

Foreign Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: The UK's international counter-terrorism policy, HC 1832

Tuesday 12 September 2023

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Members present: Alicia Kearns (Chair); Saqib Bhatti; Henry Smith; Royston Smith.

Questions 1 - 46

Witnesses

I: Peter Neumann, Professor of Security Studies, Department of War Studies, King's College London, and Founder, International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation; and Antonio Giustozzi, Senior Research Fellow, Terrorism and Conflict at Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), and Visiting Professor, King's College London.

II: Richard Barrett CMG OBE, Former Director of Counter-terrorism, MI6, and Former Head, UN al-Qaeda/Taliban Monitoring Team, United Nations Security Council; Harmonie Toros, Professor of International Relations, University of Reading; and Paul Jordan, Head of Responding to Violent Extremism, European Institute of Peace.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– Richard Barrett CMG OBE and Prof Harmonie Toros
committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/121938/html/

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Peter Neumann and Antonio Giustozzi.

Q1 **Chair:** Welcome to this sitting launching the Foreign Affairs Committee's counter-terrorism inquiry. Thank you both for joining us today. Please introduce yourselves.

Peter Neumann: I am professor of security studies at King's College London. I founded and directed the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation.

Antonio Giustozzi: I am senior research fellow at the Royal United Services Institute. Before that, I did different things, but in particular I was at the London School of Economics for six years.

Q2 **Chair:** What are the trends in terrorism? How would you characterise the landscape that we see?

Peter Neumann: Since 2018, we have seen the threat from so-called jihadism decline. It has not been reduced to zero, but it has been significantly reduced—the threat both to countries in the west and in the middle east. The caliphate, as they called it, is no longer there. A number of their fighters have dispersed and turned up in places like Africa, but it is not the organisation it used to be. That is good news, I guess.

We have also seen, especially in western countries, the rise of different types of terrorism that we did not focus on so much in the past: far-right terrorism is one manifestation, but also what the Home Office describes as terrorists motivated by unstable or hybrid ideologies, often conspiracy theories mixed with other types of influences—the dominant threat in UK terrorist plots over the past few years.

We are living in a time when there is no dominant threat, as it used to be 10, 15 or 20 years ago, but different types of terrorism are still certainly threatening this country and other countries in Europe.

Antonio Giustozzi: I definitely agree that the overall threat has declined, but with the crisis in the two largest global jihadist organisations, al-Qaeda and Islamic State, there are opportunities as much as risk.

The opportunities are that these organisations are now very brittle. Al-Qaeda has suffered multiple splits, which weakened it and overall global jihadism. Islamic State seems to be in a phase of—perhaps disintegration is too early—deep crisis that could lead to disintegration. That offers some opportunities.

Islamic State in particular, but also al-Qaeda, is struggling for funding. There is clear evidence that the lack of funding is one of the drivers of this crisis. One of the things you try to do when you raise funds is to make the headlines, to advertise that you are still functioning and



represent a threat to what some sources of funding see as the enemy. Therefore, there might be an incentive for some confluence of the big jihadist organisations to try to carry out attacks where they hit hard: north America is very difficult, but Europe or European interests outside Europe. Turkey, in particular, could be a trouble spot.

Overall, the declining trend is probably not over, and it also poses, in a sense, a new risk that might not have been there before.

Q3 **Chair:** Will you unpack why you see particular risks in Turkey?

Antonio Giustozzi: There is a debate that is still open. I have not done research on Turkey, but there are reports from Turkish and American intelligence sources about a number of attempts to organise attacks against European interests in Turkey and Europe—logistically organised from Turkey. In particular, this refers to the Khorasan branch of Islamic State, which, for reasons a bit complicated to explain here, has now established a presence in Turkey and Syria.

Q4 **Chair:** Is that because Turkey is an easy meeting point? Is it because the financial system makes it easier to move money through Turkey? Is it because of the Government looking the other way? Is it a failure of policing? Why is Turkey such a vulnerable point?

Antonio Giustozzi: Turkey has for a long time been an important hub for Islamic State in particular and affiliated groups. From there, they support operations in Syria and support Khorasan in Afghanistan and, to a lesser extent, Pakistan and central Asia. Essentially, it was a financial hub. That is where they invested—for example, by buying or establishing companies under some fronts.

They moved money from there thanks to the fact that there are large diaspora communities—Syrian and Afghan. It is easy to move money through the informal banking system. The hawala system has, so to speak, strengthened its presence in Turkey because of the presence of many recent immigrants. It is very easy to move money from there.

That was the situation until very recently. About a year ago, or perhaps a bit sooner, the Turkish authorities started to crack down on these networks, whether Islamic State in Syria-Iraq or in Turkey—there is a Turkish branch and the Turkish authorities are particularly worried about that Turkish branch—or Khorasan. There have been detentions and the seizing of assets, which has created a lot of problems for these organisations. At the same time, of course, they have these networks in place. People have been detained, but many are still free—at least a few hundred individuals, some of whom have Turkish passports and therefore could have easy access to Europe.

Essentially, what could happen now is that, not being so busy with the financial operations of Islamic State, they might be asked to turn to something else. I am not able to confirm whether these alleged attacks have been planned, but at least 15 episodes have been reported by US



intelligence. That looks quite serious, although not one of them was carried out.

There are elements of Islamic State in Syria that have defected to Khorasan in central Asia, boosting the manpower of the Islamic State in Khorasan's Turkish operations. Basically, there are hundreds of these people there, but they are not sure what to do. Therefore, they are potentially manpower for operations against European interests.

Q5 Chair: Peter, how effective has UK counter-terrorism policy been over the past two decades? Is it fair to suggest that some foreign policy of not just the UK but of key western partners has exacerbated the risk to us of counter-terrorism?

Peter Neumann: Judging the effectiveness of counter-terrorism is always difficult. If nothing happens, it does not necessarily mean that counter-terrorism has been fantastically effective. If something happens, it does not necessarily mean that the system as a whole is wrong.

I can tell you from speaking to a lot of partners across Europe that, generally speaking, the UK is quite admired for the system it has created, essentially, since 2005, with the office for counter-terrorism at the Home Office co-ordinating efforts across different Departments and integrating foreign and domestic concerns, and with the effectiveness of different UK intelligence services being connected to Five Eyes and having access to a lot of information.

That is all considered to be very professional. Usually, the judgment of other professionals from foreign countries on UK counter-terror efforts is very positive.

When it comes to policy, I do not think there is any disagreement today—even Eliza Manningham-Buller said it in the Iraq inquiry—that the invasion of Iraq created a lot of grievance and made it more likely that people would join terrorist organisations, including in this country.

I do not think many people nowadays would dispute that some of the foreign interventions have needlessly increased the terrorist risk.

Q6 Chair: What about in the short term? In the past five years—whether it be the pull-out from Afghanistan or the enabling of countries that project Salafi attack theory ideologies and allow and support them to grow—is it fair to suggest that, in failing to tackle those or by failing to end the conflict in Palestine and Israel, those have been enabling? Or is it unfair to suggest to countries that failures in foreign policy contribute directly?

Peter Neumann: With partner countries—you are thinking, perhaps, of Saudi Arabia or other countries—it is always very difficult to strike a balance. You want to push them to do stuff and work with you, because that is where a lot of bad influences, to some extent, are coming from, but you want perhaps in some cases to sanction them—not formal sanctions, but by saying, "This is not okay."



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On the whole, the UK has struck a fair balance in relation to other countries. Over the past five years, in particular, the UK has become less talked about as a potential target. My colleagues at my centre are monitoring a lot of the chatrooms and Telegram channels. Ten years ago, the UK was alongside America and Israel as a prime target. That is no longer the case, necessarily.

Antonio Giustozzi: I broadly agree. Peter is much more competent than I am on this issue.

There are dimensions of counter-terrorism that are not visible in the public domain—for example, intelligence operations, especially abroad. I am sure that the collapse of al-Qaeda in Syria—a very big blow; possibly the worst blow it ever suffered—was the result of co-operation between intelligence agencies. I hear that British intelligence might have been involved, but primarily it was the Americans and some regional powers—Turkey again, and others. There was the encouragement or incentives that caused what is today Hay'at Tahri as Sham but once was the local branch of al-Qaeda to separate. Although controversial, which is why it is not in the public domain, in inflicting strategic long-term damage to global jihadists it was a major success, probably one of the biggest successes.

It is more political and intelligence operations. We are not talking about kinetic operations here, where this kind of political manipulation of companies of global jihadists has been most successful. I am not sure what the British role in that has been.

Q7 **Saqib Bhatti:** Professor Neumann, you spoke of the decline and prevalence of jihadism, compared with other forms of extremism and terrorism. Will you unwrap that a little? How sophisticated are far-right networks? What is the knowledge transfer across country lines?

Peter Neumann: For a number of years we have seen different online networks or message forums on the far right that have enabled or inspired terrorist operations, including, for example, the attacks in Christchurch, New Zealand, in El Paso, Texas, and in Halle, Germany. The message forums have largely been taken down. It is not clear where the people who used to be on those boards have reassembled.

