



Foreign Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Work of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, HC 171

Monday 12 June 2023

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Alicia Kearns (Chair); Saqib Bhatti; Sir Chris Bryant; Liam Byrne; Neil Coyle; Drew Hendry; Bob Seely; Henry Smith; Royston Smith; Graham Stringer.

Questions 468 – 581

Witnesses

I: Rt Hon. James Cleverly MP, Secretary of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office; Sir Philip Barton KCMG OBE, Permanent Under-Secretary, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.



Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Rt Hon. James Cleverly MP and Sir Philip Barton.

Q468 **Bob Seely:** Moving on to Ukraine, how sustainable are our current levels of financial and military support?

James Cleverly: They have to be sustainable, because the stakes are so high that if we fail to achieve what we have set out to achieve—helping the Ukrainians regain their country and reinforcing the importance of territorial integrity, of national sovereignty, of the UN Charter and of the rule of law—the downstream implications are so huge and so costly, in terms of both human lives and financial expenditure, that the commitments that we have made now will be dwarfed. It is incredibly important that we stay the course. This is a conversation that I regularly have internationally.

Q469 **Bob Seely:** The US is supplying 80% to 85% of the military kit and dominates the financial support as well. The argument that you hear from some Ukrainians is that we are not sustaining the Ukrainians to the extent that allows them to achieve that victory that they need to achieve.

James Cleverly: I have just come back from Kyiv, where I had a bilateral meeting with the President, the Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister. That is not what they are saying to me.

Q470 **Bob Seely:** 155mm and 152mm shells—NATO standard and old Soviet standard—are still being significantly overmatched by the Russians' artillery shells. Is that an untrue statement or a true statement?

James Cleverly: The Russian army in the field is bigger than the Ukrainian army in the field, which is why our support to the Ukrainians in not allowing this to become a simple Soviet-style attritional slugfest is so very important.

What we have seen is that, while the Ukrainians have been overmatched in terms of troop and equipment numbers, and others, they have been much more effective in their use of both human resource and military materiel. That is part of what we do. Of course, we do recognise that, in terms of both the sustainment of our support to Ukraine and our own future replenishment, we have to collectively increase the scale of production. The plans around that are already being discussed, and those things are already going to be put in place. That is not a quick fix. It is going to take time as we gear up our production.

Q471 **Bob Seely:** On that point, why did we not give a contract months ago to BAE to significantly increase the supply of 155mm shells? It is relatively cheap and absolutely fills a very significant hole in the Ukrainian supply.

James Cleverly: This is more a matter for MoD, so I am not really able to give a detailed answer on that. There is a whole load of reasons, potentially. I am not going to speculate, because I do not know, but we do recognise that, for both the current sustainment and our future



replenishment, we need to increase military equipment and ammunition production rates.

I would also make the point, though, that we should not allow ourselves—I am not suggesting that you are—to be drawn into this belief that, somehow, Russia's capabilities are bottomless. Our sanctions regime is really putting the squeeze on Russia. Their oil revenues have dropped very significantly. They have gone into negative growth when they had been forecasting significant economic growth. We are putting pressure, through our and the international sanctions regime, on Russia's ability to wage war. We are also making sure that we are applying sanctions, for example, to Iran, where they have been providing military support to Russia.

Q472 Bob Seely: In terms of the Ukraine Recovery Conference, we have taken evidence in the past from people in the private sector on the difficulty of getting war insurance to underwrite their work or their sales in terms of the reconstruction work that is starting already, and the Ukrainians are very keen to have reconstruction now, despite its obvious risks. How is the Foreign Office working with other bits of Government to address this, so that we can get some answers for our Ukrainian friends at the Ukrainian Recovery Conference next week? This is potentially very important, and very important for our businesses, as well as supporting Ukraine.

James Cleverly: You are absolutely right. We need to find a way of supporting Ukrainians in the here and now. There has been an assessment of their immediate requirements, which is in the region of \$14 billion in value. I would make the point that the URC is not a pledging conference. That is not what it is about. That said, I have had conversations where some pledges towards that immediate need will be made at the conference, although, as I say, it is not a pledging conference.

It is about exploring what reassurances the private sector would need to start providing some of that private sector funding for the reconstruction. Some of that will be war risk insurance. Some of it will be about what we, collectively, are going to do with the Ukrainians to make sure that, once they have been successful in defending themselves against this attack, they do not have a repeat performance at some point in the near future.

Financial products, support from the international community militarily and, ultimately, their pathway to NATO are all going to be parts of it, but you are absolutely right that we need to find credible ways of de-risking enough to start unlocking the taps of private sector investment going into Ukraine. That is, in large part, what the URC is going to be about.

Q473 Sir Chris Bryant: I completely agree about Ukraine and the desire to be able to get on with reconstruction. I wonder whether you can help me with a few things. You know that Abramovich is sanctioned. The sale of Chelsea went through last May. Is the charity up and running and does it



now have the money from that to be able to start the reconstruction in Ukraine?

James Cleverly: We set up the trust to deal with this and have handed it across.

Q474 **Sir Chris Bryant:** Has it handed over the money yet?

James Cleverly: It is better that it is dealt with and seen to be dealt with independently of Government. When they are ready to receive the money, we will unlock it. That has not happened yet.

Q475 **Sir Chris Bryant:** They have been saying that they have been ready for several months now.

James Cleverly: That is not the feedback that I have. There are still certain issues that need to be resolved before that can be done.

Q476 **Sir Chris Bryant:** It is a whole year now. It is more than a year since the sale of Chelsea, and that is £3.2 billion. That would be the single biggest amount of money that we would be contributing.

James Cleverly: Yes. We have set up a trust to deal with this and that is its responsibility.

Q477 **Sir Chris Bryant:** So you are blaming Mike Penrose for not having got it ready in time.

James Cleverly: I am not blaming anybody. The point that I am making is that this is complicated. The numbers are very significant. We want to make sure that the money goes exclusively to the recipients that it should go to. It is important that we get this right, but, ultimately the trust was set up for this reason.

Q478 **Sir Chris Bryant:** What is the thing that is not right yet?

James Cleverly: It is important that we make sure that the money that is released goes exclusively to the recipients that it was designed for.

Q479 **Sir Chris Bryant:** So you are not sure that it would as it is presently constructed.

James Cleverly: I want to make sure. We want to get this right. With a sum of money of this magnitude, I would rather get it right than do it quickly and inadvertently get it wrong.

Q480 **Sir Chris Bryant:** One of your colleagues said last July, I think in the House, that it would be sorted by the autumn. Here we are the following summer. Will it be done by the summer recess?

James Cleverly: I do not know. As I say, we are not the only ones involved in this. We need to make sure that we get this right.

Q481 **Sir Chris Bryant:** I think you are literally the only people left in it, but anyway—



James Cleverly: Chris, that is just not the case, and you know that it is not the case. I know that it is good for a headline, but it is just not true.

