



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Foreign Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Work of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, HC 325

Tuesday 9 January 2024

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Members present: Alicia Kearns (Chair); Dan Carden; Fabian Hamilton; Mr Ranil Jayawardena; Brendan O'Hara; Bob Seely; Royston Smith; Henry Smith; Graham Stringer.

Questions 582-725

Witnesses

I: Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton, Foreign Secretary, and Sir Philip Barton, Permanent Under-Secretary of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Lord Cameron and Sir Philip Barton.

Chair: Welcome to this session of the Foreign Affairs Committee. Lord Cameron, Sir Philip, thank you ever so much for joining us today. Our goal is to have a conversation; it is less about establishing facts, of which we are all aware, and more about understanding your vision and perspective as you take up this vital role. We will try to move at pace, so we may challenge you, drag you back to the subject, or reclarify the focus. Of the next two hours, the first will be on Israel-Gaza, given the current circumstances; then we hope to look at Ukraine, China, the Balkans, and hostage taking. At the end, there will be what we like to call a quiz around the world, in which we will take you to as many countries as we can in as little time as possible. I hope that will work for you both.

Lord Cameron: Fine.

Q582 **Chair:** Fabulous. In which case, it would be very helpful if you could share with us your vision for your time as Foreign Secretary, and say what legacy you are hoping to achieve.

Lord Cameron: What I want to do is try to help Britain maximise its security and prosperity in a very dangerous, difficult and uncertain world. I compare the world we live in today with the world when I left university: the Berlin wall was falling, Russia was becoming a friend, democracy was spreading, China was joining the WTO, and it looked like democracy, freedom and free-market economics were spreading across the world. It is completely different today. Everything seems to be heading in a more dangerous direction. Russia has started a war in Europe; China is incredibly aggressive; democracy seems to be on the back foot; and everywhere around the world, you see the growth of protectionism.

Of course, the threat picture—the conflict picture—whether we look at Africa, Europe or the Balkans, is extremely disturbing. In those circumstances, I will try to make sure that our foreign, security, Commonwealth and development policy is all about trying to enhance Britain’s security, and maximising, where we can, our prosperity and opportunity. That is the approach that I want to take.

Q583 **Chair:** Your appointment was lauded, largely, as the biggest political shock of the last year. What made you accept the role? Was it unfinished business?

Lord Cameron: No, it was just the chance to serve. I believe very profoundly in public service. I didn’t expect to be called back to this role. I went to see the Prime Minister on, I think it was, a Monday or Tuesday night, and we were talking about various problems, including Israel-Gaza, and then he suddenly said, “Well, I’m going to be having a reshuffle, and I’d like you to be my Foreign Secretary.” That was quite a shock. I said instantly, “I would like to say yes, because I enjoy public service and believe in it. It is a very difficult time for these affairs, and I hope I can



HOUSE OF COMMONS

make a difference, but let me go away and think about it." I had a little bit of time to think about it, and said yes, and I am delighted to be back.

Q584 Chair: Did the Prime Minister give you an idea of why he felt that a change in direction or leadership was needed? Will you be different from your predecessor? We have had lots of foreign policy by slogan: "Global Britain", "tilt to the Indo-Pacific". What in your approach is different from that of your predecessors?

Lord Cameron: What the Prime Minister said was pretty much what I just said to you: that it is a very unstable, uncertain, dangerous world. There is, obviously, this huge conflict, with Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine; we've got the situation in the Middle East; and we've got a range of other dangers and difficulties almost everywhere you look. He said there is an opportunity for someone who has served as Prime Minister to come back and help with these things, and that you will bring a certain amount—hopefully—of knowledge, contacts and abilities to this role, so you will be able to help to have what he wants, which is to be the strongest possible Government.

I pay huge tribute to my predecessor, James Cleverly. I have already visited about 15 countries, and everywhere I go he is praised for his diplomatic skills and the hard work and energy he brought to the role. It is great to be working with him as Home Secretary. One of the priorities—I have five priorities I have set out for the Department—is very much about Britain's security and working with him on issues of immigration. Too much in the past—I blame my own Government for this—the Foreign Office has been going in one direction and the Home Office in another. Really trying to get them to work together on things like stopping migration upstream, helping stabilise countries and using all the tools you have in the toolbox—

Q585 Chair: Forgive me, you won't be introducing a new slogan under your tenure, will you?

Lord Cameron: I haven't come up with one yet, but maybe you can help me out.

Q586 Chair: Watch this space.

Lord Cameron: I have set out priorities for the Department, basically saying that No. 1 is supporting Ukraine; No. 2 is a more stable Middle East; No. 3 is enhancing UK security; No. 4 is international development and the critical global challenges such as the multilateral development banks—maybe we could talk about that; and the fifth is prosperity and jobs. Obviously, trade is not in the Foreign Office in the way that it used to be, but I want to help the Department of Trade to deliver these important trade deals. I want to help colleagues to get inward investment into the UK and all the rest of it. That is the focus: it is very straightforward and down to earth.

Q587 Fabian Hamilton: It is interesting that you were as shocked as we were when you became Foreign Secretary, but welcome. When you were Prime



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Minister, you created the commitment to 0.7% of GDP for overseas development aid. You also vocally opposed the FCDO/DFID merger. What is your position now?

Lord Cameron: Well, I didn't create the commitment—I delivered the commitment. It was a commitment that every country in the G8 made, I think at Gleneagles, when Tony Blair was Prime Minister. I was very proud to be the first of those G8 countries to achieve 0.7%, which we did, I think in 2013. I supported and backed DFID with a really excellent Development Minister, Andrew Mitchell, who I am now working with once again.

I said at the time that I was disappointed when we went away from 0.7% and also about the merger, but I said to the Prime Minister, when he asked me to do this job, that I would accept—fully—Cabinet collective responsibility. I will work with what we have now and try to make sure that we have the best possible joined-up policy of diplomacy and aid and that we make the very most of the 0.5% that we have.

Politics is a team enterprise. You cannot always get everything you want. You have to work out whether you can accept the situation and whether you can accept that Cabinet collective responsibility. I can. I will defend what we are doing now to make the FCDO work effectively, and I will defend the fact that 0.5%—it is not as much as it was, but we are still an aid superpower. We have an excellent development White Paper and we must use that to fulfil our moral mission in the world, but also to make sure that our aid policy works for our security and prosperity.

Q588 **Fabian Hamilton:** Will you be pushing to go back to 0.7% as quickly as possible?

Lord Cameron: Obviously, the conversations I have with Cabinet colleagues are private, and that is part of the team enterprise.

Chair: I am not sure they are that private.

Q589 **Fabian Hamilton:** Is there anything you want to change about how the FCDO operates at the moment?

Lord Cameron: There is something that happened just before I got there, and I want it to bed in and see how it is working. Andrew Mitchell was appointed Development Minister and it was an excellent move. While I could see a case for how the merger would work, I was a bit worried before that that there were too many international gatherings—on, for instance, the global alliance on vaccines, the Global Fund on AIDS and malaria, and the rest of it—where Britain was not fully represented every time. I think that having a dedicated Development Minister in the Cabinet has really helped.

I also think that something we have done inside the Department, which Sir Philip might want to talk about, which is having two permanent secretaries—one for foreign, diplomatic and Commonwealth affairs and one specifically for development—has helped. We are making sure that some of the key directorates in the Foreign Office report to that second permanent secretary and work specifically with Minister Mitchell. I think



HOUSE OF COMMONS

we are making the merger work better than it was. I would like to take a bit of time to see how it is bedding down and how it is working, and to try and make the most of it in that way.

Q590 **Chair:** From our perspective, it would be very welcome to see some political will behind the merger, because that has been our biggest criticism.

Lord Cameron: Say again.

Chair: We would like to see the political will to make the merger work, rather than it just being left to civil servants.

Lord Cameron: Definitely. We are trying to make it work. It is not going back to what happened under Margaret Thatcher, when ODA was a separate department within the Foreign Office. It is not that; it is trying to make a merged entity work, but with that slight distinction. It is quite nice being Foreign Secretary and having a £12 billion budget—you didn't used to have that when you were Foreign Secretary. But, anyway, let's try to make it work, and I am happy to keep you up to date with how we think it is going.

