the circumstances surrounding the dual nationals, the reasons why they needed to be released and any other of their conditions and medical issues that were affecting them at the time. This was all going on at the same time. The background of this owed debt not linked in any way to this, in my view, gradually assumed more and more importance, which is why I consistently advised successive Foreign Secretaries, "Pay it and let's see what happens, because we ought to pay it anyway."

**Q11 Royston Smith:** When we all became aware of dual nationals being detained, the IMS debt was not the only thing we talked about, but then it was. It then became more of a thing, and I suppose we were all linking the two ourselves. How did we get there and what did the Iranians think about us then speaking about the debt being linked to the detainees?

**Alistair Burt:** I suppose it is a bit like those moments in American dramas in the courtroom when somebody says something and the defence counsel leaps up and says, "I want that struck from the record" and the judge says, "Agreed. Objection sustained." The jury has heard everything. Once people are talking about the two things, how do you get that out of people's minds? All I can say, and I suppose it is part of diplomacy all over the world, is that there was a very clear agreement between the United Kingdom and Iran that the two issues were not linked. We made that clear and the Iranians made that clear to us. None the less, this debt had to be paid and it assumed importance for them.



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Other things would flow from the relationship one way or another, but it was something that was legally owed. I suppose because of the talk about it, it got seemingly more and more linked. I am being honest with you that I thought there was a link much earlier. That was why I advised Boris Johnson in the run-up to the JCPOA negotiations, "I think our task with Iran will be easier if we have paid this, because we are asking them to stick to an agreement in the event that the Americans walk away."

When the Americans did walk away, I advised Jeremy Hunt that "We should repay the debt, because we are now trying to hold them to an agreement that they have not walked away from, and I think it would be better if we have done this", and then subsequently with Dominic and Liz Truss. I suspect that there were others who also thought the link was growing.

I did my best to keep it out of anything public—I really did. I do not think you will find me saying anything that would suggest anything to the contrary. Equally, once it is out there and once you have to defend questions in the House of Commons when somebody says, "Why don't you pay the debt? This must be a part of it", and I have to stand there and say, "Well, no. It's not", it is very difficult.

**Q12 Liam Byrne:** It is nice to see you again. I am just getting my head round the chain of decision making, so just a few rapid-fire questions, if that is okay. It sounds like between December 2017 and May 2018 when you wrote to the Foreign Secretary, there was a crystallisation within the Foreign Office of the view that the debt should be paid. Is that a fair starting point?

**Alistair Burt:** It was certainly my view. The Foreign Office advice and officials' advice was consistent: these two are not linked, don't link them.

**Q13 Liam Byrne:** But you put your view to the Foreign Secretary that the debt should be paid. Did the Foreign Secretary agree with you?

**Alistair Burt:** Clearly, he was not persuaded. He remained very clear, as the official line was, that they were not linked, but I know that over time he sought, as did his successors, to find a way round this. I think Boris Johnson started that, but I am afraid I can't be certain. I don't want to put him or myself in any difficulties over that—I can't remember.

**Q14 Liam Byrne:** Did either you, as the Minister of State, or the Foreign Secretary, as a member of the Cabinet, ever ask the Treasury, formally in correspondence, to green-light a decision—authorise a decision—to pay the debt?

**Alistair Burt:** You'd have to ask the Foreign Secretary about that. I know very clearly that Jeremy Hunt was very active on trying to find ways round the sanctions issue, so he and officials had obviously raised it with the Treasury. I was not personally in discussion with the Treasury. I think I did one meeting with them—I have got notes on that—but I wasn't part of the discussions really.

**Q15 Liam Byrne:** Did the American Government—the US State Department or



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Secretary Pompeo, for example—ever weigh in on the decision making?

**Alistair Burt:** Not from any documents that I saw, but it was always in the background that the Americans would be unhappy about paying the debt. Secretary of State Pompeo certainly took a very strong view on this, I can recall, because, of course, they believed that the only way forward with Iran was maximum pressure and maximum sanctions.

The reason they had such far-reaching financial sanctions was to try and cut off any financial support going to Iran, so it was not unnatural that they would have regarded the payment of £350 million or £400 million as something that would undermine their position. I was in no doubt about that, but it was nothing to do with them—not least because the Americans also pay ransoms.

Q16 **Liam Byrne:** Were you aware of representations that the US State Department made to the UK?

