

Foreign Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: the UK's engagement with the Middle East and North Africa, HC 300

Monday 4 December 2023

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 4 December 2023.

[Watch the meeting](#)

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

Questions 60-78

Witness

I: John Bolton, Former National Security Advisor (United States) and Former US Ambassador at United Nations.

Examination of witness

Witness: John Bolton.

Chair: Welcome to this session of the Foreign Affairs Committee. As part of our inquiry into the Middle East, North Africa and the UK's relationship with and engagement in the region, we are delighted to be joined by Ambassador John Bolton. John, although for many people you will need little introduction, I would be grateful if you gave a quick overview of your background.

John Bolton: I am a lawyer by profession. I have been privileged to serve in the last four Republican Administrations, in the Agency for International Development, the State Department and the White House, and most recently as US Ambassador to the United Nations in the George W. Bush Administration in 2005-06 and as national security adviser to President Trump in 2018-19.

Q60 **Chair:** I will kick us off exactly on that. I would be interested in your perspective on how the US's position and interest in the Middle East and North Africa have evolved over the last few decades, including particularly under Biden at the moment.

John Bolton: There have obviously been a number of developments that have affected things since the end of the cold war and in the post-cold war era, as some people called it, which is definitively over now. I think we are in a new era; it doesn't have a name yet. Marking the post-cold war era, particularly for the United States, was of course the attack on 11 September, which launched us into an effort to destroy al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and then the second Persian Gulf war, which resulted in the overthrow of Saddam Hussein and then all the consequences that flowed from that.

This has been a period when the Middle East has been one of the central areas of focus for the United States and, I think, for most of our allies, because of the threat of international terrorism. That is obviously very different from the cold war period that we had emerged from. Now, notwithstanding the voices of some who say that the United States has to pivot to Asia, focus only on China, forget about the Middle East and forget about Europe and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, if anything the events of the past couple of months have demonstrated that we have to continue to think globally. There is no alternative.

In fact, what I think is emerging in this new era—the era after the post-cold war era—is a new Chinese-Russian axis, with the position of the two major players completely reversed from that of the cold war: China the dominant, senior partner and Russia the junior partner. And they have their coterie of outliers: North Korea, Iran, Syria, Belarus and perhaps a few others. In my view, the Middle East now becomes a major area of

focus in the conflict that I think is coming globally between this new Sino-Russian alliance and, certainly, the Western world.

That is what is now critical to understand as we look at the Middle East. Over the past 75 years, we have gone through a number of phases since the creation of Israel in 1948. Originally, the central focus was the Arab-Israeli clash. Would Israel be able to survive as an independent state? Would it be swept into the sea, as some of the Arab leaders in the '50s and '60s wanted? What would be its role? Then, once it was clear that Israel would be a success as an independent state, what would the relationship be with the claims of Palestinians and others for a separate state?

Now, having moved into the war on terrorism phase, we are in another phase, which deals with how not just Israel but the Arab states in the region—the Gulf Arab states in particular—see themselves as more closely aligned with Israel than was perhaps ever imaginable in the past, because of the Iranian threat. That tectonic shift in the region led to the Abraham accords and, I think, but for 7 October would have led to more.

The issue we mutually confront now is how best to defend our interests against what I think is essentially the main impediment to regional peace and security in the Middle East. That is Iran and its surrogate terrorist groups and allied Governments—an Iran that is deeply backed by both Russia and China, economically and militarily. I would call that the strategic framework within which to examine specific problems that may emerge, have emerged and will emerge in the region.

Q61 Chair: I know that Royston wants to ask about Iran again later, but let me quickly ask something. How do you consider current regional threats to be connected to a concerted effort by this China-Russia axis—by its coterie around them, as you describe it—to erode the international rules-based system?

John Bolton: I am not much of a believer that there is an international rules-based order, but you can at least say that they did not get the memo in Moscow and Beijing. They very much have in mind creating an alternative order. This is not like the cold war. We always look for analogies in the past. This is not ideological in nature. It is a sharing of interests that, perhaps not coincidentally, is geographically contiguous. All the states I mentioned, with the exception of Iran and Syria, form a cohesive geographic bloc.