Q591 **Bob Seely:** Very briefly, Foreign Secretary, do you find the ODA definition of aid too restrictive and too narrow? There has been some redefining of it, but aid is still very much seen as economic. Peacekeeping operations over and above 15% do not count as aid, when you could actually argue that that is basic stabilisation. At the other end, the BBC World Service is not covered as part of aid, when you could say that it is critical, especially when you are up against Russia Today and China TV. The World Service is critical when it comes to the development of civil society and broader concepts that we want to fund and support around the world.

Lord Cameron: I am a bit torn on this. There was one time when if an NGO did mine clearance, it was ODA, but if a military power did mine clearance, it was not. So there are frustrations. I am all for keeping an open mind about the definition and looking at whether we should change it. The reason why I am in two minds is that, if you change it unilaterally, you open the door to everybody else to change it unilaterally, and then you get a lot of countries that were committed to ODA backing off. If you could make some general, multilateral changes in the way you suggest, that would be a good thing.

Q592 **Bob Seely:** Another way of doing that is just to say that we will spend 0.4% or 0.6% on an international definition of ODA and then spend 0.1% on our own definition, which would support the BBC World Service, peacekeeping and more. What you do not want to do, obviously, is to have the Russians invade a country and then say that it is aid, because that is an absurdity. But if we are tied to these rules and we just say, "Well, let's see," effectively nothing happens. If we are not willing to make changes, it is very difficult to see how other people will.

Lord Cameron: On the detail, I am told that the BBC is partly funded by ODA. I think the danger would be that if you said, "Here's our 0.4%



HOUSE OF COMMONS

general definition, and here's our extra bit, which we define," that will open the door to other countries doing things that we would not in any way classify as ODA. Remember that because of covid, global poverty is increasing: there are more people going hungry, and there are more people below the poverty line than there were. So the need for keeping ODA up is strong. That is why I am worried about it, but I am happy to have a dialogue about whether there are changes we should do multilaterally.

Chair: Bob, can you move us on to Israel and Gaza?

Q593 **Bob Seely:** Absolutely. Can I just double-check, Foreign Secretary, what our objectives are in relation to Israel and Gaza?

Lord Cameron: Our objective above everything is to try and help achieve some stability in the Middle East. In the short term, our goal is to see an end to this conflict, but our longer-term goal is that we believe that there will not be true security, either for Israel or for the Palestinians, without moving towards a two-state solution. So we have a short-term horizon of wanting to get to a sustainable ceasefire, which we can talk about, and then a longer-term horizon of recognising that no ceasefire is really fully sustainable forever, unless you actually have a political horizon.

Q594 **Bob Seely:** Apart from our concern, are we doing anything like, for example, developing a road map or a peace plan with some of our Arab friends in the Middle East—Egypt, the UAE and other countries?

Lord Cameron: Yes, we are. I have travelled to the region twice already, and I am sure I will be going again before too long. You do not have to travel to have the sorts of conversations we are having with, for instance, European allies and the Americans, but also, crucially, with the Gulf and Arab states, about what the future should look like.

Fundamentally, four things have to happen. Once this conflict is over, we have to see a Palestinian-led Government in Gaza and the West Bank. We need a concrete plan of support for that Government, and a plan to help reform and support the Palestinian Authority. We have to see a massive reconstruction plan for Gaza after this conflict is over, and crucially, we have to see a political horizon towards a two-state solution. The way I see it, you won't get the sort of assistance needed on security, governance and technical help in Gaza after the conflict unless you can convince the Palestinian authorities, the Palestinian people and Arab states that you have a longer-term horizon towards a two-state solution.

Q595 **Bob Seely:** Do you think that is remotely feasible, given everything that has happened?

Lord Cameron: Yes. You've got to hope that it is feasible. Out of a crisis should come some opportunity. What is interesting is that from all the conversations I have had—with the Jordanians, the Egyptians, the Emiratis, the Saudis—it seems an awful lot of people would accept those four planks of a plan, in one form or another, going together.

Q596 **Bob Seely:** Does our current position damage our friendships with Arab



nations?

Lord Cameron: Fundamentally, I would say that it does not. Definitely there is stress there, because of course the Arab states all want to see, or have called for, an immediate ceasefire. They are deeply concerned, as I am, by what is happening in Gaza and the loss of life. To sit here and argue that saying that we want a sustainable ceasefire has had no effect on our relations I think would be stretching it, but I would say that they understand that we are not being deliberately difficult or obtuse about this. We are just very classically British, common-sense, practical people, and I cannot see a comprehensive ceasefire coming in now, while Hamas are still able to launch rockets out of Gaza. That is why we speak of a sustainable ceasefire. While those states might be a bit disappointed in our position, I think they understand it, and recognise that it does at least make internal logical sense. Those relationships are very long-standing, as you know. I think they will work with us on this sort of agenda.

Chair: I will bring in Dan on that point.

Q597 **Dan Carden:** Welcome, Foreign Secretary. Josep Borrell has stated that the EU's position on Gaza-Israel has damaged the EU's relationship with the Global South, and leaked US cables have said similar. Do you feel that the same goes for the UK?

Lord Cameron: Certainly, there are countries in the Global South, or however you want to term it, that want an immediate ceasefire, and disagree with people who do not. That means that you are in disagreement, so perhaps your standing with them will suffer in some way, but I do not think that we should just accept that and do nothing about it; I think we have to make our case very vigorously, as I do. When I meet a South African Foreign Minister, for instance, I would say, "Look, I want this conflict to end as soon as possible. I don't want it to go on for a moment longer than necessary, but for a ceasefire to work, it has to be sustainable. That means that you can't have Hamas in power able to launch rockets and not releasing hostages. That has to be dealt with."

Q598 **Dan Carden:** Do you believe that military intervention can defeat Hamas?

Lord Cameron: What the Israelis are trying to do is get rid of Hamas' ability to launch further attacks on Israel. I think you can do that. One can disagree—and I would have differences with them—on the way that they have gone about it. Can you defeat an ideology though armed intervention? No. Defeating an ideology is going to take a lot of other things, including progress towards a political solution, to show that politics can work and deliver things. But if you take the argument that there is nothing more that can be done militarily—you just have to freeze things where we are now—you then have to make an argument for how you get the remainder of Hamas out of Gaza, and get rid of the rocket launchers.

My challenge to those from the Global South, or friends in Arab states, is to say, "Okay, let's say there's a ceasefire tomorrow; how do you get rid of Hamas's capacity to launch more rockets?"



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q599 **Dan Carden:** How will you know when that moment has come, as the British Foreign Secretary? Is it your hope that the UK will be voting for a ceasefire at the UN in the near future?

Lord Cameron: I would hope that we'll be voting—I mean, what we did is we defined what we wanted as a sustainable ceasefire. The Prime Minister said that at Prime Minister's questions, and within a few weeks, that was adopted by the UN in resolution 2720 with unanimous—well, not unanimous agreement, because the United States didn't vote in favour, but without a veto. So that's our position. Yes, I look forward to the moment when this conflict is over.

Of course, we spend a lot of time asking what Israel should do next to bring this to an end, to a finish. We should also spend a nanosecond saying that if Hamas wanted, they could end this tomorrow; they could lay down their arms; they could leave Gaza. They are the ones prolonging this conflict, in many ways.

Q600 **Dan Carden:** You have warned against an unsustainable ceasefire that quickly collapses into further violence, but there is a strong feeling, I think, in the international community and among the public, that the longer the violence continues and the further away peace is, the more we are going to struggle to get to peace.

Lord Cameron: I don't disagree with that. You know, we don't want this to go on—

Dan Carden: But you can't really—

Lord Cameron: First of all, I would be in favour of humanitarian pauses, including right now. Let us have another pause to try and get hostages out and to get more aid in. I would be happy for us to do that now. What I am saying about a sustainable ceasefire is that it does need Hamas to no longer be capable of launching attacks into Israel—otherwise, it is not sustainable, and I hope that moment comes as quickly as possible.

Q601 **Chair:** Okay. Foreign Secretary, just to take you back for a moment, what is the UK's current legal position on whether or not Gaza is occupied?