**Alistair Burt:** I am not aware of anything official—there may be—but it was sort of felt. We knew the Americans would be unhappy. It was probably expressed through Treasury and financial sanctions, because the financial implications of getting on the wrong side—not of the politics in America, but of legal sanctions in America—is pretty serious and companies in the UK are entitled to take that seriously.

Q17 **Liam Byrne:** You were known as a Minister with immense integrity. Did you ever protest or argue about the delay in a decision being taken with Treasury?

**Alistair Burt:** I made my views clear. It wasn't a constant running commentary. I don't believe you could speak to any of the Foreign Secretaries and say, "Did Alistair Burt believe or not that the debt should be paid?" and get any other answer than "Yes, he believed at an early stage it should be." I pressed that case, but, at the end of the day, it wasn't mine to make.

At first, all sorts of reasons were put back about the technical problems. These, genuinely, I understood. It wasn't going to be easy for Treasury to agree this. I fully accepted that there were difficulties on sanctions, beyond my immediate portfolio that had to be dealt with. I just assumed that, yes, these take time—but once there is a commitment and a willingness to do it, can we get round them? That covered the first part of my time, from 2017 onwards.

As I say, I am pretty sure that that is broadly where it was when Foreign Secretary Johnson was there. It was with Treasury, and Treasury were dealing with the Zarif note, which came in in Boris Johnson's time, so he was obviously looking for ways round this. They were all trying to get on with it and it was obviously difficult and complex, and then, certainly, I know that Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt was looking at alternatives to payment—payments in kind and the like.



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All that was going on. I was frustrated, but I didn't think there was anything further I could have done. If there was, then I am sorry, and I wish I could have done more.

Q18 **Liam Byrne:** Were creative options like paying the debt in medicines, for example, explored?

**Alistair Burt:** Yes. I know that Foreign Secretary Hunt did this.

Q19 **Liam Byrne:** But they came to nothing.

**Alistair Burt:** No, they didn't.

Q20 **Liam Byrne:** The Ministry of Defence and IMS used the court system in lots of ways for a long period of time to delay this settlement. Was there ever a political conversation or any political oversight about the way that IMS used the courts to halt this payment?

**Alistair Burt:** There is a wrinkle here, and that is that the Iranians did not always operate at full speed either. There were plenty of occasions when I was told that a court hearing had been delayed because of a request from the Iranians. There was a dispute over the amount of interest at a late stage. Iran did not always pursue through the courts a situation that would have expedited a result, so we had that going on in the background, because I would know a court date was due and I would say, "How are we going to get on?" and so on; "Oh, it's been postponed at the request of the Iranians." So there was something else going on there, so that's also to be factored in.

Did I have any political oversight over the IMS case? No, I did not. Did anyone else? I don't know.

Q21 **Chair:** Can I put on record our enormous thanks to you for coming back and talking to us about this? I reiterate Liam's words and say that the respect in which you are held in the Foreign Office has not diminished in the years you have been absent, nor has the respect in which you are held in this House. Thank you very much indeed.

**Alistair Burt:** That is very kind. Could I offer just one more thing, if I may? I am not able to reproduce any of the letters I wrote while I was Minister, but I want to put on record that, even when I left, I did keep this going.

I wrote to the Prime Minister and to the Foreign Secretary on 2 October 2019, when I was still in the House but had left the Department, taking advantage of a recent meeting I had had with Abbas Araghchi in my role as UK commissioner for the International Commission on Missing Persons, to again press the case. I am happy to let the Committee have a copy of that letter and the reply that came from the Foreign Secretary in answer to it.

**Chair:** That would be very kind.

**Alistair Burt:** I wrote to Liz Truss when she was appointed, asking for her help. Again, I got a reply. Obviously, something happened. I am not





claiming in any way it was as a result of any letters, but I was consistent in thinking this would do the trick. I know there are plenty who could argue, "Well, it might, or it might not." In the event, the money was paid and there have been some releases, though not all, which goes to the heart of what you were saying at the beginning, Chair.

This is not a one-off in relation to one or two particular dual nationals. This still goes on. It is a wrong policy from Iran; it has to be stopped. In the unique circumstances of this debt, this made it a little bit more difficult for us. Your work in trying to prevent hostage taking and in getting Iran to see a different position for its future is absolutely vital, and I wish you all well in relation to that. I will let the Clerk have these two letters.

**Q22 Chair:** You just raised something that triggered something in my mind as a very last question before we come to Jeremy Hunt, who has very kindly agreed to be here.

The decision on how to approach different individuals, some of whom had different nationalities, was one that you had to judge very carefully. How did you decide which ones you would assist with and which ones you would not?