There are obviously conflicts within that bloc, but their interest in the Middle East is especially acute, although for somewhat different reasons. China is obviously an energy-poor country desperately in need of external sources to keep its industry going. It has been heavily reliant on the Persian Gulf, which has been a source of strategic vulnerability because they have got to get the oil and gas all the way from the Gulf to China, but it can now purchase more and more from Russia, and that oil and gas can be pipelined directly into China. That is why China is building terminals in



Pakistan: to take oil and gas that can then be pipelined north through Pakistan into western China and then to east China.

China's interest in oil and gas, notwithstanding whatever it is saying in Dubai at COP as we speak, is in getting more access to hydrocarbons. It is also, as I am sure Committee members know, building new coal-fired plants at a rapid rate. But this dependence on oil and gas has now solidified because China has made multi-billion-dollar capital commitments to refurbish the Iranian oil infrastructure, which has deteriorated significantly under sanctions over the years.

The Russia-Iran relationship has become close. I do not want to call it an alternative to OPEC at the moment; it is not that strong or that secure. However, although they are competitors in the sale of hydrocarbons, when they combine, they would be a pretty significant force on international markets. You can see the growing closeness of the relationship between Russia and Iran. Iran sells Russia drones for Russia to use in Ukraine. Russia, in turn, has now announced the sale of sophisticated fighter jets—copies of the American F-35, for example—to Iran. That indicates the growing military closeness of the relationship, not to mention their joint activities in support of the Assad dictatorship in Syria.

In multiple ways, you can see this interest unfolding. I don't think we know the full dimensions of it yet. I am not sure the Russians and the Chinese know the full dimensions of it yet, but it is very serious and the direction is clear. I think they will continue to proceed in that direction, as far as we can see.

Q62 Chair: Thank you, Ambassador. One more question from me before I turn to Henry: in terms of your assessment of the current US climate, how much meaningful interest and appetite is there for the Middle East and North Africa—not how much it might need to, but how much is it genuinely interested? I am interested in the direction you think that will go in as we head closer to a US election.

The reason I am particularly concerned is that, at the moment, you hear a lot of international discussion about Gaza and Israel, saying that we need to look to US leadership, but at the same time we are having a constant conversation about how soon the US is going to check out of Ukraine and how we make sure we pre-empt that support now. Surely we cannot be relying on the US to lead in Israel-Gaza, or else we will end up with the same conversations we are having on Ukraine. What is the direction of travel, and what is the current appetite on the Hill and within the US system?

John Bolton: I think there is very strong support, currently, to back Israel and its exercise of its legitimate right of self-defence, which they have announced as their objective to eliminate Hamas. I think there is confusion in the Administration's policy, however, because of the unwillingness to acknowledge the centrality of Iran's role in this whole affair and the way it has organised what the late unlamented Qasem



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Soleimani called the “ring of fire” strategy and what it calls publicly the “axis of resistance” against the West.

The element in American politics where there is not much support for Israel in the current circumstance is on the left side of the Democratic party, which is a source of political difficulty for the White House. But in terms of American public support, and political support in Washington, I think the support for Israel is very strong.

I would just say, as a footnote, that I don’t think support for Ukraine is as weak as some people think it is. It is a little contentious, but I know that is a different subject. In the Middle East, the main focus of American interest at the moment is the defence of Israel, but at least for those who pay attention, the concern about the existing—and continuing for quite some time—significance of the region as a source of oil and gas will also require our strategic attention.

Q63 Henry Smith: Ambassador, we really appreciate your time this afternoon. I want to ask what you see the role of the UK in the Middle East and North Africa region as best being—bilaterally, in conjunction with other countries within and outside the region, like the US and EU members, and through international organisations as well.

John Bolton: The pattern we have seen goes back for a long time, but just in contemporary times, there has been the work that we did together after Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in 1990, continuing right on through.

I understand that these are controversial subjects in the UK. They are in the US as well—that is true of the second attack on Iraq in particular—but the common interest in preventing the threat of international terrorism in our home countries and around the world and the interest in preserving the state of Israel and the economic significance of the region have us aligned very, very closely. It goes without saying that Britain’s role as a permanent member of the Security Council, as I can attest from my own experience, is vital. I am talking about the work that we do together, in very close consultation, on UN matters.

We have just seen another example of this at the G20 meeting in India and in the proposals that were discussed, and hopefully will continue after the current hostilities are over, to find a way to link India, through the Middle East, to Europe: the European Union, of course, but particularly to Britain. From our perspective, the link between the United States and India comes across the Pacific, and we have seen it develop through the quad—the now deceased Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is really the father of that idea—of Japan, India, Australia and the United States. We have seen AUKUS, with Australia, the UK and the US; there is another British connection there.