Lord Cameron: Our position is that Israel is fighting a campaign against Hamas. We have to check regularly whether that is in compliance with international humanitarian law and assess that. I do not think Israel regards itself as an occupying force, but, on whether that is correct, I would want to take legal advice, because this comes to this issue about aid, where I think Israel needs to do more—a lot more—to get more aid into Gaza, which perhaps we can come on to.

Q602 **Chair:** Forgive me, we know that Israel does not consider itself to be an occupying power, but British law currently does consider Gaza to be an occupied territory. Can you just confirm that on the record?

Lord Cameron: I don't know the precise legal definition of that; I'd have to go back and check.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q603 **Chair:** Philip, I think we all know that the Foreign Office does know what the official legal position is.

Sir Philip Barton: We describe the territories as “the Occupied Palestinian Territories”, but—

Lord Cameron: That’s a different question though—

Sir Philip Barton: But that’s a descriptor. I think we should give you a piece of written advice on the legal position.

Lord Cameron: I think what the Chair is asking is: do we consider Gaza to be occupied, militarily, at the moment? Is that what you are getting at?

Q604 **Chair:** I am asking for the British Government’s legal definition—whatever they consider to be the terminology of “occupied”—because, as I understand it, there is no question but that, in law, so under British law and according to the UN Security Council resolution 2334, on which we have based our legal position, Gaza is an occupied territory. Therefore, from that, Israel does have obligations as an occupying power. Whether or not they consider themselves to be one or not, British law does state that, and I would consider it to be quite fundamental that we knew exactly from what premise we were operating when engaging with something so complex.

Lord Cameron: Well, as you know, we refer to them as the Occupied Palestinian Territories, but obviously Gaza was left by Israel. But I think the question you’re asking now is, “Is what Israel has done technically an occupation, and, therefore, do they have a legal obligation?” The point I would make is—look, whether or not they are de jure occupying, they are de facto occupying Gaza and therefore, when it comes to this issue of aid delivery, we need them to do more.

At the moment, we are at about 150 trucks a day getting into Gaza. We need to be closer to 500. Every day that we are not closer to 500, we are going to have more people going hungry; we are going to have more people getting disease. There is a danger of there being really widespread hunger. At the moment, something like 90% of Gazans are getting less than one meal a day. So I have set out with the Israelis a whole set of things that could happen—that they could do—that would make a real difference. Make sure that Kerem Shalom is open seven days a week. Make sure that the Nitzana checking point is open 24 hours a day. Make sure that aid convoys that are coming across Jordan have unhindered access into Gaza. Look at opening the Port of Ashdod so that aid can arrive by sea and go from Ashdod either into Kerem Shalom or, even better, into the Erez crossing. Crucially, none of these things will work unless inside Gaza you have UN personnel, trucks and fuel capable of taking the aid around Gaza. Again, only the Israelis can really fix that because a bunch of visa applications for people to be there are outstanding. There is a need for armoured cars for that aid to be distributed and taken around with, and that needs to be fixed, and fixed urgently.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q605 **Chair:** I would also give you credit, Foreign Secretary, for what the UK Government has done on aid. Much progress has clearly been made as a result of that. Just for clarification, therefore, in your words, Gaza is “de facto” occupied and therefore Israel has obligations as an occupying power that you are saying today that you accept, at least—

Lord Cameron: I am saying they have. I am not a lawyer. I need to be careful—I am saying that they have responsibilities—

Q606 **Chair:** But you are saying that they have not met their obligations.

Lord Cameron: I am saying that they have got responsibilities to make sure that aid gets through. It is not solely them. I have been to el-'Arīsh myself. There are problems with Egyptian bureaucracy. There is a problem with a lack of overseeing logistics and working out what aid is going where. There are other bottlenecks but fundamentally there are some things the Israelis need to do because ultimately they have a lot of responsibility for what is happening in Gaza. I am not giving you a legal definition, because I am not a lawyer. This is a moral and political point.

Q607 **Chair:** But de facto they are occupying and they are not currently doing all they could be doing on aid and therefore what they should be doing?

Lord Cameron: I want them to do more.

Q608 **Graham Stringer:** I want to ask a quick question, more on the home front. I represent a very large Jewish community and a very large Muslim community. Both communities are both angry and fearful about what is happening in Israel and Gaza. Is there anything you can do as Foreign Secretary to help the tension that those communities are feeling? Are you aware of the impact that it is having on those communities?

Lord Cameron: I am. I think everybody can feel it, whether they are living in London, in your constituency or in my old constituency. You feel it in so many of the conversations that you have. One of the most important things with both communities, but perhaps most importantly with British Muslims, is to demonstrate that we are an aid superpower that is doing what an aid superpower should be doing and getting aid into Gaza. I have just spelled out that we have the material—we have already delivered 74 tonnes of aid, and we could deliver much more if we could deal with these bottlenecks. That is hugely reassuring.

With the Jewish community, it is partly about demonstrating an understanding of just what a catastrophic event—what an appalling event—7 October was. Sometimes people can forget, because of what has happened subsequently, the scale of it. If you look at a country the size of Israel, to lose over 1,400 people in one day, in those most horrific circumstances—I have been to Kibbutz Be’eri and seen with my own eyes where children were shot in front of their parents, where people were raped, the blood on the floor and the bullet holes in the wall. It is something you are never going to forget. This happened to a country that is a friend of ours, and they are peace-loving people in these kibbutzes. Showing understanding—that we understand why they feel so strongly



HOUSE OF COMMONS

about that event—and trying to put ourselves in their shoes is really important.

Q609 **Graham Stringer:** Thank you. Can I ask a number of quick factual questions? How many UK citizens remain in Gaza and, in particular, in the north of Gaza?

Lord Cameron: In terms of the number of citizens in Gaza, we have got a lot out, and the Israelis, Egyptians and authorities within Gaza have been helpful in doing that—

Q610 **Graham Stringer:** Can you be specific on numbers?

Lord Cameron: I know there are two who want to get out who do not have any security clearance problems but have not yet got out. What I do not have—but Philip is going to find me the number—is that we think that there are still quite a number of British nationals or dual nationals who are in Gaza but who haven't asked to leave. Have we got a number?

Sir Philip Barton: We cannot give you a precise number, as that will depend—

Q611 **Chair:** Forgive me, but Alex Chalk gave precise numbers on 7 November, when he said that 100 Brits had left Gaza and 100 were still in the country. So he gave very specific figures.

Lord Cameron: That was a long time ago. I think most of those 100 have left. The ones we do not know about are those who have not declared and do not necessarily want to leave.

Q612 **Chair:** So of those we know have declared, 50% have left?

Lord Cameron: More than that.

Sir Philip Barton: It is more than 300 now, people registered with us—British nationals and their dependants—have left with our assistance.

Lord Cameron: The crucial number is how many are there that are British nationals that want to leave and have not left, and I think that is a very small number at the moment. I will get back to you if I have got that wrong. It is also worth recognising that the Department is doing a good job in difficult circumstances.

There is also quite a number of people who have links to the UK. They might have the right to remain in the UK or they might be Commonwealth citizens from other countries who do not have representation in the region, but we do, whom we are helping to get out. There are also journalists and the families of journalists who have a British connection, as it were—they might work for the BBC or what have you—whom we are helping to get out, not to come to Britain necessarily but to carry on their work from Egypt or elsewhere.

Q613 **Graham Stringer:** Can you be specific about the number of UK nationals who remain as hostages?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Lord Cameron: Yes, there are two British nationals that remain as hostages. I do not want to make any further comment on them.

Q614 **Graham Stringer:** Do we know they are alive?

Lord Cameron: I just do not want to say any more. We do not have any information to share with you. There are also, of course, people very connected to Britain who are also hostages, and we are doing everything we can to try to help in both cases.

Q615 **Graham Stringer:** How many hostages have we managed to get back to the UK?

Lord Cameron: I do not have the figures off the top of my head. I will have to write to you about that because I do not have the figures and I do not want to give a false figure.

Q616 **Chair:** Forgive me, but we are not looking at 1,000 people where we are not sure. How many British nationals have been brought back who were hostages held by Hamas or Palestinian jihad?

Lord Cameron: I do not have—*[Interruption.]* Go on.