Q482 **Sir Chris Bryant:** Honestly, the only people who have to decide whether the money is handed over are the Government. The trust, so I am told, is perfectly ready, and has been ready for some time. If you are not across the details, you might like to write to us later.

James Cleverly: I am across the details.

Q483 **Sir Chris Bryant:** What is the problem with the trust?

James Cleverly: If everything was tickety-boo and we had all the assurances that we need, why would we not hand the money over?

Q484 **Sir Chris Bryant:** Quite, so what is the problem?

James Cleverly: I am asking why we would not.

Q485 **Sir Chris Bryant:** You are saying that it is not ready, for some reason.

James Cleverly: I am saying that, with a sum of money this significant, we are dutybound to make sure that we absolutely get this right. If your contention is that everything is fine, help me understand why we would not just sign a cheque.

Q486 **Sir Chris Bryant:** No. I want you to help me understand why you are not—

James Cleverly: I have just told you.

Q487 **Sir Chris Bryant:** No, you have not. You have not pointed to a single thing that is problematic with the present situation with the trust. Maybe you need to write to us to clarify that.

James Cleverly: I can explain now. I want to absolutely make sure that the money goes exclusively to the recipients.

Q488 **Sir Chris Bryant:** And you think it would not as it is presently constructed.

James Cleverly: I need full reassurance that is the case.

Q489 **Sir Chris Bryant:** So you do not trust the way the trust has been set up. Let me move on to another subject.

James Cleverly: No. You are trying to put words in my mouth, and that is not what I have said. It is really clear that we work with the trust. We are trying to make sure that we achieve the same thing. It is right that we do it properly. Because of the sums of money involved, I want to absolutely make sure that this is right.

Q490 **Sir Chris Bryant:** I would gently suggest that it would also be good to be able to start reconstruction in Ukraine, because there are people begging for homes. This is a substantial amount of money and it is meant to have been ready many months ago.



Let me ask you a different question. There are still British companies functioning in Russia, are there not?

James Cleverly: Quite possibly.

Q491 **Sir Chris Bryant:** You would urge them to stop, presumably.

James Cleverly: Yes.

Q492 **Sir Chris Bryant:** That would include Infosys.

James Cleverly: I would tell everyone to abide by the sanctions regime that we have put in place.

Q493 **Sir Chris Bryant:** Mantrac is partly owned by somebody who has British nationality at the moment. It still has a Russian-based website up selling Caterpillar equipment to oil and gas companies in Russia. Presumably, you think that they should stop.

James Cleverly: I do not think that it is right for me to dictate to commercial entities how they behave beyond our sanctions regime, which is explicit and underpinned by statute. Our sanctions regime is clear. One of the things that I would say as a broader point, just as I said with regard to countries trading with Russia, is that people should be aware of the reputational implications of continuing to trade with Russia. Ultimately, commercial decisions are for commercial entities.

We have a sanctions regime in place. We are working to make sure that the sanctions regime is not contravened and that we work to make sure that it is enforced. Our sanctions regime is what it is and we recognise that that does not cover all activities, so I would be uncomfortable demanding anything beyond what our sanctions demand, because that is what they are there to do. I have personal views on things, but, ultimately, in terms of Government policy, our sanctions are clear and unambiguous and should be abided by.

Q494 **Sir Chris Bryant:** Mantrac is half-owned by Mohamed Mansour, who gave £5 million to your political party at the same time as making money in Russia. Is there no reputational risk, as you just used the term?

James Cleverly: I do not know the details of the nature of the trade, and I would want to look into it rather than relying just on your interpretation of things.

Q495 **Sir Chris Bryant:** Sure. Will you write to us, then?

James Cleverly: I will if there is a specific question that you want me to answer.

Q496 **Sir Chris Bryant:** I am asking you whether it is right that—

James Cleverly: When you say “right”, do you mean legal?

Q497 **Sir Chris Bryant:** Let me finish the question. Do you think it is morally right for a British political party to take £5 million from somebody who



has just made their money out of Russia via Mantrac?

James Cleverly: The point that I would make is that we codify our morals through laws. If you are suggesting that this individual or this company has done anything wrong, I would be very interested in any of the details of that. Ultimately, our sanctions are the codification of our view on these things. We demand sanctions be abided by it and, if you are suggesting that there is a breach of that, please let me know.

Q498 **Sir Chris Bryant:** My anxiety is that we have, quite rightly, sought to put in a very strong set of sanctions to cripple the Russian economy, so as to weaken its ability to fight in Ukraine, but there is a company that has been selling equipment to gas and oil companies in Russia up until very recently, and possibly still today. Certainly, at the beginning of May, they were, which is when I understand that the Conservative Party took £5 million from the person who half-owns that company. That just seems to undermine the sanctions efforts that we are making, but maybe you could write to us.

James Cleverly: We need to be very clear on this. Are you suggesting that there is sanctions contravention—yes or no?

Q499 **Sir Chris Bryant:** I am suggesting that the sanctions regime may not be tough enough.

James Cleverly: That is a different conversation. You are raising a specific case, and you are trying to link it to donations to a political party. Are you suggesting that there is sanctions convention? If there is, I would be very interested to know the details of that.

Q500 **Sir Chris Bryant:** As you know, I have been arguing for a long time that our sanctions regime in Russia is nowhere near as strong as it needs to be, but—

James Cleverly: Are you suggesting that there is sanctions contravention?

Q501 **Sir Chris Bryant:** With all due respect, Foreign Secretary, we are the Committee and you are the Foreign Secretary, so you are in a better place to be able to judge—

James Cleverly: I am waiting for a question, Chris.

Sir Chris Bryant: I have asked a very direct question.

James Cleverly: Which is what? Repeat it, because I have missed it.

Q502 **Sir Chris Bryant:** Do you think it undermines Britain's efforts to try to weaken the Russian economy and our sanctions regime if the British Conservative Party takes £5 million from a person who part-owns a company, Mantrac, which sells and has been selling, up until very recently—I am not sure whether it still is today, but it certainly was at the beginning of May, when the money was taken by the Conservative Party—equipment to gas and oil companies in Russia?



James Cleverly: Within your question, you are making reference to sanctions. The point that I am making is that, if it is activity that is not sanctioned, I cannot see how it could undermine our sanctions regime. If you are suggesting that it is in breach of sanctions, you should let me know. Frankly, I completely fail to see how the nature of the donations is relevant. The Conservative-run UK Government have had one of the most robust postures to Russia in the world, and I am very proud of that. In many instances, we have moved more quickly than others. We work in close co-ordination with others.

Again, if there is a specific accusation that you want to make, make it, rather than just throwing words out to try to link what seems from your question to be legitimate activities. If there is illegitimacy, please feel free to say so.

Q503 **Sir Chris Bryant:** Let me ask you one final question about Russia and Ukraine. The other potential source of funds for the restoration and rebuilding of Ukraine is assets belonging to the Russian state that are presently frozen in the UK. The Government have undertaken to come back to the House by September on what plans you have in this field. As you know, some of us have been arguing for—and some other countries have already started the process—seizing assets and not just freezing them.