**Alistair Burt:** Often it was in relation to the families. The families would be approached. Obviously, we have a group of colleagues in the office who deal with this, as well as those at post. Families would be approached and they would sometimes agree and say, "We are very happy for you to be dealing with it quietly." Others, as in Richard's case, would want us to do all we could, but believed he could also add to that.

Some families contacted us and said, "Someone has been taken. We don't want you to have anything to do with this at all. Leave it to us. We are their Iranian family" and so on. It is mostly in relation to the detainee's family, who must be some of the most important determinants in all this, not a British Government decision.

**Chair:** Thank you very much indeed, Alistair. I am extremely grateful for your time. We will pause there.

## Examination of witness

Witness: Rt Hon Jeremy Hunt MP.

**Q23 Chair:** Welcome back to the Foreign Affairs Committee. This afternoon, we are very lucky to have with us Jeremy Hunt, who, before chairing the Health and Social Care Committee, was the Foreign Secretary.

Jeremy, thank you very much for coming in and helping us with this. Your work in supporting the families, in particular Richard Ratcliffe and Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, goes before you. I know that many people are very grateful for that work. We are going to approach these questions to try to understand where the Government could have done more and what items could have helped. How did the Government's approach to





supporting families change during your time in office?

**Jeremy Hunt:** I think it did change, but first of all I would like to thank you for doing this inquiry. Although it did change, the process of change was too long. It is a terrible injustice that it took six years to get Nazanin home. Anoosheh was there for a very long time. Morad is still there.

Even though we are all delighted that Nazanin and Anoosheh are home, I don't think the British state can look on the totality of what happened with any pride at all. We weren't responsible for the wrong that was committed; that was wholly Iran's fault. However, we—including myself as Foreign Secretary—have to be honest that it took far too long to resolve this situation. Ultimately, it was a curious combination of tremendously successful diplomacy in the final furlong, under Liz Truss, that secured the aligning of things that got Nazanin and Anoosheh home. Preceding that was a tremendous failure that took too long.

So, what changed? The Foreign Office has tremendous respect for the right of elected officials to make the final call on judgments such as this. In my experience, it is not Sir Humphrey-like, with officials wanting to organise the Foreign Secretary to think in their way. It was genuinely, "How do you feel about this issue, Foreign Secretary? How much priority do you want to give it?"

The fundamental question was whether or not it was a ransom payment. We all knew that Iran was saying there was a link to the debt. The first thing I needed to do was get my head around that. Had I believed it was a ransom payment, very sadly I would not have supported paying it. However, I concluded that it was not a ransom payment; it was a debt that we owed. None the less, it was totally outrageous for Iran to link a debt that we owed to the fate of innocent individuals.

Q24 **Chair:** For the sake of argument, can I challenge that and say that, surely, the perception of whether it was a ransom was a matter for the Iranian Government? Surely how they treated the debt and what they linked it to was the important element, not how you saw it. Am I wrong about that?

**Jeremy Hunt:** I think there is a difference between someone kidnapping someone and demanding a ransom payment, and hostage diplomacy, which is what Iran was doing: where it had a diplomatic disagreement—in this case, about a debt. But it's a narrow line; I fully accept that.

But there is a line, and the reason there's a line is that there was an element where Britain was in the wrong. There was a debt, dating back to the Shah's time, of £400 million, which we had not paid. So, unlike a pure hostage situation, where one side is wholly in the wrong and the other side is wholly in the right, this was fundamentally more complex. But I still fundamentally believed that it should not have been linked.

It's totally outrageous to say, if two countries have a dispute, that the way we are going to solve it is to take someone hostage. I believed very



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strongly at the start that we should try to find a way of resolving this separate to the debt. That was one issue.

The second issue was the extent to which we wished to prioritise bringing home an innocent Brit or innocent Brits, as opposed to all the other things you use up diplomatic capital for. And that, again, is something the Foreign Office very much leaves to the discretion of the Foreign Secretary. There are lots of things that we have to talk to Iran about, JCPOA being the most obvious, but there is the supporting of terrorism in Syria, Yemen and Lebanon. They are also very important things.

To what extent did we want to prioritise this? And I think that we were getting it wrong in terms of the institutional priorities. I think there was a view that this was one of a number of priorities. My feeling was that if we believe that Britain's role in the world is to stand up for democracy, liberal values and human rights, this is actually an incredibly important thing to sort out, because it demonstrates our belief, and our values, that every single citizen matters.