Sir Philip Barton: Israel is obviously taking the lead, in conjunction with international partners, including the UK, in trying to secure the release of hostages. We have been acting in support of that. We will have to confirm, but I do not think that the question about how many have been brought back to the UK is the right way—

Q617 **Chair:** I am going to be very fair to the Foreign Secretary and come back to you on this. A few of us were in Doha in December where we met Roger Carstens, who is the US hostage negotiator. He can tell me at a minute's notice the names of all the American hostages who are still being held by Hamas, let alone the ones in Venezuela or anywhere else. He can most certainly tell me how many have been brought back to the US. How many have been brought back to the UK who had UK citizenship?

Sir Philip Barton: There are two, as the Foreign Secretary said, who have British nationality who were hostages, and there are others who are connected to the UK through family ties. The answer to your question about "brought back to the UK by the UK Government", I would have to confirm—

Q618 **Chair:** I don't really care who brought them back: I care about British nationals who were held hostage. How many have been brought back?

Sir Philip Barton: Let me confirm afterwards. I will speak for myself rather than for the Foreign Secretary: I don't think there are any.

Q619 **Graham Stringer:** So the answer is zero.

Lord Cameron: I think that is right.

Q620 **Chair:** I will say that I understand from our discussions with hostage negotiators that citizenship is not being taken into account in terms of



HOUSE OF COMMONS

release. Obviously, many of us hoped at the start that foreign nationals might be the first to be released, but that is not the case. As you understand it at the moment, no British nationals are being held by Hamas. I understand why you feel you may not be able to share how many there are for various reasons, but no one has been able to be brought home as yet.

Lord Cameron: That is right. One of the things I did when I got into the Department was to make sure we were saying, "Yes, of course we must make sure we do everything we can for British nationals, but there are people who have been taken hostage who are deeply connected—

Chair: Absolutely.

Lord Cameron: —sister of, brother of, son of, and we must do everything we can for them." When we get to that category, there are people who are connected to British citizens who have been released.

Q621 **Chair:** Do we know how many?

Lord Cameron: No, because then you are getting into how many different connections there are. Of the British nationals, two, and none have been released.

Q622 **Graham Stringer:** One last question, if I may. You may not know the answer to this, but are you able to assess the threat to British hostages from the IDF bombardment in the area, and have you made any specific representations to the IDF or the Israeli Government to protect those hostages?

Lord Cameron: We raise the issue—not just the British hostages, but the hostages connected to Britain and the hostages more generally—every time we speak with Israeli Ministers. The last call I had was with Minister Dermer on Saturday morning, when I raised the hostage issue with him. We always raise that issue. Of course, in Israel itself there is a huge lobby on behalf of the hostages, wanting to get the hostages home and to save the hostages. So, yes, we raise the issue on every occasion.

Q623 **Chair:** Moving on to the conduct of the military operation, I would be interested in your assessment of Hamas's current capability, how much it has been degraded and what their intent is.

Lord Cameron: I think I have to be careful what I say. I mean, I've seen figures suggesting that they have lost well over 50% of their capacity and their capability in terms of being able to launch rockets and all the rest of it; I don't think I can go further than that. Their ability to launch rockets into Israel has been significantly degraded, but, as we have seen, they have still launched rockets in recent days.

Q624 **Chair:** The Israelis said over the weekend that they have now dismantled Hamas's military infrastructure in the north of Gaza. In your answer to Dan, you touched on the need for pauses. Is that not perhaps an opportunity to bring in a humanitarian pause in the north of Gaza? If Hamas has been dismantled, as the Israelis are saying they have



HOUSE OF COMMONS

succeeded in doing, do we need to look at particular areas having a humanitarian pause once that is appropriate? Otherwise, what is the current objective in the north of Gaza, as you understand it?

Lord Cameron: That is a very good point. What we have pushed for with Israel is to say, "Consider humanitarian pauses." We have not particularly focused on an individual area. Most Gazans have moved from the north to the south, so it is more helpful to have a humanitarian pause covering the whole of Gaza, because then you can get the aid to where most people are, but, frankly, anything would help. In fact, one issue we would like the Israelis to look at is switching the water back on into northern Gaza, because that would make a difference. It is about all those things—but that is a good thought.

Q625 **Chair:** One challenge is that as yet there has been no safe place that they could go, so perhaps that suggestion could provide an avenue.

As I am sure you saw me raise with the Prime Minister, President Biden has said that "indiscriminate" bombings have taken place. On 23 November, you warned that civilian casualties in Gaza were "too high" and that Israel must abide by international humanitarian law. How have you, as Foreign Secretary, achieved a reduction in civilian casualties?

Lord Cameron: What we have done on every occasion of talking, whether to the Israeli Prime Minister or President, or to Minister Dermer or Minister Gantz, whom I spoke with recently, is always make the point that of course we believe Israel has a right to defend itself and to deal with the Hamas threat, but it has to do so within international humanitarian law and it should try to avoid civilian casualties. We are very clear that they needed to do better in the south than they did in the north. They say today that they are moving from a sort of combat phase to more of a stabilisation phase. I do not fully know what they mean by that, but we definitely want them to do everything they can to try to move to a phase where civilians are less under threat.

Q626 **Chair:** Forgive me, but there is some sort of phrase that the US use, which I'm not going to quote accurately; it is something like "friends in public, punches behind the scenes." Do we think that the UK or the US—obviously the US has taken the lead on this—have been unable to restrain Israel in any way, in terms of the way it has conducted its airstrikes?

Lord Cameron: I think it is a very difficult question to answer. I will answer a slightly different question, if I may. I think the relentless pressure that Israel felt—from us, the Americans and others—over opening the Kerem Shalom crossing did make a difference. They eventually relented. Because we are a friend of Israel, and we have been a helpful friend in many ways on many occasions, I hope that they listen to what we have said.

Q627 **Chair:** Forgive me, when I asked the Prime Minister about the same topic, he said that he had not seen Israel's targeting. Have we asked to see Israel's targeting process or procedures?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Lord Cameron: I haven't seen it.

Chair: Have we asked to see it?

Lord Cameron: I haven't asked to see it. I don't think that that is something that they would share with us.

Q628 **Chair:** But they would share their collateral damage percentage that they are working to, if we asked them to do so.

Lord Cameron: They have certainly shared that, in that they point out—but one can say this is arguable—that their collateral damage percentage compared with other conflicts shows that they are taking the issue of civilian casualties very seriously, but that is a difficult one to—

Q629 **Chair:** I think it is a good way of holding them to account. Realistically, I believe—Royston might correct me on this—that the UK normally operates at around 3% collateral damage, and obviously a Minister will sign off particular airstrikes where there may be requirement for a greater risk factor. Israel must be operating at 20% or 30%. In 2014, they said they were working at 20-something per cent. I am surprised that we do not know what their civilian collateral damage percentage is, because that would be a direct way for us to have said to them, "Can you just get it down to below 10%?"

Lord Cameron: They do, in conversation, talk about what they think their percentages are. We do not think that is good enough, and we always push them to do more.

Q630 **Chair:** So we do know what their percentages are then?

Lord Cameron: We know what they say they have.

Q631 **Chair:** A final question from me before we move on to Brendan O'Hara, during the hostilities in Gaza in 2014, your Government decided to review licences for arms exports to Israel. You committed not to grant any further licences until hostilities were ceased. I think there were 12 specific licences that you were concerned about at the time. Why has there been no review, cessation, pause, despite the fact that there should have been an automatic trigger that exists within the Department to immediately suspend when there is a significant change on the ground?

Lord Cameron: The way this works is, as I am sure you know, that the grant of licences is done by the Department of Trade on the advice of the Foreign Office, and the Foreign Office has to look at compliance with international humanitarian law, based on an assessment of the commitment that Israel has, the capability—and whether they can they actually deliver on that capability—and the compliance. That assessment is carried out on a rolling basis, so it is permanently reviewed. Where the circumstances change and we reach a different view, we would advise the Department of Trade accordingly.

Q632 **Chair:** But the immediate handbrake—for example, after the terrorist attack in Kosovo, an immediate handbrake was put in place on sales of



HOUSE OF COMMONS

arms to Serbia—there was no immediate handbrake on this situation that I am aware of, despite there having been an enormous terrorist attack and then a response, and there has been no specific review of licences.