The message forums—4chan or 8chan—were often places where socially isolated young men were hanging out, articulating misogynistic, far-right ideologies and sometimes feeling inspired to act. That was a key element.

There is a more formal, structured type of organisation that also operates internationally across country lines. There used to be a web forum, Iron March, with 12 neo-Nazi organisations from across the world being formally affiliated with it, trying to talk about tactics and targets. A number of operators in both the US and the UK have been arrested over the past few years and were part of these forums.



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Most of the international co-operation now happens online. That is why it is so important that counter-terrorism intelligence is present online as much as it is present offline. In relation to jihadism, the police and intelligence services understood that very early. In relation to far-right radicalisation and terrorism it took a little longer; they essentially started infiltrating Telegram channels and forums like that only in 2019 after the Christchurch attack. They have some catching up to do in relation to the far right.

Q8 **Saqib Bhatti:** I have a similar question to cover left-wing extremism, ecoterrorism and things like that. Are we seeing an increase in those threats?

Peter Neumann: That is an interesting topic. We have seen intense networks of groups like Just Stop Oil and, in Germany, Last Generation, which are using similar disruptive tactics that are not terrorism.

Within these movements and groups, we are seeing an intense debate about what the next steps should be. It is already becoming obvious that these tactics are not leading to political success. As in any social movement that is employing radical but not violent tactics and not achieving its objective, at some point there will be a discussion. The danger is that, from within these movements, splinters pursue violent sabotage or even terrorism.

I am not against the idea of fighting against climate change; I am very much in favour of it. It needs to be separated, but one should be very careful about splits within these movements and some people taking it forward in a more extreme way.

Q9 **Saqib Bhatti:** Dr Giustozzi, what is your assessment of how transnational jihadism has evolved over the past 20 years?

Antonio Giustozzi: I will focus on the more recent evolution.

We know now that al-Qaeda was a small organisation when it carried out the 9/11 attacks. There was no major growth of al-Qaeda immediately; it took a few years. The wars in Afghanistan and in Iraq were instrumental in allowing al-Qaeda to mobilise more funding than before and to expand and co-opt other groups. That was the phase of maximum expansion of al-Qaeda.

Then we had the first major split, before Islamic State. For a few years, Islamic State was able to propose itself as the leading global jihadist organisation. It had a phase of large growth, partly fuelled by oil revenue because it captured many sources of revenue, especially in Iraq.

This period is over. As I said before, when you try to set up a very large organisation you need money. You can rely on volunteers, but without money you do not do much. When you investigate the nitty-gritty of how they ran the organisation, you see that even when they used people who were paid very little or not at all it was very expensive to operate on the



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ground. You need safe houses. It is very expensive to move people around because you need to smuggle them. Buying weapons and explosives is very expensive, so you need money.

Many people speculate that the funding crisis might be linked to the recent Saudi Arabia-Iran agreement. Under one of the clauses, the Saudis stopped funding Islamic State, wherever it was. There certainly was a major drop in funding, more or less coincidentally with that event.

Whatever the reason, there is no money. These organisations are very short of money.

It is an important development that al-Qaeda is having a big discussion over their future. It seems clear to them that the only short-term source of funding could be from Iran, where quite a bit of the leadership resides. There is a lot of resistance within the organisation to becoming too dependent on Iran. Many members do not like Iran. They remember the Syrian conflict, but there were issues before that. They are paralysed in this debate, and al-Qaeda is a paralysed organisation that is unable to address any of the strategic issues it has. In some areas there is some co-operation with Iran—areas where there is a clear convergence of interests, as in parts of Africa—but, overall, it is not very functional.

The collapse in Islamic State's funding is a more recent event and it poses a major problem for them. We see that they are almost desperate to raise funding.

Overall, my sense is that if the trend continues we shall see the end of global jihad. That is already being replaced by an array of national jihads, of which Hayat Tahrir al-Sham is the most mature example but we can see other examples. For example, al-Shabaab in Somalia is not being funded by al-Qaeda but is funding al-Qaeda. You wonder how long they will keep going like this, rather than asking, "Do we need al-Qaeda at this point?", and going their own way, which brings a number of benefits. It makes it easier for them to be accepted as a future Government if they separate from global jihad. There could be other examples in Africa.

The most important emerging trend has been the renationalisation of jihad. From globalisation, we are going back towards the renationalisation of it.

Q10 **Saqib Bhatti:** How does the renationalisation of jihad, as you put it, affect the way in which countries co-ordinate their counter-terrorism responses? Is there a risk of renationalising our own approaches and falling away from the networks that we have built up?

Antonio Giustozzi: I think this renationalisation offers opportunities and, again, new threats. It is not only Britain that is observing this but earlier actors. I mentioned Turkey, an actor that not everybody sees favourably in Europe nowadays, for a number of reasons.



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Another actor that was involved early in this was Iran, and another one was Russia. There are multiple actors, not only Britain—and not only friendly actors that can observe what is going on and have been active in trying to manipulate this trend to their advantage. A national jihadist movement is more likely to make some compromise on principle to advance its own cause and forget about the overarching cause of global jihad. We are seeing that with the Taliban and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, and we could see some others.

The threat is that these groups could be more easily manipulated by rivals of the United Kingdom, especially in this very tense international situation. I mentioned the debate in al-Qaeda. The Iranians have some demands of al-Qaeda. If they fund it or offer safe havens, they have some demands for that. They want it to do things that suit the Iranian strategic agenda. People speculate about Russia being interested in using some of these groups for its own self-interest.

Differences could be exploited to weaken jihadism in general and completely eradicate global jihadism, which would probably result in some reduction in the threat in Europe, including in the United Kingdom. At the same time, there are potential risks.

Peter Neumann: I think the renationalisation of jihadism is definitely something that I see happening. Jihadists are turning up in multiple countries in Africa and across the middle east, fighting primarily local campaigns. This is good news for us because, strategically, a lot of these groups are not focused on the west.

Strategies can, of course, change, which is why it would be a mistake for countries like the UK to say, "Jihadism is over; we are not paying attention to it any longer."

Ten or 12 years ago, everyone thought the Arab spring would bring democracy to the middle east and that that would be the end of terrorism. That can change very quickly.

A second factor that is important to keep in mind is that, even if these jihads are locally focused, groups are holding territory that can be a safe haven for transnationally focused actors—as we saw in Afghanistan with al-Qaeda 20-plus years ago and as we saw in Syria, with various groups hosting more transnationally focused actors.

One of the lessons coming out of 9/11 and what happened 22 years ago is very much still valid. If you allow even locally focused jihadist actors to hold territory, to govern a country, it ultimately poses the risk that, sooner or later, they will provide safe haven for people who want to attack you. That needs to be a cause of concern, even if the groups are not always focused on the west.

Q11 **Chair:** Antonio, may I take you back to a comment you made? I am interested in how you see the fight for influence over the Islamic world



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feeding into radicalisation. You talked about Saudi potentially defunding some of the terrorism it had been funding.

As the Committee travels around the world, we see Turkey, Saudi and the Qataris competing over who is going to run mosques in countries, with the preachers who come with that, whether it is central Asia, the middle east or Africa.

How much do you see that fight for influence over the Islamic world and the types of mosques that are in communities as central to the potential risk of greater radicalisation and therefore a greater threat to the UK?

Antonio Giustozzi: In the past, for a number of years, the fight for influence centrally drove the growth of global jihadism and allied groups. I do not know whether we want to name names here, but some Gulf countries were competing with one another. The strategy was not necessarily to try to see these jihadist groups succeed; it was more to gain leverage over these groups, make them dependent on funding, try to influence them and then try to do something with that.

For example, in the negotiations with the Taliban there was initially strong competition between the Saudis and Qataris. The Saudis invested in the Taliban because they wanted to buy influence and to try to use it to maintain control over the negotiating process, for their own geopolitical aims. It did not work. They lost the competition with the Qataris, but that was an example. In the media—I am not going to comment on whether the reports are correct—there are plenty of reports about Saudi Arabia and Qatar competing for influence in Syria over various Salafi and more extreme groups.

Essentially, that is what was driving that growth, but now what is driving the positive trend is the feeling that being seen to be somehow related to global jihadis is counterproductive. Too much information is now in the public domain and the intelligence agencies around the world are now quite aware. American security operatives, for example, were well informed about who was funding these groups. There was a lot of evidence of the funding coming from the Gulf, for example. That has become such an embarrassment for a number of Governments that they are trying to pull out and invest instead in the legitimisation of national jihad as a more risk-free, or less risky, way of investing in these groups.

Peter Neumann: I agree. The radicalisation and terrorism in the 2010s was, to a very large extent, a consequence not of our western interventions but of rivalry between Iran and the Shi'ite element and Saudi Arabia and the Sunni element.