James Cleverly: My understanding is that one other country is exploring that. The last time I was here, which is the best part of five months ago, that process had started. As I said at the time, we are very interested in that. There are important legal principles at stake here with regard to state seizure of assets. Freezing is one thing. Seizing and disposing is another. Our posture is really clear. Those who are or have been involved in and facilitated the destruction of Ukraine should ultimately bear the brunt of the reconstruction. We will need to explore exactly how we do this and to have international consistency. We continue to keep a close eye on the Canadian case to see how that plays out before we make any decision about what actions we might take.

Q504 **Drew Hendry:** Foreign Secretary, could you tell us what the Wagner Group is?

James Cleverly: The Wagner Group has defined itself as a private military company and is most commonly regarded as a mercenary group.

Q505 **Drew Hendry:** It is over a month since it was reported that the proscription of the Wagner Group as a terrorist organisation was imminent. Can you tell us why there is such a delay in acting? Is it because it is a Home Office responsibility?

James Cleverly: Sorry, when you say “reported”, there was speculation in the media but there was not a Government statement on that.

Drew Hendry: The question is still valid.



James Cleverly: It is not valid, because we did not say we were going to, so there is no delay.

Drew Hendry: It is a fact, Foreign Secretary.

James Cleverly: You cannot delay something that you did not say you were going to do.

Q506 **Drew Hendry:** I did not say that you said it. I said that it was reported that this was going to happen, which is a fact. Over a month ago, it was reported that this was going to be imminent, so let me just ask the question of you. Why is it taking so long to proscribe this organisation—

James Cleverly: Hang on.

Q507 **Drew Hendry:** No, Foreign Secretary, I will ask the question and then you can answer, if that is all right. Why is it taking so long to proscribe this organisation as a terrorist group?

James Cleverly: We did not say that we were going to.

Q508 **Chair:** With respect, the Prime Minister did during his leadership campaign.

James Cleverly: He was not a member of the Government. The Government have not made a commitment to do so. We do not speculate on future designations. You know that I have had this conversation with the Committee and at the Dispatch Box before. The Government have not committed to do that, but we always keep proscriptions of this and any other organisation under review. Your question is based on reporting or speculation as to what we might do rather than any commitment from the Government.

Q509 **Drew Hendry:** Are you disassociating yourself from the Prime Minister's promise?

James Cleverly: No. What I am saying is that the Government's position—

Drew Hendry: You are.

James Cleverly: No. The Government's position has remained unchanged. If the Government's position were to change, I would inform the Committee.

Q510 **Drew Hendry:** Who is the head of the Government?

James Cleverly: The Prime Minister is the head of the Government.

Q511 **Drew Hendry:** The Prime Minister said that this would happen.

James Cleverly: The Prime Minister did not say that this would happen. When he said that, he was a backbencher. The point is that there has not been a commitment from the Government. You are asking me why we are delaying something that the Government have not committed to do.



This is why I was pulling up on the question. The question was self-contradictory.

Q512 **Drew Hendry:** Let me get you out of that and change tack a wee bit. Is it your view that proscription would be a useful thing to do in terms of the operations of the Wagner Group, given their admitted responsibility for atrocities?

James Cleverly: When you say my view, do you mean as a Government Minister?

Q513 **Drew Hendry:** Yes. What is your view as a Government Minister?

James Cleverly: As a Government Minister, the Government's position is unchanged on this and, if it changes, we will let you know.

Q514 **Neil Coyle:** What does the Wagner Group have to do to be proscribed?

James Cleverly: We do not speculate on the future nature of proscriptions. The point is that no country has proscribed the Wagner Group. We will always keep proscriptions as an option, but we do not routinely speculate on which organisations might be proscribed, and I am not going to start doing so.

Drew Hendry: Let me come back and try to get an answer to the question that I asked you.

James Cleverly: I answered the question that you asked.

Q515 **Drew Hendry:** No, you did not. I asked whether it was a useful tool in terms of dealing with organisations like the Wagner Group.

James Cleverly: Proscription can be a useful tool, but I comment on the fact that no country has done so, and the UK's current position is that we have not proscribed. As I say, we do not speculate on future proscription designations.

Q516 **Drew Hendry:** What level of atrocities would have to be carried out before you did see it as a useful method?

James Cleverly: We do not speculate on future proscriptions. You are inviting me to speculate. I have just said that we do not.

Q517 **Chair:** Moving back to Russia very briefly, can I ask where we are with supporting Kara-Murza, given the fact that he is being held hostage? Specifically, has he had any access to his family? What medical support is he receiving?

James Cleverly: We continue to call for the release of all those detained by Russia on political grounds, including Alexei Navalny, Vladimir Kara-Murza and Alexei Gorinov. We continue to be in contact with his family. Leo Docherty, who is the responsible Minister for the region, has met with his family and will do so again in the near future.



We continue to push for this. We do continue to make sure that the Russian state knows that he and other individuals who are incarcerated are not going to be forgotten about. We are not going to ignore them and we will continue to keep their names in the public domain, so that Russia knows that it cannot do anything quietly behind the scenes.

Q518 Bob Seely: The Government have said that channels for dialogue with Russia may be invigorated when the moment is right. Given our support for Ukraine, and given everything that is going on at the moment, under what conditions would that moment be right? Can you tell us something about the nature of your communications with the Russian state currently?

James Cleverly: I have had no direct communications with the Russian state since becoming Foreign Secretary. We do, of course, still have some channels, but I am uncomfortable speculating as to what the circumstances would be, for two reasons. First, it is very difficult to try to meaningfully predict all the variable things that might happen during a conflict like the one that we are seeing in Ukraine. Secondly, the circumstances under which we would feel comfortable reengaging with Russia are probably not ones that I would want to speculate on in front of the Committee.

Q519 Bob Seely: No, but considering its nuclear arsenal and its permanent membership of the Security Council, do you accept the fact that, whatever its behaviour, there is worth in having some kind of communication with it? At what point do you start looking to the future, even if you are not trying to reengage with the Government? To what extent can your ambassador in Moscow, who the APPG on Russia is speaking to in about an hour, be tasked with reaching out to people who have influence in that society, especially if they are not directly aligned with the regime?

James Cleverly: Because of the circumstances, the actions of our ambassador in Moscow have been heavily curtailed. She is not able to perform the functions that you would normally expect an ambassador to perform. We do maintain some lines of potential communication. We are not routinely communicating with the Russian Government and the Russian state.

We do, of course, find ourselves sometimes co-located. I have been in the near proximity of the Russian Foreign Minister, both at the UN and at the G20 in India. If the moment were right, there could be opportunities to engage. We would do so only if we believed that engagement was either to the meaningful benefit of the Ukrainian people as part of bringing this war to the right conclusion or to avert some other serious incident. In order to avoid misunderstandings or miscommunications, we would maintain these channels as open.

Q520 Bob Seely: You are not talking to them, because you are the political head, but there are potential communication routes that are still open



and ongoing.