This connection—I would call it a belt, but the Chinese have already taken that phrase—that draws India and the Middle East closer to the West on the European side is very important and, I hope and believe, will survive



the current conflict. It is going to be very important that India does not get cut off in the broader struggle that we are going to have with the new Sino-Russian alliance. I do not need to explain to this audience what the connection through the Middle East to India is, but the recognition of what has always been there was a very encouraging outcome from the G20. There is a lot of work to do with India, but this is another reason why we cannot say that the threat of terrorism internationally is down, which it manifestly is not these days, and that we do not need to worry about the Middle East. It is just as central to our security today as it has been for many years.

- Q64 **Henry Smith:** You mentioned the quad. As you know, the UK is engaged in an Indo-Pacific tilt at the moment. Would you envisage a benefit to the UK joining the quad to make it five nations, certainly off the back of AUKUS and the trans-Pacific trade partnership, to which the UK acceded recently?

John Bolton: I have already advocated for South Korea becoming a member of the quad so that the number goes up, but I think Britain's role in the Indo-Pacific will be critical. The number of challenges that we face, particularly from China and a nuclear North Korea, which is a threat not only through delivery of its own weapons but through selling warheads to terrorist groups, shows that we are in an integrated global strategic posture, and it is enormously important for the West as a whole to stand together. Britain's experience and knowledge bring in a dimension, in a region that is very troubled for its own historical reasons, that would give confidence to many of the countries that are confronting China but are worried about having too close an association with other Asian powers.

The US and UK, as outsiders, obviously have an economic stake in peace and stability in the region. We have no territorial or hegemonic ambitions. When you look, for example, at the conflict over the South China sea, the nations of south-east Asia understand that fully. Through AUKUS, and I hope through other ways, more extensive UK participation in the region will be a win-win for us all.

- Q65 **Henry Smith:** I'm grateful for that. Turning back to the Middle East and North Africa, what do you see as the most important aspect of the West's relationship with that region? Is it security or trade, or is it other things like climate change, pandemics and so forth?

John Bolton: My definition of national security is the sort of traditional definition. I am not saying that other things are not important, but I worry that if everything is national security, nothing is national security, and the term loses its meaning.

If we look at the Middle East and Africa more broadly—not just North Africa, but the whole continent—we are being challenged. Frankly, we have failed in significant ways to respond to, and in some senses to even understand, the penetration by both Russia and China. Certainly as part of the belt and road initiative, China has been engaged in extraordinary efforts to procure minerals and other natural resources in Africa and other



parts of the world, including South America. It needs not just energy but natural resources. It has used the belt and road initiative in Africa in the same way that it has in other places. It offers what seem to be concessional financial terms at the front end of the deal, but it turns out that the back end is a lot more complicated. It has unhesitatingly used bribes and other forms of economic corruption. We are familiar with some of the earlier stories of how that has gone wrong for its so-called partners in Sri Lanka. We saw the Chinese efforts to gain a port there to be used for future military activity.

All across Africa, we have ignored the dangers and risks that are piling up. On top of that, we have the Russians in the form of the Wagner Group and other manifestations in places like Mali and Niger—countries where Europe itself faces not only potential terrorist threats and possible economic consequences because of migration across the Mediterranean, but security implications. I do not think we have much evidence of this yet, but we could easily see a pattern of Russian-Chinese co-operation in Africa, with the Wagner Group and other security elements working with China on the economic side.

I think we need to do a lot more on this. In the Trump Administration, we did a national security strategy on Africa, which tried to address the issues, but that was four years ago now and all of us are in another period, where we are not paying enough attention to Africa as a whole.

- Q66 **Henry Smith:** On Chinese expansionism, particularly into the Indian Ocean: what are your views on the UK negotiating the future sovereignty of Diego Garcia with Mauritius, which of course is heavily indebted to China, and the security risks there?

John Bolton: That is an area of extraordinary importance to the United States as well as to the United Kingdom. I do not think there should be an issue about sovereignty here: it is not theirs. This is something that is delicate; it is sometimes hard to explain it to publics. Political leaders in the UK and the US need to do more to do that, but I do not think there is any give on this question.