The west, in some instances, has amplified that but was not at the centre of it. It has amplified it in, for example, the case of Syria. It basically said, "We are not going to intervene in Syria, but feel free, Qatar, Saudi and UAE, to sponsor your groups fighting against Assad," which they did and they were not very selective, because some of them turned out to be jihadists.



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While in principle it is a good idea to have local partners and to empower them, you have to be very careful about who you empower and what fight you are joining.

Chair: That is very helpful, thank you.

- Q12 **Royston Smith:** How effective are the Government's efforts to forecast and track future terrorism trends, including state-sponsored terrorism, with regard particularly to the integrated review and the integrated review refresh? Do those efforts need to be picked up? You said it is good for us, in a way, that some of these organisations are moving into Africa, which makes us less of a target, and the Government must look at that in the same way. Are they taking their eye off the ball with the integrated review refresh, or are they taking it seriously still and thinking we should be looking at trends and forecasts?

Peter Neumann: I know that people at the FCDO are very much interested in these trends. I am a little bit worried, having read the refresh, that terrorism was almost entirely written out of it.

Chair: That is why we are doing our inquiry—we have the same view.

Peter Neumann: Yes. That would be a little careless, given that the threat is not entirely over. It would also be a mistake because, over the past 20 years, like it or not, quite a lot of institutional knowledge has built up. The UK has become very good at countering terrorism. If it is sidelined completely, a lot of that knowledge will be lost.

Twelve years ago—I briefly hinted at this before—I was living in the United States and I remember very well how enthusiastic everyone was when Bin Laden was killed and the Arab spring was breaking out. There was almost universal agreement among American policymakers that jihadism was over. That was the time when Obama announced the pivot to Asia. We could finally forget about the middle east and focus on China. Of course, two years later, there was ISIS and terrorist attacks all across the world, a more powerful terrorist organisation than had ever existed before.

I would be very careful to steer away from terrorism so dramatically. I can understand if you want to reduce and focus on other things, but it would be a mistake to lose all these insights and all the knowledge that has been built up.

- Q13 **Royston Smith:** Is your assessment the same for far-right terrorism as it is for global jihad?

Peter Neumann: From a Foreign Office perspective, of course, jihadism is probably more important simply because it is a global movement, mostly based in countries outside the UK. Far-right terrorism is a significant threat, but I would say it is primarily a domestic threat, with international links. Of course, these groups are networked internationally, but they are not based abroad; they are based here. So, from a Foreign



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Office perspective, I would say this is something you should pay attention to if there are links to the UK. But it is the Home Office, primarily, that needs to look at far-right terrorism.

Q14 Royston Smith: Antonio, you said there is an issue with funding. You also said there is a risk that high-profile or large-scale attack could be used as a means to bring in more funding. Do al-Qaeda, ISIS, have the ability to launch one of those high-profile public attacks we have seen in the past?

Antonio Giustozzi: I was in touch with Europol about a year ago and I do not think the situation has dramatically changed since. I do not believe they currently have, anywhere in Europe—of course they focus on the European Union, but this applies to the UK as well—the ability to organise anything from the top down. So, of course, you could have lone-wolf attacks—people who organise something locally, as happens from time to time. But the belief is that al-Qaeda does not have this capability.

They see Islamic State as having an organised presence in Europe but not with the aim of carrying out attacks; mostly it is about doing propaganda, especially online. I know, for example, Islamic State in Khorasan has quite a lot of people in Europe. They do online propaganda and social media from Europe because it is easier and safer for them. They also do some fundraising and recruitment, but not with the immediate aim of starting a new terror campaign in Europe.

There is a sense that, although quite a number of members of Islamic State returned to Europe from Syria—I cannot say to which countries, but possibly some to the UK—the appetite for getting involved is low; these people are quite demoralised. The collapse of the caliphate had a major psychological impact on many of these people. Even if their leaders were hoping that these people would spread a new wave of terrorists in Europe, it seems that many of them simply wanted to hide; they wanted to stay away. That might have impacted their calculations.

Essentially, as I mentioned before, out of 15 planned attacks detected by US intelligence, not one could be carried out successfully. All were either abandoned or pre-empted and, in some cases, people were detained before they could carry them out. That seemed to confirm that they are struggling; they lack the capacity at this moment to do it. But, of course, if they do try, the possibility of a few hundred Islamic State in Khorasan operatives in Turkey getting through cannot be discounted.

Getting from there to the UK, of course, would certainly be complicated. The risk is definitely higher for any European embassy in, for example, Ankara and assets abroad. But there is a possibility of them making their way to Europe. If you have a Turkish passport, it is easy to travel all over Europe. The risk cannot be discounted, but it might take them some time to rebuild, or to build from scratch, the ability to carry out attacks because the teams they had there are few and they have been dismantled. They need to regenerate it.



- Q15 **Royston Smith:** How effective is the degradation of their operations and their organisations when we see the elimination of the leadership? Is that making a big difference, or has that made a big difference?

Antonio Giustozzi: Presumably, it makes some difference but probably not as much as is generally assumed, especially when the new leaders have not even had the time to settle into their job. They are not even known to the mass of the members. Simply having a high-profile caliph like al-Baghdadi was beneficial for the caliphate. There was a loss, but after that, probably, anything additional does not have much incremental impact.

I believe it is much more useful to manipulate the divisions—the cracks within these organisations—politically. It is the right time in many cases to encourage the divisions that are emerging and splintering these organisations. Of course, when you have all these splinters, you face a different problem. You need to monitor a lot of different groups, as opposed to the main ones. But regarding the ability to operate, the ability to respond, splintering is probably very bad for them, because having a very big brand name helps a lot in fundraising. When you have 15 small brands, all trying to compete for the same limited pot of funding, it does not look very good from the point of view of somebody who wants to invest money in jihad because he thinks he is going to heaven afterwards. It needs a big organisation, a big cause, to motivate it.

This kind of splintering has already damaged them, and any further splintering will make fundraising even more difficult.

- Q16 **Saqib Bhatti:** You mentioned the UK's track record in tackling terrorism and how effective it has been. What other countries would you rate as excellent across the world, and why?

Peter Neumann: That would be an interesting study to commission with my centre. From the top of my head, I have always been very impressed by the seriousness and the resources that Scandinavian countries have invested in countering terrorism. The Netherlands is also very good. I am not Dutch, so I do not have any personal interest, but I have been impressed by the fact that it has had certainly at least as significant a terrorist threat as the UK—the numbers of plots and of people radicalised; it is very similar in many respects—but it has not had a successful terrorist attack since 2004.

I encourage you to look at the Prevent programme, which the Netherlands has run as long as the UK, but arguably without all the contention, difficulties and controversy.

- Q17 **Saqib Bhatti:** Why is that?

Peter Neumann: There are probably different reasons. One is, from the very start, the Prevent programme there was run by local mayors, rather than central Government. Local mayors are allowed to do what is right for



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their community, rather than following certain ideological ideas that may change and may not be appropriate for particular communities.

They have also focused very much on local community structures as opposed to national programmes rolled out across the country. That has made it less politicised whereas, in its first years, the UK's Prevent programme was always connected to UK foreign policy and stuff like that. You cannot do that with a local mayor. A local mayor has nothing to do with foreign policy. That very contentious topic was taken off the table from the very beginning. They have been very successful in many respects. It is a good example of how to do it right.

Q18 Chair: I want to try to race through four more topics, if that is possible.

You started a discussion about returnees. Much was made years ago about the Daesh cubs and returning pregnant mothers, whose job was to give birth to children and raise them in the way of the jihad and ensure they went on to cause problems. Was that a media furore at the time? You mentioned they were demoralised by the collapse of the caliphate. Should we be doing more about this? Is there enough monitoring?

As a subsection, although it is quite a big question, do you truly believe someone can ever be deradicalised? I question whether someone's psychology will always make them vulnerable to being attracted to an ideology; it is about shifting them to a non-violent ideology rather than a violent one.

Antonio Giustozzi: Of course, deradicalisation is a complex topic. People do deradicalise but, usually, these are internal processes. For example, we found a lot of former members of various jihadist organisations would change their minds or lose faith in the cause, not because of some Government programme but simply because of what they saw, what they experienced. For example, many central Asians saw the execution of their fellow central Asians in Iraq for not obeying orders. That was a major factor in many of them abandoning Islamic State. Defeats, of course, may take a while but they do have an impact. Then, of course, it does not mean that these people become liberal democrats. They may lose faith.

Chair: I might use that in my next political campaign.

Antonio Giustozzi: I think you know what I mean. Today, they might lose faith in a particular organisation or in a particular idea of achieving the aim through violence. Most usually, their mindset remains very ultra-conservative or even extremist—non-violent but still extremist.

So, one big debate, of course, has been—I know the UK has tried this and there is still debate over it, but it is one option, although I am not necessarily advocating it—to encourage people to give some space to non-violent extremists in order to undermine the violent extremists. That, of course, makes sense where there are a lot of violent extremists. Of course, a fairly small minority might not make much sense, but in



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countries where there are mass movements you have to go for the lesser evil as opposed to the perfect solution. There is a problem with many of the deradicalisation programmes that exist.