Lord Cameron: The circumstances are different, because of 7 October being such a hostile attack on Israel. The Government's position is that Israel has the right to defend itself and the right to try to stop Hamas launching future terrorist attacks, so it would be odd to have an automatic handbrake. What you have to do is assess on an ongoing basis, which is what we are doing.

Q633 **Chair:** Israel has a full right to defend itself under international humanitarian law, but the British Government have a duty to ensure that its licences for arms exports are as accurate as they can be. So you are not aware of any review within the system formally? The point of a rolling basis is that you have the emergency handbrake when it is needed.

Lord Cameron: It is as you described—

Q634 **Chair:** But you put one in place in 2014, which is why I am surprised that there hasn't been one, when the casualties are so much higher, this time.

Lord Cameron: What I have described is what happened, which is that it is a decision for the Department of Trade, based on advice from the Foreign Office, and that process is properly gone through.

Q635 **Chair:** I just find it strange that when there were much lower levels of hostility and activity, you put in place one as Prime Minister, and this time round, despite the circumstances being so much more serious, there has not been a review.

Lord Cameron: I think I have answered the question.

Q636 **Brendan O'Hara:** Foreign Secretary, have you received any guidance or advice, or received any submissions from the FCDO or Government lawyers, that Israel may be in breach of international humanitarian law?

Lord Cameron: Sorry, would you say that again?

Brendan O'Hara: Have you received any legal advice from the FCDO or Government lawyers that Israel may be in breach of international humanitarian law?

Lord Cameron: What I have received is advice, as part of this process that I have just described to the Chair, and the advice then was passed on, consistent with that advice, as it were, to the Department of Trade.

Q637 **Brendan O'Hara:** In terms of Israel's actions post 7 October—let me ask you personally—have you seen any evidence, been made aware of any evidence or have reasonable grounds to believe that Israel had breached international humanitarian law?

Lord Cameron: What I have to do is act on the advice that I am given. That advice is based on what we believe is happening, so we ask a whole series of questions of the Israeli Government about individual actions that are brought to our attention. We receive advice on that, consider that



HOUSE OF COMMONS

advice, and then pass it on to the Department of Trade for them to make the decision on arms exports.

Q638 **Brendan O'Hara:** Okay, I understand your relationship with the Department of trade. What I am asking you, Foreign Secretary, is: have you been made aware, or seen any evidence, or have reasonable grounds to believe, that Israel has breached international humanitarian law?

Chair: So, not arms exports.

Brendan O'Hara: Nothing to do with arms exports; this is about international humanitarian—

Lord Cameron: I have seen lots of things that have been deeply concerning, and when I do, I ask advice. We often, as part of this—for arms export, we formally have to do that: ask advice about whether that is in fact in breach of international humanitarian law.

Q639 **Brendan O'Hara:** And in your assessment as Foreign Secretary, has Israel, at any point in its response, breached international humanitarian law?

Lord Cameron: My job is not to make the legal adjudication, because I'm not a lawyer; it's for me to consult my lawyers in the Department and say, "Will you reach a judgment about whether this does breach international humanitarian law?", based on, as I said, the commitment, the capability and the compliance.

Q640 **Brendan O'Hara:** That takes me back to my initial question, then. Have your lawyers, in the FCDO or in Government, given you any advice as to whether Israel has breached international humanitarian law? You seem to be saying to us that it has been examined by the FCDO and by Government.

Lord Cameron: I know what you're asking and I don't want to—

Q641 **Brendan O'Hara:** Answer it.

Lord Cameron: Well, I don't want to be difficult; I don't want to give an inaccurate answer. I have described to you the process, because it is a process, so of course you see lots of things where you think, "Well, is that in line with international law?" So that is a process that the Foreign Office has to go through—to look at those instances, to put questions, as part of this process, to the Israeli authorities, to consider those answers and then to give me the considered advice: "Given all that, does that mean we think that Israel is in breach of human rights—international humanitarian law?" If the answer is yes, one set of advice goes to the Department of trade; if the answer is no, another set of advice goes. That's the way it works.

Q642 **Brendan O'Hara:** Okay. Let me take you away from process to the more specific. About two or three minutes ago, in answer or reply to the Chair, you said, and I quote, "One of the things we'd like the Israelis to do is switch the water back on." That says that they turned it off. It says that you recognise they have the power to turn it on. Therefore, isn't turning



HOUSE OF COMMONS

water off and having the ability to turn it back on, but choosing not to— isn't that a breach of international humanitarian law?

Lord Cameron: Well, it's just something they ought to do, in my view.

Q643 **Brendan O'Hara:** Of course they should do it; every human being would say you don't cut people's water supply off. But I'm asking you, in your position as Foreign Secretary, around the point of international humanitarian law: if Israel have the power to turn back on the water that they turned off, surely that is a flagrant breach of international humanitarian law.

Lord Cameron: Well, I'm not a lawyer. My view is they ought to switch it on because the north of Gaza—the conflict is now effectively over there, and so getting more water and power into northern Gaza would be a very good thing to do. You don't have to be a lawyer to make a judgment about that; you just have to be a human being.

Q644 **Chair:** Forgive me. Sir Philip, under international obligations, do occupying powers have an obligation to provide access to water—yes or no?

Sir Philip Barton: You're asking me a technical, legal question—

Q645 **Chair:** Sir Philip, I'm really—forgive me. You and I have played this dance enough times. We all know that under international law there is an obligation for occupying powers to provide water.

Sir Philip Barton: You're asking me a technical question about occupying powers and what their obligations are in international law. I imagine you're correct, Chair, but I'm also not a lawyer. I also just would point out I don't—

Q646 **Chair:** Sir Philip, just bear in mind we want to have—we have come to such a good place, working with you, because we have the confidence that you do know these details, and that's what your colleagues say. You know that it is not that you presume I'm correct; that "is" the duty on an occupying power.

Sir Philip Barton: Chair, I think that—

Q647 **Chair:** Yes.

Sir Philip Barton: I think that is right, so yes, but I would also add that in answering your questions earlier about occupying, occupation—

Q648 **Chair:** I am not asking you to apply it to Israel. The facts are, though, that they are required to. Lord Cameron, just to clarify, you have received no advice at any point from any Government lawyer that states that Israel is in breach of international humanitarian law.

Lord Cameron: That's not what I said.

Q649 **Chair:** That's why I'm asking you to clarify.

Lord Cameron: Yes, well, I'm going to give exactly the same answer all over again, which is what my role is.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q650 **Chair:** I'm not interested in the role; I'm interested in the legal advice you have received.

Lord Cameron: Yes, well, the legal advice I have received is consistent with the fact that we have not changed our export procedures—

Q651 **Chair:** But it's not about arms exports; it's about international humanitarian law being upheld when it comes to aid, when it comes to the way in which airstrikes are being prosecuted, and everything else. We had one question on arms exports; we have moved on from them. In any realm, in any respect, you have never had a piece of paper put in front of you by a Foreign Office lawyer that says that Israel is in breach of its international humanitarian commitments under international humanitarian law.

Lord Cameron: Look, the reason for not answering this question is that I cannot recall every single bit of paper that has been put in front of me. I look at everything. Of course, there are lots of things that have happened where you think, "Surely that was something that shouldn't have happened." I don't want to answer that question because—

Q652 **Chair:** Forgive me, but in 2013 you were quite happy to say from the Dispatch Box that war crimes had been committed by the Assad regime when it came to chemical weapons use, and two years later you were happy to say that Hamas had committed a war crime when they shot rockets into Israel.

Lord Cameron: Well, I do think there is a difference between using chemical weapons to kill people and Israel fighting a conflict where they are trying to deal with a terrorist force that inflicted an appalling attack on their country.

Q653 **Chair:** It is a difference in setting or specifics or scale, but not in principle, which was your willingness and ability to determine whether international law had been broken.

Lord Cameron: I am not sure we are going to get a lot further with this.

Chair: That's for us—

Lord Cameron: If you are asking me whether I am worried that Israel has taken action that might be in breach of international law, because particular premises have been bombed, yes, of course I am worried about that. That is why I consult the Foreign Office lawyers when giving this advice on arms exports. If you put it that way, I am happy to say yes, of course, every day I look at what has happened and ask questions about whether it is in line with international humanitarian law—could the Israelis have done better to avoid civilian casualties? Of course I do that.