- Q67 **Henry Smith:** I wholeheartedly agree. Finally, you have in the past—correct me if I am wrong—spoken about, rather than a two-state solution to Israel-Palestine, a multi-state solution whereby Gaza might transfer back to Egyptian sovereignty and the West Bank back to Jordanian sovereignty. Do you think there is any mileage left in that concept?

John Bolton: I don't know whether there is, but I can tell you that I continue to believe that the two-state solution is dead. That is what led me to what I call the three-state solution. It was not that I thought it was intrinsically a wonderful thing. We have seen the two-state solution: Gaza was a separate state, and it was a terrorist state. I do not see how Israel or anybody else could engage in a negotiation where the end result was a terrorist state right on its borders. Given the ongoing hostilities in Gaza, we now have to ask ourselves collectively, "What we do next? What is the prospect for the future here?"



HOUSE OF COMMONS

I have come up with a modification. I really think you can treat the West Bank differently from Gaza. Since a Palestinian state consisting of Gaza and pieces of the West Bank is not economically viable—obviously, Gaza alone is not economically viable either—Israel and Jordan, with some outside assistance, have a much better chance of finding an answer to the West Bank issue if it is kept separate. It may be more serious, but I do think it is different from Gaza.

I would put it this way: Gaza is a refugee camp. It has no viable economy. It is not the land of heritage of the people living there. In 1948, when Israel became a state, that area was the same thing it had been for thousands of years: the coastal road from the Middle East into Egypt with a few very small settlements. But because for 75 years the international community has accepted the idea that Palestinian refugee status is hereditary—it is the only population in the world that has had hereditary refugee status—we have allowed this dilemma to accumulate. Speaking candidly, many of the Arab states that were determined to wipe Israel off the map thought that keeping Palestinians as refugees weaponised them against the state of Israel, to the point where, today, many of those Arab states, now with more realistic Governments, do not want to take the Palestinian refugees because they are afraid that they have been generally weaponised as terrorists. It is a great tragedy for the Palestinian people.

I think we have to acknowledge that you cannot simply put Gaza back together again. That is just a prescription for more trouble in the future and for dismal lives for the Palestinian residents of Gaza. My latest idea, which I certainly welcome comments on—I am sure it will be as unwelcome in some circles as my other idea—is to take the Gaza strip and split it into two trust territories, with Israel having a trusteeship north of the Wadi Gaza and Egypt having a trusteeship south of the Wadi Gaza. I think that is permissible: you could argue that Gaza is a remnant of the British Palestinian mandate under the League of Nations, whose status is still unresolved, and therefore, as other League mandates became trusteeships, you could set up too many trusteeships here, one by Egypt and one by Israel.

Secondly, I would abolish UNRWA, the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine, which I think has developed an institutional culture of sustaining the refugee status of the Palestinians. I would turn responsibility, from the UN perspective, over to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, which, during the High Commissioner's existence, has established a pretty clear doctrine that you do not allow refugees to stay in refugee camps. That is a terrible place for anybody to be, especially families and children.

There are two options. The first is resettlement in a refugee's country of origin. That is obviously not going to happen here—Israel has announced that it will not even grant work visas for Gazans after the war is over, and it is inconsistent, in its view, with the state of Israel. If you cannot resettle people in their country of origin, refugee policy is that they are resettled in third countries. I think that is what needs to happen. That is not forcible population removal. It is doing what we did after world war two and what



HOUSE OF COMMONS

we have done for the nearly 80 years since then in refugee situations: we find other countries that will accept the refugees and give them asylum. From the point of view of the Palestinian people—let's forget strategic issues here—they have to be put in places where they are part of a functioning economy, otherwise they do not have the dignity of providing for themselves, and their children do not have a future. If you put them back in Gaza, you are putting them in an Orwellian situation where there is no future and where the Palestinian people become victims once again.

Henry Smith: Thank you; that is extremely helpful.

- Q68 **Chair:** Can I quickly pick up on the point about trusteeship? Egypt to the north; Israel to the south: why Israel on the south and not, for example, Jordan or another Arab country? Is that not essentially giving Israel additional territory?

John Bolton: I may have misspoken: I meant to say Israel in the northern part of Gaza and Egypt in the southern part. It is just because they are contiguous. I think Egypt and Israel share much of the same security problem. Egypt is legitimately concerned that Hamas is a subsidiary of the Muslim Brotherhood, and Egypt already has security problems in part of the Sinai, which Hamas helps abet. I think it has a legitimate interest, and the two countries could work together. It really is a separate problem from the West Bank, where I think Israel and Jordan would work together.