We are not the kind of country that says it's okay to accept that some citizens will be imprisoned or killed because that's a sort of collateral damage. That's the way people like Putin think about their own citizens; we don't. So I did say, "Look, this is a very big priority for me," and then proceeded to try to work out how I could progress the issue.

**Q25 Chair:** You set up the MacGregor review into special consular cases. How did that work, and what was its impact?

**Jeremy Hunt:** My reason for setting that review up was very simple. I said, "How many other Nazanins are there?" We had a blanket policy that we don't second-guess the judicial systems of other countries, even in a case like Iran, because we don't know the details.

If someone, for example, has been imprisoned for drug smuggling in Thailand or Indonesia and may be facing the death penalty, it's understandable that diplomats say, "Look, we aren't courts. We can't make a judgment about whether Liam Byrne is guilty of that terrible drug smuggling"—sorry to use your name in vain, Liam.

**Chair:** Just for the record, Liam is not seriously accused of any drug smuggling.

**Jeremy Hunt:** That was an understandable approach that the FCO, as it was called then, took. But I said, "Come on. We have to have a judgment here. There are people who our diplomats on the ground have a pretty strong suspicion are innocent, and we should be doing something. We can't just hide behind this idea that we don't second-guess court judgments."

So, when I went to UNGA in September of 2018, I said publicly that Nazanin was innocent. And I didn't realise that it was a very big deal. I was the first person to publicly say Nazanin was innocent. But the reason was that all my predecessors had been advised, "You can't make a



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judgment on someone's innocence or guilt." So that's why I set up the MacGregor review—to look at these issues, and basically to find out who else's freedom we should be pushing very hard for across the world. And that review came up with some very helpful guidelines in terms of the approach that the FCDO should take going forward.

Q26 **Chair:** The impact, though, on how you approached it in—how it changed the way you dealt with it in the Department. Was it one of the key elements that enabled you to change your stance and change the way the FCO acted, or was it a confirmation of the way you were going already?

**Jeremy Hunt:** Sorry, can you say that question again? I am not sure I understood it.

Q27 **Chair:** The MacGregor review that you set up—was it a confirmation of the direction you were going in already, or was it instrumental in changing the way you thought about it?

**Jeremy Hunt:** I wanted to change the way we thought about it. I wanted to change the policy of saying, "We do not comment on or get involved in judicial processes," but I wanted to do it in a structured way that stood the test of time. I did not just want it to be this Foreign Secretary's priorities; I wanted to institutionalise a change, which is why I set up the review.

Q28 **Chair:** In terms of the Government's approach to the cases of those held in Iran, did you consider quiet diplomacy to be effective in these state-based hostage situations?

**Jeremy Hunt:** I understood why the Foreign Office usually advised people not to go public, because they wanted quiet diplomacy to have a chance to succeed. But by the time I arrived in the Foreign Office, Nazanin had already been a hostage for two years—

**Chair:** And it was already quite noisy.

**Jeremy Hunt:** And there were others who had been in prison for some time, and I was sceptical. I could not see any evidence that it made any difference that Richard Ratcliffe had gone public, compared with other families that we now know about but did not at the time who had not gone public and were also remaining in prison.

In fact, I was nervous about this advice to keep it quiet because when I went to Tehran as part of my efforts to secure the release of Nazanin, Anoosheh and Morad, the British ambassador held a reception—a drinks party—for other ambassadors from other countries who also had dual nationals who had been detained in Iran. I will not say the names of those countries because it is for those countries, but it astonished me how many ambassadors came.

This is a big issue, and it is thanks to the courage of Richard Ratcliffe and Nazanin, because they took this decision together and the world came to find out about hostage diplomacy. If Richard had not done the incredibly



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brave thing that he did, we would not have known about what was going on. I think he has done a huge favour to everyone.

**Q29 Chair:** I certainly think the whole Committee, and I am sure the whole House, would agree with the enormous courage that Richard and Nazanin have shown. The reason we are looking at this report is not just for them, because as you know very well, there is an Australian citizen, and we know of other citizens of other countries who are now either on their release or still in their detention, making public the suffering they have been put under.

We have spoken already with Alistair about one of your predecessors' comments and how that may or may not have been received and what the impact was. What do you think was the impact of your approach to public communication on the treatment of detainees? For example, some have linked your tweet of 23 August 2018 relating to Nazanin to her subsequent arrest on 26 August. Did you consult FCO officials, as they were then, about the wording of that tweet?