Chair: We have no doubt that you would ask those questions. It is about the response that you have received.

Q654 **Brendan O'Hara:** I understand the question that you want to answer, but the question that I want to ask is: have you received legal advice that



HOUSE OF COMMONS

says that Israel is in breach of international humanitarian law?

Lord Cameron: The short answer to that is no, but I might want to qualify it instantly because it is not fair on the lawyers. Of course, the lawyers give me lots of advice saying, "We're worried about this event, that event, this event, that event. We're going to go away and consult the Israeli authorities. We're going to ask a bunch of questions and then we're going to give you considered legal advice: given everything, on the basis of capability, commitment and everything else, have they broken international law?" That is why it is not really a yes or no answer, but I am trying to be helpful by explaining how the job works. Does that help at all?

Q655 **Brendan O'Hara:** No, but unfortunately I think that's as good as we're going to get from you.

Finally, Foreign Secretary, what assessment have you made of the Israeli ambassador's claim that "every school...mosque" and "every second house" in Gaza "has access to tunnels" and "ammunition"? She said that in a television interview. When pressed on whether that means the complete destruction of Gaza by Israel, she replied, "do you have another solution"? In your opinion, was she freelancing when she was speaking to that television interviewer or was she speaking for the Israeli Government?

Lord Cameron: I don't agree with that approach. If you are asking me—

Q656 **Brendan O'Hara:** I am not asking you about the approach. I am asking whether you think she was speaking for the Israeli Government or was she freelancing?

Lord Cameron: I don't know. I would hope that that is not the position of the Israeli Government, because it is the wrong position.

Q657 **Bob Seely:** Just very quickly on this point—I am not trying to scratch the same sore.

Lord Cameron: I am trying not to be difficult. By the way, none of the individuals released so far live in the UK. No British hostages have been released, as I said. I just did not want to give a wrong answer.

Bob Seely: I don't want to bang on the same point, but I will ask it in a slightly more productive way. I am not asking you to be a faux lawyer. I am also very aware that in Hamas you have an organisation that does not pretend to do anything by any moral justification that we recognise. It slaughters people and rapes people; its approach to sexual violence is despicable, etc. I also understand that Israel, probably rightly, feels that the world is always very quick to judge its actions and never bothers to judge the actions of those—Iran, Hezbollah, Hamas, the Houthis—who are trying to attack it.

Having said that, reading between the lines, what you seem to be saying is not that you have had lawyers say that they are breaching international law. It is very difficult to argue that, because you have to understand the Israelis' legal approach to what they are doing and how they judge proportionality. I am assuming, reading between the lines,



HOUSE OF COMMONS

that your lawyers are saying that potentially the Israelis are vulnerable to a challenge from The Hague court and elsewhere, and that in some of the things they are doing, potentially in relation to proportionality, there is a vulnerability. Is that a better way of asking?

Lord Cameron: Close to that. Look, in all these cases, there is a question mark as to whether it is in breach of international humanitarian law. That is why you have to go back, look at the episode and what, in particular, was bombed, and then ask yourself a bunch of questions, which is what the lawyers do, and they give you that advice. The advice has been, so far, that they have the commitment, the capability and the compliance, but on lots of occasions that is under question. That is hopefully a better way of putting it.

Q658 **Bob Seely:** There is always a law-governed—

Lord Cameron: There is always a question, as you would expect.

Chair: Bob, I am going to move on to Dan.

Q659 **Dan Carden:** Foreign Secretary, 10 years ago you were very outspoken on Gaza being what you called an “open-air prison”. I just want to put some of the statistics that I have on the record: 1.9 million people have been displaced, 70% of Gaza’s residential buildings have been destroyed, most schools have been destroyed and most hospitals have been rendered inoperable. This week, the International Criminal Court will hold public hearings on South Africa’s application under obligations relating to the genocide convention. Could you give the Government’s views on that?

Lord Cameron: First of all, on the South Africa case—I think it is to the International Court of Justice rather than the International Criminal Court—I do not think that is helpful. I do not agree with it. I do not think it is right. I do not think we should bandy around terms like genocide in this case; I do not think that is correct. That does not change our long-standing position that, ultimately, it is for the courts to define genocide, not for states. I am very clear about that.

In terms of what I said about Gaza, it has been unsatisfactory for years—the fact that there has not been better access to and from Gaza, and the situation in Gaza has been—

Q660 **Dan Carden:** It is not for courts to determine, is it? It is for states who are party to the convention.

Lord Cameron: Ultimately, the long-standing position of the British Government on all questions of genocide—Philip will correct me if I have got this wrong—is that it is not for a Government to say, “That is genocide.” It is for a court—the ICJ or the ICC—to determine genocide.

Q661 **Dan Carden:** So it is not for the UK Government to consider the risk of genocide in any case.

Lord Cameron: Of course, if we want to, as we have on other occasions, put information into a court when they are considering a question, we are



HOUSE OF COMMONS

at liberty to do that, and we have done that, I think, in the case of what has happened recently in Burma—that predates my time as Foreign Secretary.

But you are asking me specifically about the South African case. Our view is that Israel does have a right to defend itself, must act within international humanitarian law, should avoid civilian casualties, and should do better on that ground, but we do not believe that calling this genocide and claiming that this is genocide is the right approach, and we do not agree with what South Africa is doing.

Q662 Mr Jayawardena: Lord Cameron, I actually agree with you that sometimes it is not about the technical IHL definitions and that it is around that gut feel of, “Is this right or is this wrong?”. So can I pivot to the issue of the West Bank? What is your view of the increase in violence there, and have you had conversations with the Israeli Government to try and reduce it?

Lord Cameron: Yes, I agree with you. I think that what is happening in terms of settler violence is unacceptable. I have raised this, I think, in every conversation I have had with Israeli interlocutors. We have gone one further than that and, working with the Home Office, put in place travel bans on those people responsible for settler violence. We have the opportunity, should we judge it right, to move that from a travel ban up to a full sanction, which obviously includes the travel ban, the asset freeze and other things. We keep a very clear eye on this. It is not right what is happening. As well as being terrible for the Palestinian people that live there, this is, long term, very bad for Israel, because Israel needs, fundamentally, a two-state solution in order for it to have the security it needs. So it needs to make the West Bank a functioning political space.

Q663 Mr Jayawardena: So why are we only seeing escalations in the violence, given that you are making representations and others are making representations? Why is this not working?

Lord Cameron: I think it is a range of things. Because of what happened on 7 October and what has happened subsequently, you have a rise in tensions across the Occupied Palestinian Territories and in the West Bank. You have the extreme settler movement, who have been perpetrating these acts. You have some politicians in Israel who do not call them out—indeed, they even support them—and that is why it is very important that proper friends of Israel, including Britain, call this out and are very clear about it.

Q664 Mr Jayawardena: Given that you have announced that you have banned settlers from entering the UK, what would be the trigger to up that to a full sanction? What would be the trigger, in your mind?

Lord Cameron: It is a very good question, and I cannot give you an absolute hard and fast answer. I think there is a sense that if this continues—if it gets worse, if more acts are carried out—we would consider taking the travel ban up to a full sanction.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q665 **Mr Jayawardena:** You say “more acts” being carried out. They are being carried out—this is happening all the time. I must press the point.

Lord Cameron: If you are asking for a sort of matrix for the decision, I do not have one, but it is a very good point and I will go away and think about it. But there is no hesitation: our view is that this is not right, and we need to act. You should use your sanctions and deterrents in the smartest way that you can, and we are happy to do that.

Q666 **Chair:** Very quickly, before Royston takes us on to the wider conflict, you touched earlier on the need for reconstruction in your first answer. Israel has said that it is looking to the EU and US to reconstruct and pay for the reconstruction of Gaza. Can I ask if you agree with that?

Lord Cameron: I think it is going to take a giant international effort, because the level of the destruction is so great. We are going to have to try to bring together a whole group of countries—I know this is something that your Committee has looked at—including the Arab and Muslim states. We have to bring together the main European powers and America into some form of contact group that works on this together. We are going to need as many people as possible to join the effort.