- Q69 **Chair:** Forgive me—my question was more about giving Israel part of Gaza to look over. Essentially, is that not just either extending what is currently, in UK law, an illegal occupation or giving Israel additional territory, rather than asking, for example, Egypt to look over all of it, or Jordan to do half of it, or the PLO itself to step up and to do so in order to give it legitimacy and prove that it can govern effectively?

John Bolton: By definition, a trusteeship should be an interim arrangement. It is not intended to be a permanent one. I think the idea that, somehow, there is an illegal occupation of Gaza or the West Bank is incorrect. It misreads what the nature of the League of Nations mandate was. In any event, I do not think we will resolve this by reading debates in the League of Nations about exactly what it had in mind.

The main thing is to look at the welfare of the Palestinian people. How do we get them out of the hell that this eternal refugee camp in Gaza has become? From a security point of view, it does give the Israelis some feeling of safety. I do not know what the ultimate territorial disposition would be—we will see after the population has gotten legitimate resettlement elsewhere.

- Q70 **Royston Smith:** Thank you for joining us today, Ambassador. Can I bring you back to Iran? Israel understands the threat that Iran poses; the Gulf states do, and Saudi Arabia does. In general, do we in the West understand the severity of the threat that Iran poses to the region?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

John Bolton: I don't think we really fully do at the moment, and obviously that inhibits our ability to respond in a strategic fashion. It is a theory, ultimately, that revolutionary fervour cools and people become moderates. I don't think there is much evidence that on the key revolutionary points the 1979 Islamic revolution has moderated at all.

Just speaking from the US perspective here, I think the Administration has misread Iran and misread its views on its nuclear weapons programme. For the last three years, it tried desperately to get back into the nuclear agreement, which I think was a mistake going back to 2015 and why I was happy to be an advocate to get out of the deal, which the Trump Administration ultimately did in 2018. Nor do I think the Administration either understands or is willing to admit what exactly is happening now with this "ring of fire" strategy that the Iranians are putting together.

Essentially, what you see in the region are terrorist groups, or even nation states in the case of the Assad Government in Syria, that have been armed, equipped, trained, financed and directed in many respects by Iran, not so that these surrogates could have the capability to strike Israel or others, but so that they would have the capability to act when Iran wanted them to act. It is not just Hamas, but Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, Hezbollah in the north, the Houthi rebels in Yemen, the Assad regime in Syria, and Shi'a militia groups in Iraq that Iran has been trying to craft into a cohesive axis of resistance.

I might say that this has been an Iranian game plan before. Hezbollah was created out of a number of smaller Lebanese terrorist groups, one of which Iran helped blow up the US marine barracks in Lebanon in 1983, and earlier attacking the US embassy there. Hezbollah is kind of a coalition of terrorist groups. In Iraq right now, as we speak, Iran is trying to meld the Shi'a militia groups into an equivalent of Lebanese Hezbollah.

The culminating part of that strategy to get their axis of control from Iran through Iraq, Syria and Lebanon is ordering all the surrogate groups that I mentioned. Unless you see the strategic picture, you miss what the responses need to be. This is, as I said earlier, not just Hamas versus Israel, but part of a larger Iranian strategy, the full dimensions of which, I acknowledge, we do not see, but they are clearly evident.

For example, we just had more attacks by the Houthis in Yemen on commercial shipping in the Red sea over the weekend. At least some of the drones or missiles were shot down by a US destroyer in the region. This is part of a long string of attacks on commercial shipping or our ships, maybe aimed ultimately at Israel, that the Houthis have been carrying out. They would not have two rocks to rub together of that capability if they did not come from Iran. Again, I don't need to explain to anybody in the room the significance of a threat to commercial shipping through the Red sea, through the Bab-el-Mandeb strait at the southern end. Obviously, that is part of the transit route through the Suez canal. I think 10% of the world's trade, 20,000 ships a year, go through the Suez canal. If Iran tried to cut that shipping off, we would all sit up and take notice.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

There could be a legitimate debate about exactly what Iran's strategy is here, but the idea that Hamas simply woke up one morning and decided to risk committing suicide on its own just does not make sense. Talking about, understanding and getting better intelligence on Iran are very important here.