James Cleverly: We still have an embassy. We still have potential lines of communication and, of course, we would not hesitate to use them to avert a misunderstanding or to seize an opportunity to bring this war to a successful conclusion.

Q521 **Bob Seely:** Can I just ask two very brief questions for clarity? First, the US has described Wagner as a transnational criminal organisation, so they have given it a designation. Wagner has no designation currently in this country in terms of being a terrorist group or a transnational crime group, or anything like that, so they are undesignated.

James Cleverly: No country has designated them as a terrorist organisation, per the question that was asked.

Q522 **Bob Seely:** But others have designated them as an international criminal organisation. We have not gone down that route. Do we have the capacity to do that? Do we have that designation in UK law?

James Cleverly: I have not spoken in detail with the American system, but my understanding is that that equates to a sanctions designation. We sanctioned Wagner in its entirety. It is slightly different wording but it gets to the same place as us.

Q523 **Bob Seely:** On the seizure of Russian assets, we have said in the past that we have frozen Russian sovereign assets. It is our intention to give those assets in some form to Ukraine or to find a legal vehicle, if the Russians do not voluntarily do so, because that is what we have certainly implied in the past. You said that you are looking at the Canadian example. What progress is there among G7 states about not only seizing assets? Where is the process at in terms of handing them over to an international fund of some kind to support the Ukrainian reconstruction? Where are we with that?

James Cleverly: I do not have anything that I can describe as well-advanced thinking, either from the UK or from the wider G7. There are some very serious legal hurdles. It is not healthy to have states arbitrarily seizing and liquidating assets. Even though the cause is as clear, unambiguous and just as this, there are some very important international legal principles. We will continue to explore, whether through legal means or through sanctions routes, or whatever it might be, to get the people who have done the damage to pay for the repair. It sounds easy. It is not straightforward, which is why no country has come up with a silver bullet solution to this, but we will keep working to explore ways of making sure that the people who have done the damage pay for the damage.

Q524 **Bob Seely:** The money will eventually go back to them.

James Cleverly: Sanctions are not time-limited. The precedent for freezing assets, even for a very extended period of time, is well tested. There is a difference between freezing and seizing, but we are not just



going to shrug our shoulders and say, "It is difficult, so we are not going to try." We will continue investigating in close co-ordination with our international allies.

Q525 **Chair:** Have we and our close allies got our posture right towards Vučić and Serbia?

James Cleverly: Lord Peach, who is our envoy to the region, has had very clear and direct conversations with the Serbian leadership. We have made it completely clear that attacks against KFOR troops are completely unacceptable. Implying that KFOR was somehow involved in initiating the violence is completely unjustified. I have spoken with the Kosovan Prime Minister. We are seeking to de-escalate this situation and we do so by utilising the strong relationships we have with the leaders in the region.

I genuinely pay tribute to Lord Peach, who is very enthusiastic and a regular visitor to the region. He has been there over a dozen times, just since I have become Foreign Secretary. We are delivering those very clear and unambiguous messages to all the leaders involved.

Q526 **Chair:** There is a clear lack of balance in the messaging, particularly from the US, on what has happened in Kosovo over the last two weeks. What is missing is that, if we truly believe that we are going to de-escalate the situation, you have to call a spade a spade, and yet I have not seen us, the US or the EU call out the armed militias in northern Serbia, who were the foremost part of the protest—if there were any legitimate protestors, I would be surprised—who threw Molotov cocktails and shot at KFOR, and who are armed and funded by Vučić and his Serbian forces. If you do not support them and do what you are told, you find a grenade on your doorstep about to blow up your child. Why are we not calling out these armed militias?

James Cleverly: We have made it clear directly. We do our diplomatic engagement face-to-face, and we have the standing in the region to do so. When we speak, the leaders in the region listen. They do not always take our advice, which is frustrating, and we have seen some of the repercussions of that. We have made it very clear that we expect the demilitarisation of those groups in the north Kosovo area in the border region. We have had that conversation directly.

Q527 **Chair:** The problem is that we are not doing it publicly. Publicly, the US has used a very sharp stick with the Kosovans and really gone for them. I do not think that it is a particularly fair group of sanctions to say, "You are no longer welcome in DC, we will not help you anymore with recognition and, by the way, you are out of that training exercise that is about to take place," with no public criticism of the armed militias and the fact that they are funded by Serbia.

James Cleverly: There is a balance. It is a legitimate observation, but there is a balance. Sometimes, doing diplomacy directly and privately can be most effective. There sometimes needs to be a route to escalation. If that does not work, you need somewhere to go. I sometimes feel that



there is a desire to always go loud and public at the start, rather than having that as a position that you can escalate to. The UK has real standing in the region and, when we speak, we speak with authority. As I say, it does not always mean that we are listened to, but we do speak with a real authority.

Lord Peach has had conversations directly, and we will continue to do so. We want to demonstrate that a route to de-escalation, with engagement between Serbia and Kosovo, and dialogue rather than violence, is the way forward. That will be our position. Of course, we always reserve the right to change our posture and our response based on circumstances. At the moment, my view is that the best way of doing this is utilising the strong relationship that Lord Peach has built over decades to try to drive change.

Chair: Given that the US and the EU are being completely unbalanced on this and have used a very loud voice against Kosovo and none against Serbia, I would just urge that that is where the UK's role does come in, because you cannot have accountability or peace if there is a deep imbalance in the way that we have seen over the last two weeks.

Q528 **Graham Stringer:** What impact has the cut of 97.5% to a £250 million aid budget to Sudan had on the civil war in Sudan?

James Cleverly: The drivers of the current escalation in conflict were probably independent of that. Of course, I would like nothing more than to have a bigger budget. As I said, there will not be any Secretary of State in any Government of any persuasion that would not like more money.

The drivers of the most recent escalation in violence are multiple. I was about to say "multiple and complicated", but, sadly, they are not terribly complicated. There cannot be a line drawn between our ODA expenditure in the region and that conflict, because of course there is still ODA money being spent, less by ourselves but by other countries. I am unconvinced that putting more money in whatever format into the region would have prevented this current escalation in violence.

Q529 **Graham Stringer:** Any reasonable person would accept that there were other major drivers of the civil war, but are you really saying that to remove nearly £250 million of aid has not affected what is happening in Sudan in any way?

James Cleverly: This most recent escalation in violence has been driven by other factors. As I say, although we have reduced, other countries have increased. I would love to think that we are so very influential that, even though other countries were still putting ODA money into Sudan, our reduction in expenditure offset theirs, but that does not strike me as a credible argument. The friction between the two generals is independent of our ODA expenditure.



We will of course continue to work with international partners, both within Africa and within the region, to try to bring a permanent sustained peace and dialogue between the two generals, but I cannot see that there is any connection between our ODA expenditure and this conflict.

Q530 Graham Stringer: Everybody wants peace. Every reasonable person wants peace in Sudan, but there has been criticism of the United Kingdom and the Security Council putting too much faith in the Sudan transition process and not enough in the security of people in Sudan. What is your response to that criticism? People feel that that process has not been working and will not work, and that there should be another focus.