Q667 **Chair:** Should it not be for Israel, though, to lead on the reconstruction? To go to Ranil’s point, it was able to find \$70 million to fund the expansion of illegal settlements over the next year, despite lobbying by this Government to stop that. Surely Israel should be leading on the reconstruction of Gaza.

Lord Cameron: I think it will take more than any one country to do this.

Q668 **Chair:** Very briefly, you touched on the contact group. Obviously I have been urging the creation of a Palestine contact group. One of those aspects would be, for me, that the priority is track-two diplomacy. We need to get civil society—women, youth and other groups—in the room who are ready to talk about the long-term peace or the “day after”, as His Majesty from Jordan wishes to refer to it. Are we even anywhere close to bringing together track-two diplomacy? That is something that the UK could lead on and could do now.

Lord Cameron: There are a lot of conversations taking place about this. Obviously one of the difficulties is that some countries have been less inclined to talk about it until the conflict is over, but I think you have seen in recent days an Egyptian plan—you have even seen the Israelis talk about what should happen in Gaza after this conflict is over. I think the space is opening up; the conversations are taking place now.

Q669 **Royston Smith:** Foreign Secretary, thank you for joining us here today. When we started this inquiry it was about the Middle East and North Africa, but it has morphed into something that is—maybe not predominantly, but certainly—Israel and Gaza-related. However, there is a bigger issue, which is why we were looking at the Middle East before 7 October. One of the issues, which I am sure we will come to, is Yemen and how, as the UN penholder, we deal with that and how we are seen to be playing our part. Before we come to that, what is your sense of what



HOUSE OF COMMONS

is happening in the south of the Red sea, and what are the Government and you, the Foreign Secretary, doing to prevent contagion in the region?

Lord Cameron: I think what is happening in the Red sea is extremely dangerous, in that you have had repeated Houthi attacks upon not just Israeli shipping, as they would claim, but all shipping. You have to in some ways try to separate this from the conflict for a second and think, "Is it acceptable that one of the most important sea lanes in the world has effectively been closed by a group that are unacceptably, illegally and continually attacking shipping?" My answer is no, it is not. That is why we, with others, set up Operation Prosperity Guardian, why we have British destroyers and potentially frigates involved in it, and why you heard the Defence Secretary say so clearly that if this continues, we have to consider what further action could be taken. Of course, no one wants to see escalation of conflict in the Middle East, but it is unacceptable to have the freedom of navigation affected in this way. That is the position that we take.

Q670 **Royston Smith:** What is your sense of why the Houthis are involving themselves? They would say that it is the Palestinian cause and they feel that they should do what they can to take the side of the Palestinians against what they see as the aggressor: the Israelis.

Lord Cameron: That is exactly what they say. They are also, in some ways, a proxy for Iranian action. That is what they say, but, fundamentally, the effect of what they are doing is to stop the freedom of navigation and the free flow of goods, manufactures, oil and everything else, which is important to countries in the region and in the world. I just do not think we can accept this continued prevention of the freedom of navigation. So that is what they say, but it is illegal and unacceptable and has to stop.

Q671 **Royston Smith:** That is what they say, but what do you think? Why now? Why would they want to embroil themselves in this?

Lord Cameron: It is a very good question. I think partly it is a sort of competition for attention, for voice, for making them more popular in the world they want to be in by taking action because of what is happening in Gaza. But they need to be told, as they have been told, that this is not a free option and that consequences follow. I think it is actually the first time that British destroyers have shot down a hostile aviation thing in about 30 years. They need to be told that it is unacceptable. Speculating on exactly why they are doing it and why they continue is important, but it is hard to know exactly why.

Q672 **Royston Smith:** Can we talk about the road map for peace proposed by the Saudi Government? I believe they are in discussions with the Houthis now. Depending on who you talk to, you will find that the Houthis are sighted of the peace proposal and are discussing it with the Saudis, but others in Yemen are being excluded. What is your sense of that? Do you see the same as we have been told by others—that this is turning into a Houthi-Saudi deal, as opposed to a Yemen solution, which may be, in the way that Gaza and Israel may be, a two-state solution?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Lord Cameron: What I see—and I praise the Saudis for doing this—is a genuine attempt at a peace process to bring this long-standing conflict to an end. These processes work only if you include all the relevant participants in them. If you take a step back and ask why we are in this situation, I think there is a good case to be made, if you go back 10 years to when this conflict began—maybe we could apply this to other situations—that, for all the difficulties of dealing with the Houthis, if you leave a significant part of a country out of a peace process, it does not work.

I would applaud the Saudis for what they are doing. I hope this peace process is yielding results. It looks like it is. It looks like they have made real progress. But that does not mean that the Houthis can go about attacking ships in the Red sea. In fact, I think if you asked the Saudis what their view is, they would say that pretty clearly too.

Q673 **Royston Smith:** Which brings me to the point of why they might be doing it. The argument is that the Houthis are having these discussions with the Saudis, but the south of Yemen is being excluded. Given your point that you cannot have a peace process unless everyone is involved, it looks to me like there may be a flawed process. Of course, we are the penholder. We spoke to the US envoy when we were in Doha a few weeks ago. The UN envoy has just come back from Muscat. Everyone is talking about this, but there are groups of people in Yemen who feel that they have been excluded.

Lord Cameron: You make a good point; let me take that away. I would apply it to Afghanistan and Iraq—to all these situations. Fundamentally, if you want to try to bring peace after conflict, you need to include all the parties to that conflict and all the parties in the country to have the best chance of success.

Q674 **Royston Smith:** I have one final question, if I may, on a peaceful solution to the region. On the Abraham accords and Saudi normalisation with Israel, do you think that those agreements and arrangements are now in jeopardy because of what is happening in Israel and Gaza?

Lord Cameron: My instinct is that, if you go to the Emirates, Bahrain or Morocco, they are very committed to what they agreed to. They see it as a good advance. It is obviously under some pressure because of local opinion, but I think they are committed to it. I think that, in the medium term, the Saudis would still like to get that back on track. I think there is a genuine view that part of peace for this region is recognition of Israel by these major powers, but you can't leave the Palestinians out of this equation. You have to have the Palestinians feeling that they can live in dignity and security in the Palestinian territories with a state of their own.

Q675 **Royston Smith:** When we talk about the fact that it will have to be an international effort to rebuild Gaza, do you think it is incumbent on the Middle Eastern Gulf countries and others to be the largest part of that solution?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Lord Cameron: They obviously have huge capabilities and capacity to do that, but I think it is going to be quite a diplomatic effort to get everybody around the table and to get everybody to contribute, as the Chair rightly pointed out.

Chair: Foreign Secretary, you didn't touch too much on Iran. Bob, do you want to quickly follow up?

Q676 **Bob Seely:** Thank you, Chair. Briefly—I know it is a big subject and we are very tight on time—to what extent do you see Iran as an opportunistic manipulator of events, and to what extent do you see it as the prime mover behind what is happening, not only against Israel but against Saudi, using the various proxies that it has, be they the proxies in Iraq, Hezbollah, Hamas or the Houthis?

Lord Cameron: I think it is probably the first of your propositions, in that it is clear that all of these organisations—whether it is Hamas, Hezbollah, the Houthis or Iran-backed armed groups in Syria and Iraq—have the support of Iran in common, but they have quite a lot of agency to act on their own. I think it is the first of the suggestions you make.

Q677 **Bob Seely:** And that is the FCDO's view—that they have agency and they are supported.

Lord Cameron: My view very strongly is that Iran is a malign influence in the region. I said that very clearly in an interview the other day. There is no doubt that it gives weapons, training, ability, money and support to all these groups. We know that. We know that Houthi weapons come from Iran. We know that Hezbollah rockets come from Iran. We know that. But the way you put the question was, do we think that these groups are backed by Iran and manipulated by Iran but, ultimately, able to make some of their own decisions? If that is the way you put it, I would say it is that—yes.

Q678 **Dan Carden:** This Committee warned against the deprioritising of the Middle East. I wonder whether, on reflection, you regret that there was not a single mention of Palestine or the Middle East peace process in the last integrated review and refresh, and whether you can explain that.