**Jeremy Hunt:** I am certain that I would have. I cannot exactly remember but I do not think I ever would have done a tweet without their approval, and they would have given me very frank and excellent advice, as they always did, about the risks and potential benefits of any public pronouncement on the issue.

My judgment was partly conditioned by the experience that I had as Health Secretary, where I found that the NHS as an institution, sometimes without meaning to, shut out ordinary people who had complaints or problems. My instinct in this case was to listen to and be guided by Richard, because I thought he had the most skin in the game of everyone I was talking to.

My approach to securing the freedom of Nazanin, Anoosheh and Morad changed in a way. I started by saying, "Let's try the quiet diplomacy." I had a half-hour one-to-one meeting with the Iranian Foreign Minister Zarif at the United Nations. I went to Tehran. All that was designed to try to build up chemistry with him, but I always said, "You need to understand that the status quo is not an option. I am making an effort. We are spending half an hour talking mainly about dual-national detention. I have come all the way to Tehran to talk about this, and I am listening to all the other things you want to talk about, but in the end, if nothing happens, there will be consequences."

And nothing happened, so I felt I had to demonstrate that I meant it. I started with the travel ban on all dual nationals going to Iran, which I thought was a blindingly obvious thing to do anyway, because if they were still taking dual nationals, the last thing you would want is for other British dual nationals to go to Iran. The Iranians were not happy with that because it had an economic impact on them as dual nationals tend to be people with the strongest economic links.

The next stage, when there was still no progress, was to agree diplomatic protection for Nazanin—a largely symbolic change, but it was an important



one. Again, I took that very much following the advice of Richard, who is an incredibly thoughtful man, very ably supported by his MP, Tulip Siddiq, who was a huge voice in campaigning for Nazanin's freedom. That was because I felt there should be no consequences, but again, that did not change anything<sup>1</sup>, so I concluded that we really did have to settle this debt and that that was the morally right thing to do because we owed the money.

I then started really pushing on that inside Government. Unfortunately, I was not around for long enough to see that through, but that was what I was absolutely determined to do.

**Q30 Chair:** And after all that, you did not use the term "hostage". Why not?

**Jeremy Hunt:** I don't think I consciously didn't use the word "hostage". I was mindful of the fact that there was a relationship with the Foreign Ministry, and I was trying to negotiate the release of our dual nationals. I was looking to see whether there was a way that we could sequence it so that at least if we did pay the debt, we knew that we would get the dual nationals back. Maybe I was a little mindful of my language as a result of that, but I was prepared to call a spade a spade and say that Nazanin and the others were innocent.

**Q31 Henry Smith:** Thank you very much for being with us today, Jeremy. You touched a moment ago on the considerations that you went through in deciding to extend diplomatic protection to Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe. Why was that diplomatic protection not extended to some of the others who were taken hostage by the Iranian regime?

**Jeremy Hunt:** I was guided by the families. I had regular meetings with the Tahbaz family and the Ashoori family. It was Richard Ratcliffe who requested diplomatic protection; I did not get that request from the other families. The other families asked my advice candidly as to whether they should go public, and I had to be honest with them and say, "Look, in the end, this is a choice you have to make; I cannot make this choice for you. I can tell you that some people in the Foreign Office think going public will delay the release of your loved one. There are others who think that it increases the pressure. You have to make that choice."

I was advised, and I agreed, that diplomatic protection was a largely symbolic measure. Nothing would force Iran to act on the basis of that, but I think they were annoyed when we did it, and I wanted them to be annoyed, because I wanted them to know that we meant what we said when we said that there would be consequences, and I wanted to maximise their embarrassment.

**Q32 Henry Smith:** On the symbolic reality of granting diplomatic protection to Nazanin, do you think that sort of move could have been used more effectively in other ways?

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<sup>1</sup> Note by witness: When saying "I felt there should be no consequences", I misspoke. What I meant to say was: "I felt there *shouldn't* be no consequences".



**Jeremy Hunt:** Yes. It was the only time when I genuinely woke up in the middle of the night wondering if it was the right thing to do—that was the night before we announced it. I had a wonderful private secretary travelling with me—it was in Scotland—and I confessed to her that I was worried that there could be an immediate lengthening of Nazanin’s sentence, or something like that, in retaliation. I told my private secretary that I had not been sleeping very well, and she said nor had she, because we were both worried. However, Richard was very clear that it was what he wanted and what she wanted. Once I had satisfied myself that they were alive to those risks I thought, okay, this is what we are going to do.