James Cleverly: The simple truth is that there has been a lot of effort both from regional bodies like the AU and multilateral organisations to try to drive a sustainable peace. The negotiations had appeared to be progressing, and the very sudden breakdown in talks and escalation of violence was a shock to many on the international stage.

I am trying to understand the people who say that we need to do more to protect the Sudanese people and how that might manifest itself, but this is not a permissive environment at the moment; we are not in a position where peacekeepers could go in. We need to get the two generals, who are the key counterparties here, back around the negotiating table and bring a sustainable peace. That could then facilitate other work, but I cannot see that there is capacity in the international community to inject a security force into Sudan in the circumstances that we currently see.

Q531 Graham Stringer: I will come back to the intelligence. Dominic Raab, your predecessor, had a pretty torrid time at this Committee after the evacuation of Afghanistan, as did the Permanent Under-Secretary. Have you read our report?

James Cleverly: Yes.

Q532 Graham Stringer: Can you tell me, having read the report, how we did better and worse in the evacuation of Sudan when the civil war broke out? In terms of lessons learned, what lessons were learned and what improved?

James Cleverly: There were a number of points. I am not going to be able to get them all because it was a comprehensive document. I did not agree with all of it, but it was a thoughtful and important document.

Our capacity in the crisis response centre was one of the things that we have changed. We have made it much clearer in terms of crisis leadership, the gold, silver, and bronze functionality within the crisis centre and the decision-making across Government, including the use of COBRA.

In terms of what went better, it is clear that the evacuation from Sudan was discharged better than the evacuation from Afghanistan, although



the circumstances were very different, so you should be careful drawing too many comparisons of one to the other.

We conducted the largest and longest evacuation operation of any of the western nations that had people in Sudan. Again, we co-ordinated very closely with regional leadership, both with the African Union and of course with Saudi Arabia, so that people could go from Port Sudan to Jeddah. We co-ordinated very closely with other countries to facilitate the evacuation of their nationals, where we were able to, both in the initial under-fire evacuation of our embassy staff and the embassy staff of a couple of other countries, but also the longer evacuation of British nationals and their Sudanese dependants.

Q533 **Graham Stringer:** In response to that report, the Foreign Office said that “decisions should be clearly made, and communicated, in advance of any future evacuations about eligibility for evacuation”. Why then did the eligibility criteria for evacuation from Sudan change, and why was the main form of communication via email when the internet was pretty often not there? It was down a lot of the time.

James Cleverly: We were able to change our criteria because we were able to extend the duration of our evacuation flights. You have to remember that the ceasefire, which was never particularly strong, was a time-limited ceasefire when we first went in there. Of course, what we did was prioritise the people who we felt we had the strongest responsibility for, which is British nationals and their immediate dependants, particularly those vulnerable.

Through the work of the international community—I pay particular tribute to Tony Blinken of the United States of America for facilitating talks that extended the ceasefire—it became clear that we were able to keep the airhead open for longer. That gave us more flexibility and we were able to evacuate more people and extend the criteria. The extension of the criteria was a by-product of relatively good news, but it was absolutely right that we prioritised British nationals and their immediate dependants when we thought that we had a very limited window of opportunity.

Q534 **Graham Stringer:** You said previously—I said I would come back to it—that the start of this war, with the two generals falling out, was not foreseeable or predictable. Minister Mitchell told this Committee exactly that, which is one of the reasons why there was a certain level of failure and lack of senior staffing in Khartoum.

James Cleverly: Sorry, when you say “failure”, what do you mean by that, because I disagree?

Q535 **Graham Stringer:** You think that everything was perfect—

James Cleverly: No, I did not say that. What do you mean by “a certain level of failure”?

Q536 **Graham Stringer:** I will try to clarify it in a second, although it is normal



for Members of the Committee to ask questions of Ministers when they are here. There were certain difficulties getting people who were not British nationals, but who have UK residency, out when their partners were leaving. There were difficulties about communication and difficulties getting to airbases. They are well documented.

The question I wanted to ask was that, while you and Mr Mitchell said that there were problems with early warning systems, the former British ambassador to Sudan and other people have said that this was predictable. Does that mean that there is something wrong with the Foreign Office's early warning systems?

James Cleverly: I am going to go back to the implied question that you made in the preamble to the specific question about difficulties. The point is that we had to make decisions about prioritisation, and we had to communicate in an environment where electricity, the internet and mobile phone signal was unpredictable. You said that we relied on email. We did not rely on email. We used all available means of communication throughout the evacuation, so we always communicated on multiple channels because we knew that no one channel could be relied upon. The difficulties were inherent within the situation. They were not performance difficulties by the FCDO.

You said that there were difficulties with non-British nationals. Again, they were not difficulties; they were decisions that we made to prioritise British nationals and their immediate families. As I said, as it became clear that we could evacuate more people than was originally thought because the international community, led by the United States, was able to extend the period of ceasefire, we were able to extend the criteria. These were not difficulties, these were choices. We took advantage of opportunities as they presented themselves to do more than our original planning had envisaged, because we had more time than our original planning had envisaged.

When you said that there were difficulties in the leadership, the reason I wanted to push back on that is because the heads of mission routinely leave the country for various times, whether it be on leave, to come to conferences or to go to regional events. That is not unusual. We have a well-established chain of command, and the number two in Khartoum, when the HMA was out, was the development director. The development director took command of the situation in-country. There were no difficulties with the chain of command. Indeed, having the HMA able to plug into the crisis response centre here in King Charles Street actually proved to be a real advantage. I just wanted to nail down those implied questions that you laid out before you asked your specific question.

When it came to predicting, there are always tensions in terms of negotiations like these. There was no country in the world, including the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which has very good links into Sudan, that predicted this particular escalation at this particular time. Indeed, there was a Saudi aircraft on the ground that was destroyed in the fighting. If



the Saudis had predicted it, that airplane would not have been there. The fact is that there are always tensions and saying, “This could break down,” is not predicting the particular nature and timing of the breakdown. Although there are always tensions in the negotiations, basically no one—not the UK, not the US, not the Saudis, not anybody—predicted the scale of the escalation at this particular point in time.

Q537 Liam Byrne: When it comes to rebuilding Sudan, our latitude is going to be constrained because the Home Office has taken so much money out of your budget. You said that all Secretaries of State wanted more, but your budget is smaller because the Home Office is using ODA to fund accommodation costs and other costs for those seeking asylum in this country. Can you just confirm to the Committee how much the Home Office is taking from your budget in ODA this year?

James Cleverly: I am going to push back on the language you used in the question. We do not define how ODA is spent. The definition of ODA expenditure is an international one. We abide by that, and we are comfortable to work within the confines of that.

Q538 Liam Byrne: You will know that some countries do not take money out of ODA, for example, to support those seeking asylum in their own country, such as Australia, for example.