- Q71 **Royston Smith:** Ambassador, you touched on Iran's strategy, and that is what I am trying to understand. How do you see their endgame? What is it that they want to achieve? It is a bit like when Hamas did what they did on 7 October; I was left thinking "What did they want to achieve? Did they want to achieve this sort of destruction?" Maybe, maybe not. It is the same with Iran, isn't it? What do you think their endgame is?

John Bolton: Ultimately, they have two objectives: geopolitical hegemony within the Middle East—the broader region—and hegemony within Islam, which obviously goes back to ancient conflicts within the Islamic population as a whole. One way they believe they can achieve both is to cripple Israel. Their arc to the Mediterranean obviously runs through Syria and Lebanon, which are right on the border with Israel, and I think the "ring of fire" strategy was intended to give Iran options about how to put pressure on Israel.

Right now, you obviously have the conflict in Gaza, but for nearly two months northern Israel has been subjected to rocket fire almost every day. Now, they are not Hezbollah's most sophisticated rockets—they are probably cleaning out the bottom end of their inventory—but when 10, 20 or 30 rockets a day are being thrown into northern Israel, you can't have sustained economic activity. The Israelis have substantially evacuated the area, and Hezbollah will go up its value chain of rockets. The estimates are that in the Beqaa valley—I'm glad you are sitting down—they have between 120,000 and 150,000 rockets, so they are just getting started. That is a way to squeeze Israel.

Your question is very important: specifically, what did Iran have in mind when they unleashed Hamas, or acquiesced in Hamas doing this? One possibility is that they saw the Israeli Government subject to very bitter criticism within Israel, and maybe they thought that this would bring the Government down. The attack was launched almost to the day of the 50th anniversary of the Yom Kippur war, when the Arab states caught Israel totally by surprise, much like this circumstance. That ultimately brought Golda Meir's Government down, and maybe they thought it would happen again. Perhaps they wanted to test the Netanyahu Government and thought that if the Israeli Defence Forces went into Gaza, they could bog them down in a conflict there and then unleash Hezbollah for a really significant series of attacks in the north.

I could give you a dozen different scenarios for how this may yet play out. I don't have a good answer about how far it can or will go, but I think that right now Iran is calling the shots and we in the West are responding. We are not trying to control the future dimension, in part because the Government—again, I am just speaking about the US Government—isn't willing to acknowledge that it is a broader conflict already. People say, "We



HOUSE OF COMMONS

don't want the conflict to spread," but I think it has already spread. We are in a strategic dilemma that necessarily implicates a lot of other players.

That includes what the reaction of the Gulf Arab states may be. They see the Iranian threat very similarly to the way Israel does, which is why the Abraham accords became possible. They want to know whether the United States and the West as a whole are going to stand up to this or whether—because they are not moving out of the neighbourhood—they have to make accommodations with Iran, whether they like it or not. I certainly hope that is not the outcome, but it remains to be seen at this point.

- Q72 Royston Smith:** You said clearly that the Gulf states—particularly the Saudis—understand the threat of Iran. Iran's desire to have a nuclear weapon hasn't gone away, and the Saudis are making noises along the lines of, "If you're going to have one, we're potentially going to have one." Do you see a danger of nuclear proliferation in the Middle East?

John Bolton: Yes, I do. I think the Gulf Arabs are also very concerned about the terrorist threat, because they could be vulnerable to instability caused by Iranian efforts to destabilise their Governments. You can see in many countries in the region—among not just the Gulf Arabs but Turkey, Egypt and others—a feeling that they are not going to be left behind if Iran gets nuclear weapons. That is part of the reason why our failure to stop Iran is so dangerous. It is not simply about the Iranian nuclear programme: it is the broader proliferation problem. Every time an adversary country gets close to a nuclear weapon, there is no doubt that its neighbours begin to think they need them as well, and I don't think we are seriously addressing that.

As members of the board of governors of the International Atomic Energy Agency, both the US and the UK have received within the past 10 days a very critical report by the IAEA director general. Yet the decision was made collectively—with France, with Germany—not to do anything in the IAEA board because, according to press reports, the circumstances are so dangerous in the region that you do not want to do anything to provoke Iran. Well, here is Iran on its way to nuclear weapons. That is pretty provocative, yet we are not willing to have even a resolution of the IAEA board criticising them. I think this is the kind of thing that the mullahs in Tehran read and see as western weakness. I think that is a mistake.