There is a third alternative, which is disruption as opposed to deradicalisation, to try to undermine an organisation rather than trying to deradicalise individuals. The individual might be quite extreme in their views, but we should not underestimate the importance of the organisational element.

As I mentioned, without the organisational element of money, there could be isolated incidents but not a major strategic threat. If you can undermine an organisation—this is actually what we do. What we have been trying to do is more disruption because we can see some results. But with the deradicalisation, we find it difficult to deliver.

Peter Neumann: To make it a little more interesting, I disagree here.

Chair: We love disagreement. Go on, please.

Peter Neumann: Yes. I think deradicalisation can work, and I think that it depends on what is expected from it.

Chair: Yes.

Peter Neumann: As you just said, if someone can be convinced not to commit an act of violence, but instead just be what we call a cognitive extremist—just have extreme views without killing people—that is already something. We should not dismiss that so easily. There have been many successes like that. I often wish that organisations engaged in doing these kinds of interventions would also talk about their successes more because there have been successes.

One point is very clear, and this is where it comes into the topic of what do you expect. You cannot deradicalise someone against their will. Deradicalisation works best when someone is already having doubts, having questions, when someone is, explicitly or not, looking for a way out. If, at that point, an intervention programme facilitates that, encourages the questions and the doubts, and offers an opportunity for someone to get out, it can be very helpful.

The last point I want to make is that a mistake in the discussion is always that we look at disruption and deradicalisation as mutually exclusive. They do complement each other. In some cases, the police may not be the right instrument, may not be useful, because that person may not have broken any laws. In that case, a deradicalisation effort may be the only tool there is.

So, it does not always work; I completely agree with you. It would be a mistake to expect 100% success, which is not true of any kind of programme of that sort. But there are uses for deradicalisation and there



are good practitioners in this country who are very committed and have a lot of expertise.

Q19 Chair: As we go forward with future trends, Royston picked up on the ability of the Foreign Office to do that tracking and forecasting. Where do you see future threats to the UK emanating from? Is there a potential intersection with organised crime, as terror groups themselves, perhaps, are not looking to mass fundraise, to have the bureaucracy you talked about, the things that essentially provide entry points for intelligence services? Is there a potential intersectionality with organised crime—that they move to them to perpetrate acts for them? Obviously, that removes much of the glory that individuals are seeking and all the infamy around either doing things or orchestrating them. Where should we be investing our time and money now because of what is coming down the road? Then there is that intersectionality.

Antonio Giustozzi: Of course, there is a track record of extremist organisations working with organised crime in general. Mostly for moving people around, they definitely rely on that a lot—moving money, moving weapons, of course. They have to rely on the services of smugglers and so on, which creates some kind of link.

It would be highly risky for an organised crime group to carry out attacks in a country like the UK because, of course, there is not a lot of violent crime in the UK, unlike some Latin American country with immensely high crime rates anyway where it is easy to avoid attribution. But in the UK, it would be almost certain to attract a lot of attention, create a lot of trouble for the implementers. I do not see that as something that is likely to happen in this context.

Assuming the money is available, organised crime can move people, weapons or explosives. There is a good rationale for fighting organised crime anyway, apart from the terrorist threat.

Peter Neumann: Regarding future developments, I would certainly look at any kind of geopolitical change. Terrorism is a political phenomenon and is typically tied to cleavages within society or within the global context. As we said before, the conflict between Saudi and Iran had terrorist consequences. Foreign military interventions by western countries had terrorist consequences. Perhaps what we are seeing now in Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine will have terrorist consequences. So, whatever happens, we have to think about how terrorists would use this opportunity, how states would try to sponsor groups like that. That is a very important component of predicting what future developments there will be.

Secondly, we must keep an eye on technology. Extremist groups are always typically the first to exploit new opportunities, whether it is encrypted technology on mobile phones or the internet as a whole—social media. Whatever new thing comes along will probably be used by



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terrorists in one way or another. This is an area where we have to be ahead of the curve.

Q20 **Chair:** That is why I often say that, over the last few decades, we saw terrorists who behaved like states and now we are moving to states who behave like terrorists. How much learning does there need to be? Currently, when you look within the Foreign Office, counter-hostile state and counter-terrorist operations and directorates are completely separated; they do not share expertise or intelligence. Obviously, there are people who might move around between the roles, but it is not that common. How much should we increasingly be looking at adopting many of the CT strategies we use when it comes to states that are using terrorist tactics?

Peter Neumann: There is room for that. One thing that immediately comes to mind is the whole area of disinformation, countering disinformation. The conversation of the past 10 years was almost exclusively or mostly about jihadist groups and how we can counter their presence online. Now we are dealing with state actors sometimes using social media to promote certain messages. A lot can be learned from that.

As a footnote, we know that countries like Russia have systematically sought to promote division within western societies because they are ultimately trying to weaken western resolve. We know that Russia, in particular, has sponsored far-right actors across Europe and in the western world. That is definitely a crossover here.

Q21 **Chair:** In which case, are there any final comments or anything you wish we had asked you that you would like to leave us with as we go into this inquiry?

Peter Neumann: No, thank you.

Chair: Thank you both ever so much for helping us to kick off this inquiry.

Peter Neumann: Thank you very much.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Richard Barrett CMG OBE, Harmonie Toros and Paul Jordan.

Q22 **Chair:** Welcome back to this first hearing of the Foreign Affairs Committee on counter-terrorism. Thank you for joining us. Please introduce yourselves.

Harmonie Toros: I am professor of politics and international relations at the University of Reading.

Paul Jordan: I am a consultant and expert on counter-terrorism, international and national security, and head of responding to violent extremism at the European Institute of Peace.



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Richard Barrett: I have no current role.

Chair: Which means you can speak completely freely.

Richard Barrett: My opinions are entirely my own. I used to work in the UK on security matters, including counter-terrorism, and then was asked by the United Nations Secretary-General to head a team of experts to help the Security Council with counter-terrorism. In that role, I was very much involved in the evolution and development of a UN global strategy to counter terrorism and what ultimately became the UN Office of Counter-Terrorism.

Q23 **Chair:** Thank you all very much for joining us. In this session we want to deep-dive into north-east Syria, which is an area the Committee is passionate about but feels is very overlooked at the moment.

Richard, give us an overview of what you see as the situation on the ground at the moment in terms of prisons and detention camps more broadly. Does the UK even have a policy?

Richard Barrett: Sometimes it is hard to detect what the UK policy is generally on lots of things, is it not, not just on terrorism? In Syria, it is slightly strange in many ways. We are an important member of the coalition to defeat Daesh and so on, and we have been very active in that. When you have a big, effective tool like the military, you tend to use it, but, for the rest of the world, when we look particularly at ISIS sympathisers who are held in camps and prisons there, we do not appear to have a very coherent policy—in particular, when you look at some of the actions taken in the famous case of Shamima Begum, for example, and in relation to other countries.

Paul will say more about this because he is very much involved with European countries, but even when I was at the UN people thought that the UK must have a sensible policy on this. They are waiting for it to evolve.

I think the Foreign Office was in a bit of a bind because it could see the unsustainability, if you like, of the Home Office policy of just keeping these people out, because what is going to happen to them? They will not just disappear in a puff of smoke, and clearly with all the children being born in the camps the problem will last for some time.

The Kurdish authorities, the SDF, which is particularly engaged in so far as the remnants of the Islamic State and their detention are concerned, are always looking to see whether they can persuade the UK somehow, or perhaps trap it in some respects, to move towards recognition of the Kurdish proto state. That was clearly their ambition, but obviously the UK could not do that under international law given relations with Turkey, Iraq and, one hopes in the future, Syria.

As far as the SDF is concerned—I could speak at length on this but it would probably be rather superfluous and dull—it is still waiting; it says,



"We are holding the fort, but how long do you think we can go on with this? You are helping us by building prisons or providing some support through the coalition against Daesh, but in a bilateral sense you are still, quite rightly, seeing this as part of Syria and, therefore, it is difficult for you to engage directly."

In western Syria, there is a slightly different situation because you have Hayat Tahrir al-Sham as the main body in charge, to a certain extent in competition with the Kurds and the Islamic State remnants in that part of Syria. There, I think it is much more a question of what our relationship with Turkey and Lebanon is, for example, in that area of the Levant generally than it is about having a direct association with the people who are in charge, whom we would still regard essentially as terrorists.

Our relations with northern Syria, the area over which the Syrian Arab Republic has lost control, are slightly confusing and conflicted even to ourselves.

Paul Jordan: To pick up on a couple of Richard's points, UK foreign policy, particularly in north-east Syria, at best, could be described as confused and, at worst, as duplicitous, pusillanimous and very isolationist. That is very much about them desiring other countries to repatriate their citizens. Obviously, being a big part of the coalition, the US and all the other countries are pushing for what they call third-country nationals—those outside Syria and Iraq who are in the camps—to be taken back. That has been pretty much the push since 2019 and the fall of Baghuz, when everyone was going into the camps and it became too much for the Kurds to deal with.