James Cleverly: The definition of ODA is internationally recognised, and we are not going to try to redefine that. Refugees in the ODA-expenditure country is an internationally recognised and appropriate use.

Q539 Liam Byrne: I remember some of this as the immigration Minister for two years. Let me ask the question, just in the interests of time. How much money is the Home Office taking out of the budget this year?

James Cleverly: You keep using the phrase “taking out of the budget”, but the point is that we do not define what is or is not ODA expenditure. We spend money on what we spend money on. The definition is external. Spending money on hosting refugees in the UK is legitimate Government expenditure. I recognise that it is having an implication on our ability to expend elsewhere, within a limited ODA pot. Of course I would love to spend more money, but the expenditure domestically on refugees is a legitimate expenditure, as I am sure you agree.

Q540 Liam Byrne: How much is it?

James Cleverly: I will double-check the most up-to-date figures, but my understanding is that it is £1.7 billion in the financial year 2022-23.¹

Q541 Liam Byrne: Would it not help us to find other ways to increase our

¹ The Foreign Secretary wanted to provide the following clarification after the session: “The £1.7 billion figure is the size of the reduction to FCDO’s ODA budget in 2022-23, compared to its ODA budget set at the 2021 Spending Review. The Home Office’s provisional ODA spend in calendar year 2022 was just under £2.4 billion.”



overseas development budget, given the pressures that we have? There is £1.7 billion of pressure, for example.

James Cleverly: We are. That is why the Prime Minister has committed to growing the economy, because 0.5% of a larger quantum is a larger budget. That is why growing the UK economy is so important. We have also said that our aspiration is to go back up to 0.7% of GNI once the economic situation improves. Again, that is why it is so important that we deliver on our promise to the British people to grow the economy.

Q542 **Liam Byrne:** But why do we not match Japan's commitment to recycle 40% of the £19 billion in special drawing rights that we got from the IMF?

James Cleverly: The quantum of our ODA expenditure has been decided by Government; that is decided at 0.5% of GNI. We want to make sure that we drive down the pressure on domestic refugee hosting by making sure the countries that people leave are safer, and that includes bringing the war in Ukraine to a conclusion. If we spend the money somewhere, it has to come from somewhere else.

Q543 **Liam Byrne:** The special drawing rights are sitting in the exchange equalisation account in the Treasury.

James Cleverly: It is still money.

Q544 **Liam Byrne:** You cannot use it for anything else. It is £19 billion.

James Cleverly: I disagree you cannot use it for anything else.

Q545 **Liam Byrne:** You cannot use SDRs for anything else.

James Cleverly: So you can only use SDRs on ODA.

Q546 **Liam Byrne:** It can either sit in the exchange equalisation account or you can, as you know, recycle them, because you have recycled 20%. My question is why you have taken the decision to recycle 20% and not 40% like Japan, or indeed 25% like France and China? Why have you come up with this magic number of 20%?

James Cleverly: The process that I went through when I was the Minister with the lead for development prior to becoming Foreign Secretary, in the exercise that I went through with Andrew Mitchell, balances our international commitments. I do not have the extensive folder full of spreadsheets that underpin the decision making on that, but the point is that the idea that somehow there is this free pot of painless money that we could apply to but choose not to, which is implicit in your question, is just not accurate. All money has to come from somewhere and there is always an opportunity cost to any expenditure.

We want to grow the British economy so that we can get back up to the 0.7% of GNI. Also, until we get to that increase to 0.7%, while we sit at not less than 0.5%, we want to make sure that that 0.5% is of a bigger figure. Either way, our incentive is to grow the economy.



Q547 **Liam Byrne:** At President Macron's summit in Paris next week, what proposals are we tabling to grow the size of the development pie globally?

James Cleverly: I do not want to pre-empt the negotiations that will be happening at that summit, but the point is that the best way of being more generous internationally is to grow the size of the economy.

I am very proud that under this Government, even in our most constrained year, we are able to put a higher percentage of GNI than under any Labour Government. In our worst year we did better than the previous Labour Government's best year. I am very proud of that. The best way of doing even more still is to grow the economy. Everything circles back to growing the economy sustainably, and that is why we are focusing on that.

Liam Byrne: You could match what Japan is doing.

Q548 **Neil Coyle:** 150 Palestinians and 20 Israelis died last year alone, in part due to tensions over settlement expansions. Can you just talk us through what steps you are taking to stop Israel annexing further land in the occupied West Bank?

James Cleverly: Our conversations with Israel have made it clear that we oppose any actions that potentially undermine a sustainable two-state solution; that includes settlement expansions. We have raised that, and I have raised that directly with my Israeli interlocutor. I know that message has been passed across a number of channels across Government.

Q549 **Neil Coyle:** That is a conversation, but what meaningful initiatives are you working on to de-escalate the conflict?

James Cleverly: Diplomacy is meaningful initiatives. That is how much change is derived in the world. We work directly with Israel and in co-ordination with other international partners. We have a very good relationship with both Israel and other countries in the region and beyond. We are consistent in our message that we want a sustainable, peaceful two-state solution that sees a home for both the Israeli people and the Palestinian people.

We will support activity or initiatives that support that agenda, and we will oppose those that potentially undermine it. I have had this conversation directly. We do not believe the settlement expansion supports that agenda; that is why we have said that we oppose it.

Q550 **Neil Coyle:** Why is the UK Government opposing the ICJ referral on the issue? What is the basis for the UK position on that?

James Cleverly: I do not believe that that is the most effective way of driving change in this. You will remember a number of occasions in the past where there has been talk of or a commitment to settlement



expansion; through diplomacy and negotiation, we have prevented those expansions, and we will continue to seek to do so.

Q551 **Neil Coyle:** The difference is that the Israeli Government coalition now has a commitment to expand. Would you consider action against British companies that are demolishing even UK aid-built support for Palestinian refugees in particular, but also that are engaged in building illegally for Israeli settlements?

James Cleverly: What do you mean about British companies?

Q552 **Neil Coyle:** I mean British companies that are involved in the demolition of existing Palestinian facilities on Palestinian land, or in building Israeli settlements in disputed or occupied territory.

James Cleverly: Our position on trading with Israel is that UK companies that trade with Israel are able to do so. Ultimately, our position is that we feel that settlement expansion is detrimental to the desire for a sustainable two-state solution. That continues to be our position.

Q553 **Neil Coyle:** Sir Chris touched on Mantrac earlier, in terms of the £5 million donation to the Conservative Party and no action against Mantrac profiteering from an illegal war. Again here, we have JCB, with a £5 million donation to the Conservative Party and involved in building Israeli settlements. There has been no action from the UK Government. What is to stop the public concluding that a £5 million donation allows a blind eye from Government?

James Cleverly: If you are making a specific accusation, make it.

Neil Coyle: I just did.

James Cleverly: I am here as a Government Minister rather than a spokesperson for the Conservative Party, but were the party chairman here I am sure that he would say that all the donations to the Conservative Party are done in full accordance with Electoral Commission law and with full transparency. If you are making an accusation of bribery in any way, then please do so. I would be very interested to hear you actually say it rather than just imply it.