- Q73 Royston Smith:** I have one more question. Someone said—it is an awful statement, but it sort of made sense—that the Iranians will fight Israel to the last Palestinian. What can we do in the West to try to show the Palestinians that this is not the right route and that what we are suggesting—whatever it may be—is a better route?

John Bolton: I think that is very important. In many parts of the region, if this conflict is seen as an Arab-Israeli conflict, the reaction at the popular level will be pretty predictable. But I can tell you, I was just in Saudi Arabia about three or four weeks ago, and I spoke to a number of people at very high levels. They understood, to a person, that this is an



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Iranian-induced conflict. Now, they don't say that publicly in their Government pronouncements. It would be very useful if they did; I think it's unlikely. But if we and others can help to explain to people that Iran is calling the shots here, so that in the region more broadly—in the popular press and so on—people understood that, they would have a different view of what is happening. I am not suggesting that is an easy communication strategy to carry out, but I think it would go a long way toward explaining to people what is really happening in Gaza.

- Q74 Royston Smith:** With the Middle East or some of the Gulf states getting closer to China and Russia, is that—bearing in mind that Iran is close to China and Russia—causing them some complications in making public pronouncements on Iran?

John Bolton: I think it's possible. Look, I think they are hedging. I think in part it is because they think the United States is feckless, which is a problem. I think that is a correctable problem, but if they think the United States is backing away from the region—they hear prominent politicians in this country say that—they will look to their own interest.

Another impression that I carried away from my travels to Saudi Arabia was that although there is no progress for the foreseeable future on a mutual exchange of diplomatic relations, I think that file has just been put in a drawer and that when the hostilities are over, it will come back. I think the mistakes we are making are recoverable, but we need to start recovering pretty soon. A good way to do that is understanding what the bigger strategic picture is. That is a good place to start.

- Q75 Chair:** Before I hand over to Henry, can I follow up on that quickly with you, Ambassador? I am interested in why countries are refusing to ascribe responsibility to Iran and who is really calling the shots here. With Saudi and Iran, there is no love lost there, so what is their unwillingness to do so? I remember the day after the attacks: when many of us in this room were talking to the media we said, "Look, the only rational conclusion I can come to is that Iran was behind this." Why is the US so disinclined to say that Iran is behind this? You commented on this earlier. We have seen US officials say, "We don't have any intelligence that tells us this is Iranian-organised." Where does this disinclination come from, and why are they so hesitant about this?

John Bolton: Some might interpret what I am about to say as a partisan comment, but let me just put it as an analytical point in the foreign policy context. I think the Administration came into office dead set on getting back into the 2015 nuclear deal. Remember, the President had been Vice-President at the time, and they regarded this as the major accomplishment of President Obama's second term. They saw it as a mistake for the US to withdraw, as we did during the Trump Administration. I think that has coloured almost all the rest of their policy besides, with respect to Iran, and I think it colours it here.

If they blame Iran for attacking Israel—which is essentially what I think this is—and, I might say, for attacking, via the Shia militia groups in Iraq,



HOUSE OF COMMONS

American service members at our bases and civilian personnel at our embassies and consulates, without adequate American retaliation, it is just part of the bigger picture. They do not want to take Iran on, because it means shedding a worldview they have that has turned out to be wildly inaccurate. I think that hurts us, because we play into the narrative that this is an Arab-Israeli conflict when, to my mind, while the Iranians may have harvested Gazan discontent with Israel, absent the Iranian influence this would not have happened.

- Q76 Henry Smith:** Following on from the last question, I quite understand, and think you are probably correct about, the US's reticence to name Tehran, but what do you think is behind the reticence in Riyadh? Is it some sort of Arab-brotherhood approach, or are the Saudis concerned about internal problems were they to be overly critical of Iran? What do you think that reticence in Riyadh is?

John Bolton: I am speculating here to a considerable extent, but I think it is because they do not know what the outcome is going to be. They do not see—again, I will just speak about the United States—a firm US position, and that worries them. They do not want to get too far out in front before they see how the West as a whole reacts. But my experience during my trip, conducting a number of business affairs and things like that, was that they were conducted as if the war were not under way. I think it was a very realistic setting, and I think that their counsel is to be cautious until they can see a little bit more clearly what's up. As I say—I'll say it right out—I cannot predict exactly what overall game plan Iran has here, other than to continue to test weakness; if that is what they see, they will continue to press.