Q33 **Henry Smith:** Talking about irritating the Iranian regime with that move, when you summoned the Iranian ambassador over the case, I think in January 2019, what was the reaction from the Iranian Government?

**Jeremy Hunt:** He just looked blank and impassive, and I presume he thought we were going through the diplomatic motions. But I was very angry that we weren’t making any progress. In fact, things were going in the wrong direction, if anything. I thought there was a callous disregard for innocent people. It was very striking to me that not once in all my discussions did the Iranian authorities publicly or privately say that Nazanin was guilty. They did not try and go through the pretence that this is someone who has been convicted in a court and is a spy. They knew perfectly well that she was wholly innocent, and that just made me feel even more strongly that we had to do something about it.

Q34 **Henry Smith:** As a result of that summoning, what was the mood and response in Tehran? Did it change the trajectory of the case in any significant way?

**Jeremy Hunt:** I do not think so. What became clear from my visit to Iran was that there was one thing and one thing only that would secure the release of those dual nationals and that was the payment of the debt. I concluded that we should do that.

**Henry Smith:** That is very clear, thank you.

Q35 **Liam Byrne:** We have heard from Alistair that between December 2017 and May 2018 he concluded that the debt probably had to be paid. He was making that argument internally. You became Foreign Secretary July 9, 2018; you described it to UNGA in December of that year. You summoned the ambassador in January 2019 and extended diplomatic protection in March 2019. I just want to pin this down, but I think you said that you had concluded after that that the debt probably had to be paid if there was to be any progress. Can you put a rough date on when that conclusion crystalised in your mind?

**Jeremy Hunt:** I was never against the debt being repaid, but I tried every other avenue. I think that after about nine months of trying every other avenue I concluded that this was the only thing that was going to break the log jam and so I started pushing harder in my internal Government discussions.



Q36 **Liam Byrne:** That is spring 2019?

**Jeremy Hunt:** I would guess it was around there.

Q37 **Liam Byrne:** How did you then prosecute that argument inside Government? Did you ever write to the Treasury formally?

**Jeremy Hunt:** No, I don't believe I did. I spoke to Philip Hammond, and I raised the issue at Cabinet-level discussions. I think that there was no opposition in principle at that stage. I think that the Government had moved, actually, and I had certainly come to the conclusion that the debt was not a ransom, and we could pay it in clean conscience. I think looking back on it is easy to do with the benefit of hindsight, but the real diplomatic failure was allowing this £400 million debt to go on for 40 years. There must have been many opportunities, prior to Nazanin being taken captive, for it to be paid. The fact that we let it fester on created the opportunities for the Iranians to do this. If there was a failure, it was that.

Q38 **Liam Byrne:** So between spring '19, when the decision had crystallised in your mind, and July '19, when you changed jobs—

**Jeremy Hunt:** Euphemistically put.

**Liam Byrne:** The consensus crystallised within Government that this was good to go—the debt should be paid.

**Jeremy Hunt:** That might be pushing it a bit. It was certainly my judgment that it should be paid. I was pursuing discussions very actively with Philip Hammond as to how it might happen. The Treasury were obviously the people who would know how you could pay a debt like that without incurring financial sanctions. Zarif himself had suggested to me that we could send £400 million-worth of medicine as a potential way of doing it.

Q39 **Liam Byrne:** That was proposed to you.

**Jeremy Hunt:** That was one of the ideas that he had said to me. Of course, he was not ultimately calling the shots—the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Iran was not calling the shots. We were looking at all these options, and work was being done.

Q40 **Liam Byrne:** Who is the “we” in that sentence? Is that FCO, or is that FCO plus HMT?

**Jeremy Hunt:** FCO was pushing HMT as to how we could solve this problem, and they were looking into it.

Q41 **Liam Byrne:** When you say they were looking into it, does that mean that Treasury officials were giving advice to Philip Hammond with judgments about whether to give you the green light or not?

**Jeremy Hunt:** I was not aware that there was any Sir Humphrey-like behind-the-scenes attempt to block this. I was aware, when I became Foreign Secretary, that there was a long-held position in the Ministry of Defence that the debt should not be paid, because—I can understand this—they were worried that Iran was an adversary funding terrorism in





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the Middle East, and they did not want them to have £400 million more to spend on terrorist activities.

But I would say that, during the course of that year, the Ministry of Defence position moved to a neutral reluctance that if the debt had to be paid, it had to be paid. That was the vibe from the Ministry of Defence, and the general feeling in Government by that spring was that if a way could be found to pay the debt, we should. The most enthusiastic bit of Government for paying the debt was the FCO, but other parts of Government were willing to see if there was a way it could be done.