The UK is now pretty much on its own, certainly within western Europe and within most of Europe, and certainly compared with a lot of countries that have repatriated, by refusing. It has repatriated three or four orphans, basically.

The UK does not have a lot of citizens, which makes it even worse, and it is simply refusing to move on this subject. I started working on the diplomatic side of things to try to convince countries, particularly European ones, to repatriate their citizens back in 2019. At the time, pretty much all countries were aligned, in that they did not really want to talk about it, they thought it was too difficult to deal with and their domestic politics would be too difficult and people would not want them to be accepted back. Between now and then, we have seen a vast increase in countries moving away from that position and towards repatriation.

Comparing 2020 with 2022, there has been an 86% increase in repatriations and, comparing 2021 with 2022, there has been a 60% increase, so it has been going up precipitously. That is because there is only one solution for countries: to repatriate their citizens. Nothing else will work. There are no other durable solutions. Everyone in the US, the UN and even the coalition, in which the UK is a major player, is for



repatriation. I think that for the UK to expect other countries to repatriate is a pretty poor showing. In particular, there is a big push around Iraq repatriating theirs, while the UK remains in the position of not talking about it at all with regard to its citizens.

It has to change. Richard and I spoke to the UK about this many years ago before it was even a problem. We said it could be a problem. We have been talking to them consistently since and there has not been a change of position. From a foreign policy perspective, a lot of allies now just do not understand the UK position and are not as willing to accept the UK talking to them about things in the region because they feel, "What would be the point?" Then you have local allies, such as the Kurds or other actors you are trying to help, who just do not believe what the UK says.

Q24 Chair: Harmonie, will you unpack a bit what Paul says about the UK's refusal to repatriate, and how that is affecting our diplomatic relationships?

Harmonie Toros: If we move away from terrorism being the central focus and threat in international security, that is not necessarily a negative thing in the sense that there was too much emphasis on the danger and threat of terrorism in the post-9/11 period.

The danger now is that there was an extraordinary global effort, the global war on terrorism, but it has left behind a whole series of situations, including the one in north-east Syria, that cannot be forgotten. It is not because the great capitals have decided that the war on terror is over. We forget that all these situations are still out there and people exist in these unresolved and absolutely terrifying realities.

One important thing to say is that the war on terror may be over in London or Washington, but it leaves behind things that need to be worked through and tackled. Those things cannot be forgotten.

Peter Neumann spoke about how the UK is regarded as being particularly effective in counter-terrorism and countering and preventing violent extremism. The Contest strategy was very well regarded internationally. Therefore, the UK has the means to deal with this situation. It has had a multi-agency approach to radicalisation and countering violent extremism for the past 20 years. It includes the NHS, social care, education and the police service. We have this set-up; it is not as if the UK is unprepared to deal with the maximum of 100 UK citizens we are talking about. This is why it is so difficult to understand, as there are multi-agency responses set up in France, Holland, Belgium and Germany. Why is the UK refusing to do this? It is a question that leaves allies perplexed.

Q25 Chair: If you move away from the diplomatic—let me play extreme devil's advocate—there are those who say that British citizenship is a privilege and that these individuals chose to rip up that privilege and walk away from the country and commit treason when they chose to join



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Daesh. Would you argue that some people may do this, or essentially is the argument that people do not have the right to British citizenship any longer because they have chosen not only to reject it but to join an enemy force and say they are no longer citizens?

Harmonie Toros: I am not sure that is how citizenship actually works to a certain degree.

Chair: But when they turned up in Iraq or Syria, they walked in; they got passports from Daesh; they got forms and paid taxes, so to all intents and purposes their view was that they had taken out a new citizenship and had no interest in what they had before. These are the arguments we have. How do you argue against those views of the average person in the street?

Harmonie Toros: The first point would be to speak about the children, the largest group of people we are talking about here. The only thing these children have done is to be born. They were born in the wrong place at the wrong time. A lot of them are small children, and those who were alive when Baghuz fell in 2019 were small children.

I know we will come to the question of the boys. The boys are being particularly targeted and they are in a particularly dire situation. Some of them were six when Baghuz fell. We are in a situation where British children, who have done nothing other than being born, are being punished essentially for the crimes of their parents. That is the first question.

The second question is about the women, but also potentially some of the men. Not everyone necessarily went willingly to Iraq and Syria. Some people were tricked into going; some people went as minors. If you were taken there by your family when you were 12 or 13 and have become an adult, what is your status? There is a whole series of realities on the ground.

We are talking about a small enough group of people about whom a real investigation of the adults can be carried out on a case-by-case basis. We are not talking about 10,000 people. The Iraqis have repatriated 3,700 people. For them to do it on a case-by-case basis is an extraordinary amount of work. If we are talking about 100 people, it is a very different reality.

Richard Barrett: This is a very important question. Many who see their Governments helping people who have done bad things with rehabilitation programmes or whatever slightly resent the fact that those people are being rewarded for their bad behaviour and are getting things that are not necessarily available to perfectly law-abiding people. That is true. That has always been a problem, particularly with the rehabilitation programmes in Saudi Arabia and Yemen, as it used to be.

None the less, there are questions to be asked, particularly for European countries, as to why these people went to join Islamic State. I do not



know of anyone from the UK who joined Islamic State to train to be a domestic terrorist and come back and commit attacks here. They went to join something; there was a pull factor, but there was also a push factor. Maybe they felt they did not have opportunities, felt discriminated against or regarded as second-class, or were just isolated from society in some way here. I think you have to look at why people went before you can decide what the right treatment is.

Q26 Chair: Regardless of push factors, it is still a matter of personal responsibility.

Paul Jordan: However, if you do want them to answer to that responsibility, there has to be some form of accountability. At the moment, there is none; they are just in a camp. If you want to try the person for treason or answer for something, you have to have a process. What those of us on this side are saying is not that you need to forget their crimes or what they did, or particularly like them, but that there has to be some justice and accountability, and that involves a process.

If you say that they ripped up their passports, all you are really doing is pushing that on to the Kurds. If every single country did that—at the start, many of the countries were trying to—you would have a group of people about whom countries were saying, “We don’t want them back. As far as we are concerned, they are not ours.” They have nowhere to go. You are expecting a non-state group of actors, who are barely controlling the state with no finances and no real systems, to do something with them.

Q27 Chair: On the accountability point, in Syria there can be no accountability. We all know the court system is a joke; there is no meaningful justice. But on accountability is it not the case that most of the people they hurt, the victims and survivors of their crimes, are Iraqis? Therefore, should they not face justice? Where they end up serving their prison sentences is another question, but, if we bring them back to the UK, surely that is wrong because those Iraqis or members of ethnic minorities who were persecuted by them deserve to see those people in Iraqi courts and to be able to face them down. Often, one of the most important things for survivors of crime is to be able to sit opposite that person in a court under the rule of law and say, “I’m giving evidence against you. You did this to me,” and see them face justice. How do we get round that problem?

Richard Barrett: That is a very important question. Of course, there have been very many trials of Iraqis and Syrians who joined Islamic State or showed sympathy towards it in Iraq. By our standards, we would probably say these trials were inadequate. There was not proper representation of the defendants, and so on. Either we send them for trial in Iraq or we bring them back here for some sort of accountability.

I do not think any of these people who are repatriated to their country of origin are resistant to going to court and being tried for whatever they



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did, but there has to be a legal framework in which that operates. If there is not something that says you should be charged and taken before a court, a law has to be passed that provides for that.

- Q28 **Chair:** We do not particularly like the court system in Mexico, but if a British national conducts drug trafficking in that country, we do not say, "We don't like your courts. Mexico was where the crime was perpetrated, but we are going to fly you back to the UK to face justice instead because you are a British national." We say, "You must face justice in the country where you committed the crime. We will try to represent you and support you through consular access, but you are subject to their courts and their punishment because that is where you committed the crime."

Richard Barrett: If there was a clear understanding between the UK and Iraq or the UK and Syria, that is fine, but there is not. I think the Iraqi courts would feel quite burdened by the women and children against whom, on the face of it, there is not much solid evidence to bring before the courts.

- Q29 **Chair:** But there are a number of individuals against whom there will be evidence who should be prosecuted.

Richard Barrett: There may be some cases that can be brought—great: bring them—but for most women and children it is probably pretty hard to say they had terrorist intent, or will have terrorist intent.

- Q30 **Chair:** They may have enslaved the Yazidis; they may have assisted in the rape of Yazidis. There are other crimes that are just as heinous, even if they are slightly different.

Richard Barrett: Crimes against the Yazidis and things like that are very serious, but as British—I think this is part of your question about the British reputation and contribution—we are very strongly in support of the rule of law. In this area, the rule of law is very vague. Whose law? We do not recognise the Kurdish authorities; we do not even recognise the Kurdish authorities in Iraq. There are human rights issues, and so on; there are international conventions. All these things complicate what we are trying to do in holding these people to account.