- Q77 Henry Smith:** You spoke eloquently about the threats and challenges of China and Russia globally, but also in the context of the Middle East, and you touched on India as well, but what about Turkey? It seems to me that, for different reasons, both Turkey and India are potentially trying to play different sides. I would be interested in your perspective, with particular reference to Ankara's and Delhi's approaches.

John Bolton: One word on India: part of our problem here is pulling India away from its recent historical connection with Russia in terms of reliance on Russia for sophisticated weapons systems and how India has taken advantage of the discount prices on oil it can buy from Russia since the invasion of Ukraine. That matter is going to require a lot of attention. We can attend to it a different day.

Turkey is a real problem for NATO. It does not take much to see the difficulty it causes, and is still causing, really, on Finland's admission—that difficulty is hopefully over with now—and on Sweden. I can say from my own experience in the Trump Administration that they were trying to play a double game with Russia and the other NATO members. I thought that was behaviour not really acceptable from an ally—in particular the purchase of Russian S-400 air defence systems, which are obviously incompatible with NATO air defence systems. I think that justified the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

United States in pulling our F-35 programme out of Turkey, because we cannot expose the F-35 to Russian air defence systems up close like that.

I think Erdoğan has been anti-American for a long time, going back to the second Gulf war, when he basically helped to deny a parliamentary super-majority that would have permitted American forces to come into northern Iraq through Turkey, which we had asked to do. Frankly, I think he has neo-Ottomanist ambitions in the Middle East and has been unhelpful in a number of regards. If the presidential election in Turkey had turned out differently, I would not have lost any sleep over a different outcome.

But we are where we are. I do not believe that Erdoğan's foreign policy approach is really consistent with where the Turkish people themselves are, but we are in a place where we just have to grit our teeth and bear it. The geography of Turkey is unanswerable, and in the near future we just have to work hard to keep them doing responsible things, as difficult as that might be.

Henry Smith: Thank you; that was very helpful.

- Q78 **Chair:** I have a final question before we wrap up, Ambassador. Let me draw you back to my first question about the US direction of travel. Although no one should be asked to have a crystal ball, I am going to do exactly that because you know the players. What does a Republican Government's interest in the Middle East and North Africa look like in terms of their strategic objectives, what they are trying to achieve and, frankly, where they will put the file to one side and say, "This part of MENA is just not of interest to us"? Is there any distinction between a Trump presidency and a wider Republican presidency?

John Bolton: The answer to your question depends on whether we get a real Republican nominated to be President or it is Donald Trump.

Chair: That sounds like the inside of the Conservative party on a weekly basis, but go on, please.

John Bolton: There is a lot of talk about there. Look, Trump has a very idiosyncratic way of looking at foreign policy: he does not really have a philosophy and he does not do policy as we conventionally understand that. It is transactional and very much depends on the benefits that accrue to Donald Trump. I do not know what he would do in a number of contexts. For example, with respect to the Russia-Ukraine war he has said that he would get Putin and Zelensky into a room and solve it within 24 hours, which is obviously not going to happen. In terms of the Middle East, as far as I know he has only said, "This never would have happened if I were President." That is a political argument.

I think that if pretty much any of the other remaining viable Republic candidates for the nomination were to be nominated, you would have a policy that focused on supporting Israel and that continued to be strongly anti-regime concerning the mullahs in Iran. I think we would try to have a much better relationship with the Gulf Arabs and continue to try to bring them and Israel closer together in their strategic perspective, and have a



HOUSE OF COMMONS

policy that would have staying power in the region. The idea that we do not need to focus on the Middle East or, frankly, that we do not need to focus on Europe, as some Republicans have said, is very much a minority position. It is a global question: you have to look at these various areas and how they interconnect, and if it is correct that there is a new Russian-Chinese axis, I think the connection is going to be all too visible for us without too much further delay.

Chair: With that, Ambassador, we thank you ever so much for your time—it was very much appreciated—and I hope we are able to call on you again at a future point.

John Bolton: Thank you. I appreciate the Committee's patience in doing this today, which I understand is not in your normal schedule. I am very grateful for that and look forward to the time when we can be together in person.

Chair: We look forward to it. Thank you very much, Ambassador. With that, I bring the session to a close.