- Q42 **Liam Byrne:** In the recesses of my mind, I remember as Chief Secretary having all sorts of interesting opportunities to spend money that came in from various members of the Cabinet. Normally what would happen is that the Chief Secretary would then commission advice from the Treasury to say, "Look, we obviously don't want to help this individual, but are there any good reasons that I can give them for not helping them?" You are not aware of any Treasury analysis or work that was undertaken to inform Philip Hammond's conversations with you about resolving this?

**Jeremy Hunt:** If the Treasury were trying to stop it, my officials would have said to me, "The Treasury are trying to stop this." Philip Hammond is a very black-and-white character. He was a former Foreign Secretary, and I think he had the view that this was a debt that Britain owed to Iran. He was also a former Defence Secretary, but I think his view was that a debt was a debt, so if there was a way that it could be settled that was not in breach of sanctions, he was willing to go along with it.

- Q43 **Liam Byrne:** The question that that leaves me—my final question—is that we at last have a Government that will not stand in the FCDO's way in settling this debt, if not a consensus. But there is then a very long period of time before the debt is settled, so the question becomes: why was the flash to bang so long? Why did it take so long between a consensus settling on Government and the decision finally being taken? Why do you think that period of time was so long?

**Jeremy Hunt:** You would have to ask my successors that question, because I do not know what was going on inside government. Obviously, I had stepped down from the Government at that point, but I think that it is something that will have required an enormous effort that was beyond the ability of one Government Department on its own to achieve. A lot of things had to be aligned: IMS under the control of MoD, the Treasury dealing with financial sanctions, FCO—FCDO as it then became—dealing with the diplomacy, and, crucially, the fact that the decision makers in Iran were not actually the Iranian Government that we were dealing with. It was the IRGC, whom we had no contact with, who reported to the Supreme Leader. So there was a lot of complexity in the situation, but I do not know why it took so long after that.

- Q44 **Liam Byrne:** Could it have been quicker?

**Jeremy Hunt:** You have to say yes. A woman was held innocently for six years, Anoosheh for nearly as long, Morad for years and he is still there. I



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am not sure that it is appropriate to blame any individual. I am not trying to do a plug here, although I have just written a book about the dangers of a blame culture, but I do think you have to have accountability. The British state has to say, "A terrible injustice was done against some of our citizens, and we just took too long to sort it out."

- Q45 **Liam Byrne:** Many of these big decisions take several Departments working together. There is machinery in government to do that—in the Cabinet Office and indeed in the National Security Council. I think that the story you have told us does not show that machinery working well. Is that a fair summary?

**Jeremy Hunt:** I am not trying to prevaricate here—

**Liam Byrne:** It is an open question. Honestly.

**Jeremy Hunt:** The Cabinet Office tends to take responsibility, as I am sure you will remember, for issues that are formally multi-departmental, such as preparing for pandemics. That is where they tend to have a formal responsibility. I do not think the Cabinet Office would have had a formal responsibility in a case like this.

- Q46 **Liam Byrne:** The NSC could.

**Jeremy Hunt:** Yes, potentially, if it was perceived to be linked to defence and security because of Iran's influence in the Middle East. This inquiry is very important because I think you need to come to a conclusion as to why it took so long—why it took too long.

- Q47 **Chair:** Can I come back to the questions about delays? It will have been before your time as Foreign Secretary, but you will remember that the US Government under, I believe, President Obama paid a similar debt for a similar shipment of weapons that was not delivered to the Shah's regime after the revolution. There was a suggestion that that money was effectively then spent on the war in Syria—on murdering, sadly, hundreds of thousands of Sunni Muslims—and in general violent activity around the region. Was the case for the blockage on the IMS debt made on a similar or connected basis to that?

**Jeremy Hunt:** I am guessing here, but I think it was the MoD's historic position on the issue that it should not be paid for that reason.

- Q48 **Royston Smith:** I have only one small question. It has niggled me for a long time, and I maybe should have asked Alistair while he was here. I was here when the former Foreign Secretary, now Prime Minister, said in a sort of flippant but almost innocently sounding way that, as far as he was aware, she was just teaching journalism or something. It has always puzzled me why he would have said that. Why didn't he say, "As far as I am aware, she was just selling ice creams"? Why that term? Have you any idea where that came from?