- Q31 **Saqib Bhatti:** Paul, can you shed a bit of light on what is happening in the camps with the radicalisation of women, children and men?

Paul Jordan: We are talking about two camps. Al-Hawl, which makes all the news, is the bigger one. At its largest, it had 70,000 to 80,000 people. Al-Roj is much smaller; it holds a few thousand. Al-Hawl is the one that has been deeply affected by radicalisation. There have been ISIS cells in Al-Hawl consistently for quite a while.

It is basically split up into two main areas. The larger part, which is sectioned off, is purely Iraqis and Syrians. There was roughly a 50:50 split. At its greatest, each had 30,000 Iraqis and Syrians; now it is down



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to about 25,000 Iraqis and 18,000 Syrians, but that contains some men, women and children.

What is called the international annexe was an addition made after the fall of Baghuz, when it had an influx of everyone. That reflected up to 60 countries. At its greatest, it was just over 12,000 to 13,000; at the moment, it is about 8,000 to 10,000 with all the repatriations and movements.

Fifty per cent of the camp is under 11 years old, so we are talking predominantly about children, and most of the radicalisation is happening with children. That is particularly prevalent in the annexe. The Kurds had all these people turn up. They did not really know much about them; they just knew they had been fighting with Daesh and they were from places they had never even heard of, so they said, "Okay, fine. We will keep them in the annexe." It is basically an outdoor prison camp. It is locked up. They do not have any real contact with the outside world. It is heavily secured and it is very difficult for them to communicate at all. There, you had the more radical women indoctrinating the kids. You had lots of radicalisation lessons and kids playing with toy guns. It became a difficult place for anyone to interact with in terms of both how the Kurdish authorities controlled it and how the occupants were behaving.

In a way, it is undulating between levels of radicalisation in there and the main camp as well as security. There was a significant number of threats around the end of 2021 and start of 2022 in the Iraqi side of the main camp. There were still ISIS cells with lots of ISIS propaganda and tunnels. People are continually being smuggled out; people are bribing their way out. It is not a very safe or secure area, and there is an odd balance between a kind of prison and a humanitarian camp. Because both types of actors feel it is very difficult to deal with and interact with, you get neither.

Q32 Saqib Bhatti: How serious are the narratives and ideologies that young boys are being exposed to in the camps?

Paul Jordan: Some of them are very, very serious. There is an ongoing policy on the part of the administration. When boys get to about 13 they are removed and put into either an adult detention facility—basically, a male prison—or a children's or boys' detention facility. There are a couple of them. The coalition helped to renovate one of those.

There was a lot of sexual violence towards the children, particularly young males. There were lots of rapes, which the Kurds were finding incredibly difficult to deal with because it was around the ideology of repopulating Daesh. When the males reached that age, they removed them, but that meant they went to a prison. Much of the time, that is an adult prison. A couple of years ago, a young Australian citizen was killed during an attempted Daesh break from Ghweiran prison in Hasakah, because the younger kids were used as human shields by the rest of the



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prisoners in attempting to escape. Again, it is a pretty brutal and not very positive environment for youngsters.

Richard Barrett: I would add that it is not because the Kurds are instinctively rough on people; they just completely lack the resources, training and so on to be able to run a properly managed prison.

Paul Jordan: I have a lot of sympathy for the Kurds. We have been working with them for a long time to try to help them. We have got them to change position a lot of times with regard to repatriation. At the start, it was difficult for countries to repatriate, but now the Kurds are much easier to deal with because they have been saying, "Help us." They have been saying to the international community—the Brits and everyone else—"We can't cope with this." General Mazloum has been consistently banging on that door, but those who refuse to repatriate are not helping at all.

Harmonie Toros: The question of the boys is a particularly difficult one. On one side, you have reality on the ground and the danger of their radicalisation. You have the reality on the ground that there is a risk of them being victimised and forced by their mothers or others to have sex with adult women. There is a whole series of problems for these young boys in the camp.

The solution, however, of taking them away from their families is an extraordinarily problematic one. Boys as young as 10 have been taken away from their families, sometimes in the middle of the night; sometimes they have simply left the camp because they do not want to have a confrontation with the family. You understand why this happens when the family is not around, but they just disappear. Therefore, the family has no idea what has happened to them. They are taken away to what are called rehabilitation centres. Most likely, the Kurds have the best intentions, but they do not have the means to run programmes.

Boys spoken to by human rights lawyers just two months ago said they were in a cell for 23 hours a day. They get one class of 45 minutes a week, which is their supposed rehabilitation. They are rarely able to speak to their families or mother, if at all, and there is a sense that these boys are losing track of who they are.

I give you one example that for me was very striking. A little French boy knew his name. However, he was asked his date of birth but did not remember because he no longer had an adult next to him with that primary information about him. He did not remember his date of birth. He was asked where he was from and said he could not remember. Then he asked whether there was a place in France called Toulouse. He was told yes and then he said, "I think that is where I am from."

Your name, date of birth and where you are from are your basic identity markers; that is where you start. If you start to lose that, the only thing you have left is that you have been identified as a threat; you are



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associated with ISIS and with danger and you lose those primary markers.

The problem is compounded by these half-solutions. When they reach 16 in these centres they are taken to prisons with adult men. You grow into an entire detention system and it gets worse along the way. I think it is extraordinarily problematic in terms of the possibility of bringing these people back into society with rehabilitation and reintegration.

Q33 Henry Smith: From your perspective, what is the significance of the attack on al-Sina prison in Hasakah by Islamic State?

Harmonie Toros: The main thing I would take from the attack—Paul or Richard will go into it in greater detail—is that we have the detention system, whether it is a camp, rehabilitation centre or prison, in an area that is not stable. Therefore, you cannot rely on holding people in an area that is, in political and security terms, unstable.

I will come back to the prison in a second, but what is very interesting is that two weeks ago there were clashes. On one day, 23 people were killed in clashes between the Kurds and Arab militias on the ground. There is a constant situation of conflict, war and violence. You cannot rely on having a detention system. This is not a Guantanamo that is completely isolated; to a certain degree, it is that kind of idea, but in reality on the ground it is unstable and we cannot rely on it necessarily in the medium term or long run. That is most important to me.

To come back to the prison break, how can you rely on the idea that your national security is based on a prison system that you do not control and where you can have such breaks? From a security perspective, it is incredibly problematic.

Paul Jordan: From the perspective of Daesh, what it shows is that it still has some depth. It has definitely been under-reporting a lot of its attacks in that region to try to keep under the radar a little bit. It has been significantly degraded by US and SDF and the coalition. I think three leaders in a row—heads of intelligence—have been taken out in the past few years.

In that particular prison break, the cell had been captured by the SDF and the coalition six months previously and it managed to ramp up another cell to conduct a prison break; they were exactly the same circumstances within six months. It shows that it does have some depth and a lot of planning. It has a lot of decent operators able to do that.

What it also shows from a UK perspective is the fact that there is a very high chance that UK citizens contained there could be killed in one of these, they could be broken out, they could be lost, et cetera. I think it is really important. An Australian citizen, a child, was killed, which is huge. I think he was about 14 when he was killed. He did not sign up to join. He went out with his mum and ended up losing his life out there.



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That is why hammering the door on repatriation is such a big thing. There is no way to keep them. Most of the prisons are ad hoc and just things that have been refurbished. General Mazloum, who is head of the SDF, said himself that the prisons cannot keep the men.

The men are the next looming problem. We have tens of thousands of women and children in al-Hawl and Roj, but there are men contained in the prison as well. There are not many Brits. I think there are about 10 men, but that will be the next problem we have to deal with. If we do not deal with it, there is a significant chance that either ISIS or others will end up taking over the prisons and breaking people out.

Richard Barrett: They see the prisons as a source of manpower. That is one reason. In the al-Hasakah break, maybe 100 or 200 Islamic State sympathisers were freed, but the Islamic State attackers lost quite a lot of people, too, so, overall, I do not think they reckon that was terribly successful.

At the same time, it exposed weaknesses in the defence of the prisons and it reminded other potential sympathisers. There were a lot of people being held without charge and so on, so it was quite a good recruiting sergeant like that and exposed double standards. I agree with Paul—and the Kurds have said this repeatedly—that Islamic State could mount another prison break like that, and they choose not to for whatever reason.

Q34 **Henry Smith:** That brings me on to my next question. What do you believe the UK is seeking to get out of funding prisons for Islamic State fighters in north-eastern Syria?

Richard Barrett: Objectively, there is quite a good rationale for doing so: to improve conditions and to make the threat less obvious if they can be held in prisons. It still does not address the longer-term problem of where the legal framework is, what you are going to do with them, who they belong to, and so on. Those remain incredibly difficult questions to answer. Particularly with the children, with the boys who reach adolescence, being put in these prisons is not only a human rights issue, of course, but it is also a complicated issue because the nationality of those children is not exactly clear, and that further confuses the issue of responsibility.