Q554 **Neil Coyle:** You said that you have had these conversations. I am asking what actions you are taking against those who are pursuing the expansion and annexation of settlements. You are saying you are having conversations, but I am seeing no action. I am just exploring why there might be no action.

James Cleverly: You say that we are seeing no action, but I have made the point that on a number of occasions there have been well-advanced talks through diplomacy—you can shake your head all you like.

Neil Coyle: Chair, I do not think this is bearing any fruit at all. If you want to move on, please do.



James Cleverly: Through diplomacy, we have prevented those expansions from happening, because that is how diplomacy works. We do not get our way in every instance, but that is how diplomacy works. We will continue to engage to try to drive positive change, both in this region and more broadly around the world.

Q555 **Royston Smith:** Foreign Secretary, in 1975 the signing of the Madrid Accords ended the Spanish presence in modern-day Morocco, but still the Western Sahara is contested. Does the UK support Morocco's claim to the Western Sahara? If not, why not? If so, when publicly?

James Cleverly: Our position on this is that we do not recognise the Moroccan claim to the Western Sahara. We enjoy a very good bilateral relationship with Morocco. This is an issue that I have discussed with the Moroccan Foreign Minister on a number of occasions.

Our position is unchanged. Ultimately, we want to see this resolved through dialogue and negotiation, as is the case with a number of other issues around the world. We will always seek to encourage dialogue and negotiation. That remains the UK Government position.

Q556 **Henry Smith:** Foreign Secretary, is it still the Government's position that we support self-determination over the future of sovereignty for our British Overseas Territories such as Gibraltar and the Falklands?

James Cleverly: Yes, our position on those overseas territories has remained the same. I have made the point specifically with regards to the Falklands recently after Argentina unilaterally withdrew from an agreement around this. Our position on this remains unchanged.

Q557 **Henry Smith:** If the position of the British Government is, I would argue correctly, for self-determination over the future sovereignty of overseas territories such as Gibraltar, the Falkland Islands, Bermuda, the Cayman Islands and others, why is that not the case for the British Indian Ocean Territory?

James Cleverly: As you will know, there have been ongoing legal proceedings with regard to the definition of sovereignty of British Indian Ocean Territory. As you will know, we are in negotiations with Mauritius to try to resolve this in a way that protects all the things that we need to protect. The UK Government's position is that this is incredibly important to us. We abide by international law, and that is why we are discussing with the Government of Mauritius a sustainable solution to what is currently a disagreement.

Q558 **Henry Smith:** Finally, are you aware that one of those protections that I know the FCDO talks about is countering Chinese growing influence in the Indian Ocean. Are you aware that the Mauritian Government have recently chartered a Chinese vessel to transport between Mauritius and one of the outer islands of the British Indian Ocean Territory, Peros Banhos?



James Cleverly: Yes, I have heard reports of that. This is why more broadly, looping back round to the initial questions that the Committee posed, our increased focus on the Indo-Pacific is incredibly important.

We enjoy a good bilateral relationship with Mauritius. We want to make sure that they do not find themselves, as other countries have done, in a debt relationship with China that unbalances their sovereign governmental decision-making. We will continue to make sure that, through these negotiations, we stay very clearly focused on both the immediate geographical and the wider geopolitical issues that we seek to protect. I can give you and the Committee assurances on that.

Q559 **Drew Hendry:** The US Inflation Reduction Act subsidies are presenting clear opportunities in the hydrogen economy. We know that the EU is now working hard to access the supply chain. Scotland has a rapidly developing hydrogen industry. What specific work have you and the Prime Minister done to ensure that Scottish industry can access that?

James Cleverly: I have discussed UK-US trading, including Scotland, on trips to the United States of America. I am very proud of the fact that I am Scotland's Foreign Secretary. I am very passionate about promoting Scottish business, innovation and technology.

Q560 **Drew Hendry:** Have you done any work specifically on the hydrogen opportunity?

James Cleverly: I have raised business opportunities with Scotland, not exclusively about hydrogen.

Q561 **Drew Hendry:** You have not specifically on that. Have you had any discussions with Scottish Government Ministers about taking this forward?

James Cleverly: I had a meeting a while back now with Angus Robertson about promoting Scotland overseas. As I say, I am very proud to do it and it is an important part of the job that I do. Renewable energy and renewable energy technologies are something that I discuss regularly, not just with the United States of America but with countries around the world.

Q562 **Drew Hendry:** You said you had a discussion with Angus Robertson. When was that?

James Cleverly: I would need to double-check my diary, but it was a while back now. Was it the tail-end of last year or this year?

Drew Hendry: Last year.

James Cleverly: Was it last year?

² The Foreign Secretary has since confirmed he met with Angus Robertson on 16 November 2022.



Q563 **Drew Hendry:** No, I am asking you. Was it last year?

James Cleverly: I cannot remember off the top of my head.²

Q564 **Saqib Bhatti:** I wanted to ask a question about the arrest of Rached Ghannouchi and other people in the Ennahda movement. I am really concerned about the attack on political pluralism and the trampling on the democratic rights and the constitution that came about after the Arab Spring. Very simply, what is the FCDO doing to get Rached Ghannouchi and other members of the Ennahda movement released from prison?

James Cleverly: Tunisia looked as if it might be the good news story from the Arab Spring. It is disappointing to see the progress they have been making slipping backwards. I will double-check when the most recent engagement was on that. I do not have the detail but it would have been done. It is not something that I have raised personally with them, but I know this is something that we feel strongly about. Of course, we want to see pluralism and a meaningful democracy in Tunisia. We will continue to push for that.

Q565 **Neil Coyle:** We are fast approaching elections in Sierra Leone. In your letter to the Committee you said that where there are concerns, you have raised them with the Sierra Leone Government. What concerns have been raised?

James Cleverly: I have had direct exchange with the President of Sierra Leone, reinforcing our desire to see open, free and fair elections in Sierra Leone. Since the time of military Government in Sierra Leone, there has been a move towards democracy, but I wanted to make it clear that we are watching, that we want the best for Sierra Leone, but that we do expect free, open and fair elections in Sierra Leone. I have done that directly, and I know that this is a conversation that is echoed at High Commissioner level.

Q566 **Neil Coyle:** Did those conversations include issues about registration, intimidation of voters or anything specific, or were they more generally about retaining democracy?

James Cleverly: I can double-check on the nature of the conversation. This is a conversation that we have regularly. The High Commissioner had conversations on these issues when I visited Sierra Leone. I had the conversations on these issues directly with the Sierra Leonean Government, and, as I say, I have exchanged communications with the Sierra Leonean President reinforcing this.

Q567 **Neil Coyle:** Our letter raises specific concerns. Could you go back and look at what the discussions entailed, because your reply did not cover any of the specifics? It would just be interesting to hear.