**Jeremy Hunt:** It is a very good question, and I do not know the answer. She was not doing that. I am just speculating, but maybe he had seen a briefing that said she had been accused of doing this and the words came



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out wrong. Although that particular instance has often been talked about, that was never raised with me by the Iranians as the reason that we were not settling the issue. It was always the debt, the debt, the debt.

Q49 **Royston Smith:** Except that did attract a lot of attention, of course.

**Jeremy Hunt:** It attracted attention and, of course, embarrassment, but to me it was not the substantive issue in the negotiations: it was about settling the debt. It was completely transactional. Obviously, we have no friendship between Iran and Britain—we are on opposing sides in nearly every international issue—so the relationship is very transactional, and there is a lack of trust.

There is a deep suspicion of Britain for historical reasons, so it became clear to me that it was essentially a very transactional thing, but at the end of his evidence, Alistair said that he carried on making the case after he stepped down, and I did too. I thought, “Maybe it is going to help this along if I say publicly as a former Foreign Secretary that we should settle our debt”, so I did.

Q50 **Royston Smith:** Now we have and, thank goodness, we have some detainees home, but not all of them. Does that mean that settling the debt was the thing that unlocked that, or was it the thing that unlocked that for those detainees, but not the others?

**Jeremy Hunt:** I am not on the inside track on this, and I have not had Privy Council briefings as to what is happening. I can just tell you what I think has happened, which is that the Iranians linked the repayment of the debt to two of the three hostages coming home and the third moving from prison to house arrest. They then reneged on the house arrest part of the deal because he is also an American citizen, and they are asking for something from the Americans. That is what I suspect is happening.

I still have a photograph and a book by Morad Tahbaz, who is a very distinguished photographer and naturalist and, by all accounts, an absolutely wonderful man. He is suffering in prison every bit as much as Nazanin and Anoosheh did.

Q51 **Chair:** My last question is on looking forward. You have already mentioned Morad, quite rightly, who is still being held, and there are many others who are still being held from other countries. How should the UK and the international community act to discourage what is, frankly, hostage taking as a form of influence, and in some cases is kidnap for ransom, in the sense that the kidnapping is linked to a specific ask of another country? What do you think we can do?

**Jeremy Hunt:** That is absolutely what I hope the outcome of your inquiry will do—make some proposals in that respect—because the retrospective question is why it took us so long to get our ducks in a row to get Nazanin and Anoosheh home, but the prospective question is how you stop this happening in the future. My judgement is that there is only one thing I really think would work, which we have seen in Ukraine. When democracies come together, we can be very effective, and I think we have



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surprised ourselves by the extent to which that has happened with Ukraine.

In the case of hostage taking, I think there needs to be an international pact between democracies that says, "If you take one of our citizens, it's like you're taking all of our citizens. We will react as Britain if a Canadian is taken hostage, and they will react in the United States if a Brit is taken hostage, so you are not just taking on one country: you are taking on all of us and we are going to act in concert, because between us, we have the weight to stamp this out." That requires a lot of diplomatic effort, but bringing everyone together is exactly what our Rolls-Royce FCDO is very good at doing. Why on earth wouldn't all the democracies—people who believe in human rights and liberal values—want to sign up to do something?

To do that, you have to agree not just that you will do it, but what you will do and what the consequences would be when someone is taken hostage, and everyone must be prepared to do that. However, if we do, I think we would have a very good chance of stamping it out.

- Q52 **Chair:** You will remember that when Michael Spavor and Michael Kovrig were taken by the Chinese Government, effectively in revenge for an arrest warrant of an individual being exercised in Canada, that was raised by many different countries at the time. You are thinking of a similar sort of article 5 moment there, where all countries are able to act together. What sort of options would we have?

**Jeremy Hunt:** If we take that example, the Chinese Government were very confident that when they did that, the only real consequences would come from Canada, and that other countries would huff and puff, but probably not do very much. Therefore, from their point of view, it was a safe thing to do.

The way to settle these issues will not necessarily be the same when it is China, Iran or another country, because each situation is different. As with any deterrence philosophy, you do not necessarily have to publicise exactly what it is that you propose to do, but you have to ensure that anyone thinking of doing this knows that the price will be too high. That is what we need to make happen, in my judgment.

**Chair:** Thank you. I will leave it there on that note. While Tulip is here, I will pay enormous tribute to Tulip as well for her work in supporting Richard and Nazanin. I can definitely say, from all of us here, that we are very pleased that Nazanin is home, but we do remember the others who are not. Thank you very much indeed, Jeremy.