Q35 **Henry Smith:** Developing that a little further, how do you think Islamic State might seek to use the growing grievances of men, women and children?

Paul Jordan: They have used it, and they are, across their various communication methods to the group. They are happy to talk about al-Hawl. In fact, possibly one of the reasons that there have not been significant attacks on al-Hawl—around 2021 most of the coalition and a lot of different intelligence forces were very worried about this, and they



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determined that they needed to secure al-Hawl and the perimeter—is that it is not really worth it for them to do that.

It is a great situation. They can have all these European countries with their Muslim citizens held in this open prison being essentialised, stripped of citizenship or told they are not coming back. The kids would not make particularly good fighters at that age. The mothers are not going to be much use. They are going to be more of a burden. For them, it would not be a particularly good reason to break people out. That may well be a reasoning for them. They have certainly capitalised on the fact that there will be a lot of grievance around people being held there and a lot of people not even wanting to engage with it.

The messaging of Daesh globally is nothing like what it was. If it was a few years ago, they would be able to utilise this. It is just a good thing that they are not able to communicate as effectively, otherwise it would be much higher up.

Harmonie Toros: It is very dangerous to be an outlier in this kind of policy. I am very happy that a series of countries are moving away from this policy, but remaining on this hard-line position that we do not repatriate our citizens is putting the UK in a particular situation of sitting as an outlier—a particularly hard outlier. As was said in this session and the previous session, and as Paul just said, at the moment the Daesh propaganda machine is down. When you are an outlier, you become the potential target of this kind of messaging, saying that the UK in particular is not repatriating, the UK in particular is hurting Muslims, et cetera. That is a dangerous position to be in.

Q36 **Chair:** But that is the policy it has globally. It does not repatriate from Mexico. It does not repatriate from Germany. It does not repatriate from anywhere. That is a standard Foreign Office policy.

Harmonie Toros: Yes.

Chair: That does not mean it is not being twisted for ideological purposes, but, just in terms of clarity, as much as some of us often wish the Foreign Office would help us with some of our constituents, that is its policy.

Harmonie Toros: I understand. Daesh would not use that fact, obviously. They would say that the UK, as opposed to Germany, which has repatriated all its willing citizens, is not willing to do this. There are risks involved in taking a position like that.

Q37 **Royston Smith:** Much of what I was going to ask has been answered. What access do people have? Shamima Begum's case is well documented and well known, and the media have access to her in the refugee camps or wherever she may be. The Government are spending taxpayers' money funding some of these prison places. Who knows what is going on there? Have any of you been to any of these places and had access? How does the Foreign Office monitor how its funding is being used on behalf of



taxpayers?

Richard Barrett: You will be aware, of course, of the journalist interviews with Shamima Begum and other people. Clearly, she could have done with a media adviser, I would have thought, for many of them. They are accessible to an extent. The al-Hawl annexe, I think, is off limits to everybody, is it not, at the moment? In the Roj camp, where, certainly initially, people of perceived lower risk were put and where Shamima Begum is at the moment, I think that people can get in and out relatively easily and can certainly arrange with the Kurds to interview people. In fact, the UN special rapporteur for human rights with regard to counter-terrorism was there in July, as Harmonie mentioned, and she managed to interview a few people who were brought to her by the authorities or even whom she bumped into just wandering around the camp.

The problems for the Foreign Office are more in whom it approaches. They cannot just wander in. The people who work in the military coalition could possibly wander in. If you are in the Foreign Office, you are representing the Government. You have to go through a process of going to a country. Who should the Foreign Office approach? It does not want to go to Damascus, as the UN special rapporteur did, because our relations with Syria are, to say the least, difficult. If it went to Turkey and said, "Would you help us cross the border?", I do not think the Turks would accept that, and the Syrians certainly would not accept that.

Gaining access legally is problematic. Practically, I do not think it would be very problematic. If it wanted to ask Paul to go and talk to Shamima Begum or somebody else and ask them these questions and then report back, I do not think Paul would have a difficulty because we have good relations with the Kurds and so on. I sympathise with the FCDO, with there being no natural legal way to have consular access even to these Brits.

Q38 **Royston Smith:** They are largely helping to fund these prisons and places for former Daesh fighters or children or women, but there is no particular access to know how they are being treated. Is that what you are telling me? What you have told us today is very comprehensive, but how do I know how accurate that is? How does the FCDO know how accurate that is?

Richard Barrett: I would have thought the FCDO would tell you what the difficulties of access were. It would explain why it could not be properly representative of British citizens who are, to a certain extent, illegally detained abroad.

Q39 **Royston Smith:** That is good, but you have given us a very comprehensive picture, and I am asking you how I know how accurate it is. You tell me that the FCDO does not have access and you do not have access, although you feel that you could get it if you want to. Some people have had access to Shamima Begum and others. How do I know how accurate your picture is?



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Paul Jordan: I have had access and still have access to all the camps. I have been to some of the rehabilitation centres, but not the male detention facilities. Basically, it is relatively easy to get access to the Syrians and Iraqis in the al-Hawl main camp. There are a number of NGOs operating in there.

The annexe, which is where everyone who is not Syrian or Iraqi is, including the Brits, is very difficult to get access to. I have had access to it, but you have to have a good relationship and go through a number of different processes. There are no NGOs operating there. There is nothing, really. They stay there, they are locked in, they get their food, and they get locked back up again. They do not have phones, or rather they should not have phones, so they have no real contact with the outside world.

Roj, which is the smaller camp, is much more open and much more easy. That is separated, so it has an annexe that is mainly internationals, which is where Shamima is, a few more Brits, the one US citizen and a couple of others. That is a bit more difficult to get access to than the main Roj camp. The main Roj camp has some internationals as well. Roj is much easier to access than al-Hawl.

The rehabilitation centres just for children are slightly easier to get access to, and some international NGOs like Save the Children did some stuff there to help the kids and have access there. With the prisons, it is pretty much nothing. There was a UN mission once and there were some photos of the conditions that got leaked out, so access was restricted off the back of that.

Royston Smith: We ought to ask the FCDO how it has access, if it does.

Q40 **Chair:** I think it is claiming that, as Richard suggested, they cannot get consular assistance, and therefore it has none. Would that be a fair assessment? We should assume that no Foreign Office official has been in these camps.

Harmonie Toros: It is a good question to ask, I would say. This is the answer the Government gave when they were asked the question by the special rapporteur for counter-terrorism and human rights: "We have no consular access." There is no consulate sitting in al-Hasakah, which makes sense. At the same time, it reduces the FCDO to consular access, and the FCDO is so much more than that. To a certain degree, if the French, the Germans, the Dutch and the Belgians can get their citizens out, I do not think consular access is the reason this is not working. Let us put it that way.

Q41 **Henry Smith:** Is there any difference between citizens who are of one country and dual nationals like Shamima Begum, who I believe is British Bangladeshi? Is there any difference in the way those who are of single nationality or dual nationality are dealt with?

Richard Barrett: Certainly, when it comes to taking responsibility and therefore taking action, if there is a dual national, one country will take



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the lead. With people who are dual national American or dual national European, it will be the American or the European authorities who take the lead because perhaps they are more capable of managing the situation than whatever other nationality may be involved.

Finland is a very interesting example because it had a surprising number of women and children held in those camps, and to begin with it was quite resistant to repatriation, along with most other Europeans, but then it decided, "No, we had better do this." It had quite a long-term strategy to manage the situation of children who probably did not speak Finnish, did not have a Finnish father and were altogether unfamiliar with Finland. They would do lots of Zoom-type interaction with them, help them to learn the language, find out what relatives they might have in Finland, and gradually prepare the ground for repatriation, which none the less was not necessarily easy when they got there, but there was a determined step-by-step approach. That would probably work for many dual nationals.

Our British position is that someone like Shamima Begum may have the right to Bangladeshi citizenship, but Bangladesh has made it quite clear that if she applied she would be refused, and if she turned up in Dhaka she would be slammed into prison and probably executed. The Bangladeshis do not want to deal with her.

From the point of view of the extremists and the ideological approach, that is quite nice: "You Bangladeshis may have grown up in east London, gone to school in east London and had no other influences until the age of 15. Do not rely on the British Government to regard you as a British citizen." It is a good propaganda point for them.

What threat can a 22-year-old present to the UK that the security services or police forces and, most importantly, the Bangladeshi community in east London cannot manage? That is a little hard for other people to understand perhaps, not being privy to information that we do not have.

Paul Jordan: It is much more difficult to try to get dual citizens repatriated because of the diplomacy between the two countries. Usually, certainly at the start, neither one of them wants to accept responsibility and both try to push it on to the other.

There is also the difficulty in confirming identity. Basically, when these people turned up, they did not have passports or identifiers, so they all got shoved in the annexe. They tended to group together by language. You would have the Russian speakers in one corner, the English speakers on one side, and the French speakers on the other. The Kurds did not really have a way of identifying them, so they had to work a lot with different countries to be able to do it, which became very difficult if they were dual citizens.