James Cleverly: I was telling you what I have directly done. I will double-check on what specific points have been raised by the High Commissioner. High Commissioners, because they have more regular interaction with our interlocutors, will go into more detail than I will do at



Foreign Secretary level, but I have raised our focus on democracy in Sierra Leone directly with the President.

Q568 **Neil Coyle:** I look forward to receiving further correspondence. I wanted to ask about this fraud against the Foreign Office in Sierra Leone, with £2 million going missing in the context of a dwindling budget. Perhaps you can talk us through how it was even possible that this could occur.

Sir Philip Barton: It is still being investigated. We have missions around the world in countries with different practices; some of those have corrupt practices. This was clearly a case where individuals working for us were corruptly selling things that they should not have been. We have now spotted it. We are looking at exactly what happened and what that tells us about our controls around the world.

As you know, I wrote to the Chair in advance of appearing. Any fraud in our annual accounts is regrettable and we are determined to find out exactly what happened and any lessons we need to draw more widely across the network.

Q569 **Neil Coyle:** What is stopping this happening again in Sierra Leone? Does it not re-sound the alarm about the undermining of democracy and the rule of law in that country by the governing party, potentially?

Sir Philip Barton: It does not necessarily draw any lessons for wider politics or governance in Sierra Leone.

Q570 **Neil Coyle:** You are saying that this was specific to individuals within the Foreign Office's staff.

Sir Philip Barton: This case was specific to individuals in the High Commission, yes.

Q571 **Sir Chris Bryant:** First of all, thanks very much for what Andrew Mitchell said about the new anti-gay law in Uganda. I presume that you completely endorse that. Was it just about choosing which Minister would say it?

James Cleverly: Yes. He is the Minister for Africa and so he said it. I raised it directly when I last met the Ugandan High Commissioner as well.

Q572 **Sir Chris Bryant:** Can you confirm whether we have been funding the Inter-Religious Council of Uganda? You might not be across the details. If you are not, could you just write to us to tell us how much?

James Cleverly: I will double-check on that.

Q573 **Sir Chris Bryant:** Let us not get it half-right. If you could write to us that would be great, because obviously it would be distressing for a lot of people to think that we have been funding a profoundly homophobic organisation in Uganda for the last few years. It would be nice to know how much money we have been giving if we have; if we have not, we can cross that off.



On the Gulf Strategy Fund, as I understand it, we doubled the amount of money going to Saudi Arabia and Bahrain last year. Some of that money is going to the Ministry of Interior ombudsman, but there are lots of allegations that they have been deliberately covering up torture in Bahrain. Why on earth would we be giving money to Bahrain to do that?

James Cleverly: We are building capacity to make sure that the legal functions in Bahrain and other countries in the region improve. Actually, we have seen significant changes, particularly with regard to the use of non-custodial sentences and particularly with regard to people under the age of 18. We have seen improvements that have been made. I raise the issue of human rights regularly with my Gulf counterpart.

Q574 **Sir Chris Bryant:** When did you last do so?

James Cleverly: Again, I would need to double-check my diary.

Q575 **Sir Chris Bryant:** Can you just send us a list of the times when you have raised human rights issues with Gulf state leaders? It would be great if you could.

James Cleverly: I can do but, to make the point, this is a regular part of the conversations I have.

Q576 **Sir Chris Bryant:** It would just be good to have it all on the record.

James Cleverly: Typically, it would be in the vast majority of the interactions that I have with my Gulf counterparts.

Q577 **Sir Chris Bryant:** The last set of transparency returns that the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office returned was for up until last September. You are now nearly six months late. Why is that? You are meant to do it within three months of the date concerned. For instance, there are no transparency returns about your time in the Foreign Office.

James Cleverly: I will look into that.

Sir Philip Barton: Let me look into that.

Q578 **Sir Chris Bryant:** You are nearly always the last Department. The Leader of the House has said that you are meant to be doing it within a month, by the summer recess, so it would be good to see how you are going to get on with that.

James Cleverly: I will look to see what happened to that. I would imagine that, by the nature of international travel and the nature of our job, our returns might be more complicated than other Government Departments, but I will look into that. I would prefer to be best in class.

Q579 **Chair:** I have the final two questions, Foreign Secretary. What is your assessment on the ongoing normalisation of Assad? Also, connected to that question, the father of Asma al-Assad, the wife of Bashar, is a known captagon smuggler here in the UK, and yet there seems to be no effort to make sure that captagon does not make its way to the UK. Particularly



given that that opium is now being razed to the ground in Afghanistan, what are we doing to stop captagon coming here, but also to sanction people, like the Assad regime and his family, who are still here operating on British soil and travelling to Syria at least every other week?

James Cleverly: I am uncomfortable about speaking specifically about individuals, but I have raised the decision by the Arab League to re-admit Syria. I had extensive conversations with a number of my Arab interlocutors in the weeks and months leading up to that. I knew this was something that they were considering. I know that some of the pressure of Syrian refugees in the region is part of that, and there is a desire or a belief that it is better to prise Syria away from Russia, for example.

I have made it clear that we are uncomfortable with that. Obviously, it is not our decision to make. It is an Arab League decision. The UK's posture has not changed. I recognise some of the drivers for that decision, even though I do not necessarily agree with them; I certainly do not like the decision.

We will continue working with our partners in the region to try to drive stability in Syria. In the Syrian border regions, particularly in the west where it borders on to Lebanon, and particularly the north, where it borders on to Turkey and Iraq, these are challenges. It is an incredibly difficult file, and one that I spend a lot of my time working on. The UK's position remains consistent, and we will encourage our partners in the region not to allow Syria's reintroduction to blind them to some of the changes that Syria and the Assad regime really need to drive.

Chair: I will leave that request about Asma al-Assad's father with you.

James Cleverly: I will absolutely make a note of that.

Q580 **Chair:** Finally, is the Foreign Office resisting, holding up or refusing to allow the proscription of the IRGC, which we understand the Home Office wants to do? As part of that, can you also assure us as to the position of Morad Tahbaz, who remains held illegally by the Iranian Government and whose health we are gravely concerned about as a Committee?

James Cleverly: On the second point, we continue to work, as we always do, to get the full release of those people illegitimately detained in Iran. This is a conversation that I have had with the United States of America, and that we continue to have with the Iranian regime. The protection of British nationals overseas will always remain a priority for the UK.

With regards to proscription, decisions about proscription are always a cross-Government decision. The Government speak with one voice. The Government's position at the moment is that we have not proscribed the IRGC as a terrorist organisation. As I said in response to other questions on this, we keep these issues constantly under review. If the Government's position were to change, the Government would then speak with one voice about this changed position.



Q581 **Chair:** If the Foreign Office was to give it the green flag, would the Government's position change?

James Cleverly: Decisions are made across Government on this. I am not going to get into where people are because discussions within Government are best kept within Government until decisions are made, and then they are communicated as a single voice.

Chair: This Committee puts a strong request to the Foreign Office to give a green light to IRGC proscription.

Can I give you both our thanks for coming before us today and for giving up your time? We will write to you on a few issues that were raised today. Thank you, both, ever so much.