Richard Barrett: Of course, the Kurds say that even now they do not have a full and accurate list of all the people in detention—nationality, dates of birth and so on. They say they cannot rely on what information they are given by the people themselves, and they do not really go in for that degree of record keeping.

Q42 **Henry Smith:** More broadly, what do you think are the geopolitical consequences of UK policy in north-east Syria with regard to the detention of those who went to support Islamic State and their family members? What, strategically, do you think are the consequences?

Richard Barrett: We are seen as an active member of the coalition against Daesh. Obviously, we were seen as an active member of the campaign in Afghanistan. People reckon that the British position is forthright but tends to be military rather than soft power.

On the other hand, I would have thought that some of the greatest strengths of the British reputation were not only the observance of the rule of law but the engagement in making the rules. All the European conventions and things like that were largely drafted by British lawyers and politicians.

I think the world at large asks whether we have lost the plot, whether we have just stood back from some of these things, whether we think terrorism can be dealt with in future, and whether there are other more vital interests at the moment, which of course there are. The great powers have come back to fill a vacuum that was left by the diminution and outflow of the terrorist threat. China, Russia, Ukraine, the transatlantic relationships and post-Brexit relationships with Europe and all that sort of thing are much more obvious concerns to the UK than terrorism. None the less, on the international stage, of course, we aim to play a significant role in the way the world thinks about terrorism, defines terrorism and reacts to terrorism.

Paul Jordan: The US in particular has been amazingly perplexed at how the UK has responded in its policy. The US was very clear, and is still very clear, from Blinken all the way down, that countries should repatriate. I consistently deal with senior policymakers on the ground in north-east Syria. They just cannot understand the British, particularly when the biggest problem is that, as Richard said, we form a significant part of the coalition, and the coalition is all about repatriations.

The head of CENTCOM, General Kurilla, has done a few missions trying to get people to repatriate. The head of the coalition, General McFarlane, has been banging that drum as well. Our very close partners, the Americans as well as all the western Europeans—the Germans, the French, the Belgians, the Dutch, the Danes and the Swedes—have all repatriated.

When I started working on this, it was very easy and very comfortable to have a roundtable involving everyone and the Brits, whereas now it



would be very uncomfortable, to the point where most of them would say, "Why are you inviting the Brits to this? They are so misaligned in what they are doing and what they are telling others to do."

From a geopolitical perspective, at the very start of this, when lots of western European countries were not repatriating, the Russians put on a presentation at the UN, saying, "Look how great Russia is because we are repatriating our citizens, and all of the countries that follow human rights, et cetera, are not doing it." Countries do recognise and will use that. It is an issue geopolitically with our allies and with those we oppose, because both sides are seeing the difference in the presentation and the practicalities of what the UK is doing.

Harmonie Toros: We also have to look at it from a Kurdish perspective. It seems like an extraordinary, complicated problem, but it is a relatively manageable issue to repatriate these people. From a Kurdish perspective, it is seen as, "Why are you not helping us out on this one issue when we are doing all the rest here on the ground, or not necessarily all of it but a lot of it?" The idea of standing by your allies and supporting a group that the US and the UK support also means doing something that helps them out and they are asking you to do, and not doing that has costs. It is also detrimental to that relationship.

When it comes to the question of dual citizens, there is the question of who takes the lead. The larger question of the women and the children is being dealt with by other countries—the UK being an outlier—with these repatriations. The question of the men is incredibly complicated. The ideal solution would be a concerted effort and a discussion among all these nations, sitting down and asking, "What do we do? How do we deal with this question?" That would make far more sense than each country doing a little bit, especially when it comes to the question of the men. Questions like dual citizenship can be dealt with in such fora.

Q43 **Chair:** Have any of our allies repatriated all their women and children?

Paul Jordan: Kosovo and Kazakhstan have done a lot. Uzbekistan has done a lot.

Richard Barrett: Kyrgyzstan just took another.

Paul Jordan: I do not think the Uzbeks or the Kyrgyz have done all of their men.

Harmonie Toros: The Germans claim they have repatriated all those who want to come back, which does not mean they have repatriated all.

Paul Jordan: Of all the western Europeans, pretty much the majority of the European women and children who are willing and able to be repatriated have been. For some countries, one or two women have refused. That is obviously a different problem. For Europe—this is why the UK is such an outlier—the number of women and children still there has gone down significantly because they have executed a number of



repatriations, which has pretty much cleared all those who are willing and able.

- Q44 **Chair:** Have any attacks, particularly in Europe, been devised or orchestrated from the camp? Although extreme radicalisation is going on, is there any ability to orchestrate?

Richard Barrett: Not to my knowledge.

Paul Jordan: Not that I am aware of.

Richard Barrett: Not that I am aware of. I asked a previous head of the Security Service whether he had had any problem from returnees, because a lot of people have come back, and he said that they had not and that they did not regard them as a high risk based on experience. Of course, one should remember that the probably less ardent supporters of Islamic State came back earlier than others. Nevertheless, that was the case.

- Q45 **Chair:** On the integrated review and the way we go forward not just in north-east Syria but more broadly, part of the reason we are doing this inquiry is that we felt that counter-terrorism had definitely been degraded as a priority in the integrated review, although I will say that, when we meet different organisations and parts of Government, they do not say that the money has been reduced in any way. If anything, the money has gone up substantially, and they feel they have what they need in terms of resources, although everyone would always like more.

Are there any final reflections on counter-terrorism policy that you would like to leave with us?

Harmonie Toros: The integrated review refresh, as you said, mentions counter-terrorism very little. It has one mention of Syria in the whole document, regarding nationals who would be trying to come to the UK.

The important point is that counter-terrorism has, to a certain degree—certainly on the question of repatriation—been seen largely as a Home Office question. Reducing it to that is problematic. The foreign policy element of counter-terrorism has to return because it cannot be reduced purely to a domestic security question.

There are geostrategic implications. There are implications in terms of international security. There are implications in terms of the UK's standing as a standard for international norms and international law. Therefore, the foreign policy element has to be taken into account, and that has fallen by the wayside.

Paul Jordan: The threat has significantly degraded, and should be treated as it is. There are lots of different ways in which a counter-terrorism policy is used as part of foreign policy, even down to things such as soft power, helping to train other nations and educate them and build up their knowledge and capacity.



It is important to recognise that kind of interaction while being cognisant of the fact that, yes, the threat has changed and it is a new world and the gaze should therefore lower slightly from that perspective. There still needs to be a recognition and an understanding.

What we cannot do is what has happened in the past, and saying, "That is not a problem now," and then it suddenly becomes a problem, which then leads to an over-reaction. That is always the biggest issue with counter-terrorism—the over-reaction if there is a case of terrorism.

Richard Barrett: I absolutely agree. We are now in a securitised society, are we not? We have bollards outside public buildings and all that sort of thing, and it is very hard to see that being rolled back. It is actually a measure of success for the terrorist groups that they have forced the securitisation of society on us.

One of the challenges in foreign policy is to see where states might take advantage of the influence that terrorist groups have on societies like ours. If there is a terrorist attack here, there is quite rightly a huge amount of coverage, concern, inquiry and so on, and states must see that as a good tactic to deploy, but I do not think that as of yet they have really worked out how to do that. You can say, in the past, Iran and Hezbollah and stuff like that. It is a worry that states might see a way around that problem of deniability.

Another thing that we have to consider—the integrated review refresh addresses this, too—is the whole issue of resilience. Resilience, of course, is not the military or police or intelligence services' response; resilience is about the social response. We suffer from terrorist activity in that terrorist activity is designed to divide our society and to identify and broaden fissures within society. A lot of counter-terrorism can be presented as being prejudicial towards one part of society over another.

More on the foreign policy side, I see that there is a proposal in the integrated review to integrate the various funds for counter-terrorism support in other countries. That is good. The CSSF, the conflict, stability and security fund, has been effective in supporting various projects abroad, but generally the problem with that support has been that it is short term—six months to a year of funding. For an NGO, or even for an in-country organisation, it takes time to set up and it is difficult to present to the donor. You get the grant, but it is for a limited amount of time. You have all your overheads. How are you going to justify that? You stagger into action before you are ready, and then the funder says, "I do not think this is working," and they take the fund away.

Q46 Chair: On CT in particular, though, I would just push back: a lot of CSSF programmes are funded for two or three years. It supported the Lebanese armed forces. That was a three-year programme. Most of the CT programmes that I did under the CSSF were all at least two years because of exactly that.



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Richard Barrett: Because of that problem. I am involved with an organisation that does a lot of work in north-east Nigeria against Boko Haram and all that sort of stuff. It has tremendous difficulty in maintaining lots of very local offices that are dealing with young men and their families who may be attracted to go off and join Boko Haram. It takes a lot of training and sustained effort, as you can imagine. Even two or three years is great and far better than nothing, but it is fairly short term.

Chair: Thank you, all three of you, for giving evidence. That was a really interesting and insightful session, so we are really grateful for your time.