Lord Cameron: The integrated review—and the refresh, actually—was before my time, but I will own up to another sin, if you like. If you go back to 2008, '09, '10 onwards, there were some real efforts to get the peace process under way—my predecessor Gordon Brown wrote a brilliant article in *The Guardian* today about it, and Barack Obama made a huge effort when he was President—but ultimately they kept getting stalled, and Israeli politics kept going in a direction that made it very hard to make progress. I remember something that Obama said to me. I was pushing him and saying, "Come on, Barack; we've got to do more, we've got to do more," and he was saying, "Look, David, we can't want this more than they want it"—more than the Palestinians and the Israelis want it. That is true, but none the less, looking back, it is one of those things where you just wish even more had been done.



Q679 **Dan Carden:** I am not sure that answers why it has been missed out of the integrated review.

Lord Cameron: As I say, I only joined the Government a month ago, so I can't answer that question, but it has always been the British Government's view—it never changed through the change of Prime Ministers—that the two-state solution is the answer to the Israel-Palestine conundrum. That has been the absolutely consistent policy all the way through.

What I was trying to say is that I think there have been moments of great effort and action, and moments when Israeli politics is going the wrong way, the global financial crisis takes over, there are other problems—Iranian mischief rises—and it is harder to get this moving. In my time as Prime Minister, it was very difficult to get this dossier moving. I think, to be fair to my successors, that that has been the case subsequently. Israeli politics has just moved in a completely different direction, where it was hard to find anyone who supported a two-state solution. Hopefully, out of this crisis, we can try to start again to make the long-term argument that the only way you will get true peace and security is the two-state solution, but it will be a hard ask.

Chair: I think a lot of us would agree with the assessment you have just made. This Committee has been very critical of the fact that there was not a single reference to Palestine or the Middle East peace process in the IR or the IR refresh, and the writing was on the wall. In June last year, I gave a speech in which I said we were going to see the Gaza crisis of 2023. That was not because I have a crystal ball but because I listen to our Arab partners. All of us on this Committee feel very strongly that, exactly as per your sentiment, it is vital that we do not allow this time to be the time that we fail; we must move forward.

On the point of moving forward, I now move us on to other areas. Fabian, you want to look at the Middle East.

Q680 **Fabian Hamilton:** Thank you, Chair. Foreign Secretary, I hope you agree that Libya is a crucial country, given where it is geopolitically and given the total mess it is in, with effectively no state and different factions fighting for the oil wealth and the exploitation of that oil. In 2016, this Committee condemned your decision to intervene in Libya as not having been based on accurate intelligence, as an opportunistic exercise in regime change and as having created a humanitarian crisis. With hindsight, would you agree?

Lord Cameron: The short answer is no. I remember reading that report. I think it was my fellow Conservative who was largely responsible for it: the Member of Parliament for—I mustn't traduce him by getting his name wrong. Anyway, I will think about that.

Look, the information I had at the time—and I don't think it was inaccurate—was that Colonel Gaddafi was heading towards Benghazi, where he was threatening to kill large numbers of his own population, and we had seen evidence of him doing that already. We acted in order to



HOUSE OF COMMONS

prevent what could have been a huge humanitarian crisis and slaughter. I think the information on which we acted was correct, and I disagree with the report. I haven't read it for many years, but I remember reading it in 2016 or 2017 and thinking it was bunk.

Fabian Hamilton: I wasn't a member of the Committee myself at the time, so I am not going to take ownership of it.

Chair: I would suggest not calling any of our reports bunk.

Lord Cameron: I am sure there are many good things in the report, but not that particular point. The idea that, as Prime Minister, you would launch some action in Libya on the basis of—what? That you thought it would be a good idea? For no reason? We were genuinely concerned that there was going to be a slaughter.

Fabian Hamilton: And I am sure we all understand that—

Lord Cameron: By the way, so was Nicolas Sarkozy and so was Hillary Clinton. That is why the action took place.

Q681 **Fabian Hamilton:** Foreign Secretary, the problem is that we have effectively no state there—no Government. We have competing factions. We have warlords in the shape of people like Khalifa Haftar. We have state sponsors of armaments to the different factions. It is a total mess. Through all that, many refugees coming from sub-Saharan Africa are going through Libya instead of staying in Libya to help rebuild that state and returning remittances to their own countries, and they are crossing the Mediterranean into Italy and Europe. Surely some of that must have been the consequence of that intervention. Would you agree?

Lord Cameron: What I would agree with is that at the end of the intervention, when we, the French and others wanted to help the Libyan factions come together, they did not want any foreign boots on the ground. There was a Libyan national opposition, which was relatively well formed at the time, but they wouldn't accept outside assistance in that way. They said that would make things worse, rather than better, and that was the decision they took. Ultimately, they failed to take the opportunity to have the help that might have been necessary to try to take armaments out of Libya and get the different groups together to form a more cohesive whole. They didn't take that opportunity, but we were offering it. I remember bringing the leader of the Libyan national opposition to the G8 in Northern Ireland in 2013, I think, to have exactly that conversation, but it wasn't something we could make work. Obviously, after the Iraq war, there was great nervousness about putting boots on the ground. We were willing to try different things if they wanted to, but they didn't want to.

Q682 **Fabian Hamilton:** So the blame lies squarely with the Libyans, rather than outside interference or intervention.

Lord Cameron: It is up to you to decide what you think. My view is that it was right to intervene. It was right to stop Gaddafi killing his own people.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

It was right to give that country a chance of a brighter future. They didn't want to have that help in reconstruction. That is the view that I take.

Q683 Fabian Hamilton: Can I move us to the other end of the Maghreb—to Morocco? I will declare my interest, in that I was a guest of the Moroccan Parliament on a visit in October 2022. I refer people to my declaration in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

Morocco is a stable country with a functioning democracy. It is of huge strategic importance to the UK and we have a long-standing relationship with it. What will you do as Foreign Secretary to further the partnership that we have with that country, which is so important geopolitically, can supply us with green energy and has just built the massive port at Tanger Med, which is doing so much to help international trade into Africa?

Lord Cameron: First of all, I have spoken to my opposite number the Moroccan Foreign Minister twice, I think, but certainly once, since taking this job, and I think that relations are in a very good place. There is a lot of bilateral co-operation on all the sorts of areas that you describe. I think that there is a huge appetite on behalf of Morocco to play a bigger role in the region, and indeed when it comes to the Middle East peace process, as well as to be far more outward going and outward facing about trade, investment, partnerships and everything else. I think it is a very good opportunity for a strong relationship.

Q684 Fabian Hamilton: So they are our partners in helping to bring about the two-state solution. Would you agree with that?

Lord Cameron: Yes. I think that, of all the countries—well, I don't want to single them out too much, but I have had lots of conversations with countries that have an interest in how we move forward, and they have been some of the most forward-leaning and enthusiastic about the role that they might be able to play, but also very enthusiastic about the bilateral relationship and what more we can do together.

Q685 Mr Jayawardena: Just very quickly, you have said that there is an enthusiastic relationship between Britain and Morocco, and you have said that they are a partner in some of our endeavours. Given the long-standing dispute over Western Sahara, and that the United States recognised Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara in 2020, which helped unlock normalisation of relations with Israel for Morocco, why won't we?

Lord Cameron: I am very happy to take this away and look at it. Whenever I have been asked this question before—I remember when we were preparing for Prime Minister's questions, someone would throw in, "What about Western Sahara?" just to see if you were on your game. I do not see a case for change, but I am very happy to take it away and have a look.

Chair: Let us turn to Ukraine.

Q686 Bob Seely: Do you think that the conflict in Gaza is hampering international support to Ukraine?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Lord Cameron: It is certainly taking attention away from Ukraine, which I think is a pity. It is the job of the strongest supporters of Ukraine, of which I would say Britain is rightly one, to do everything we can to keep it as high up the agenda as possible, and to keep the partnership and coalition of countries that back Ukraine as strong, united and purposeful as possible.

Q687 **Bob Seely:** How confident are you in the UK's ability to continue to support Ukraine in a prolonged conflict? Let me give you two pieces of concern. The first is what might happen next year in the US elections. Secondly, there is a lot of circumstantial evidence to suggest that supplies to the Ukrainians are beginning to dry up, that we are being slow to commit and that other countries in Europe are being slow to commit. If the Ukrainians need over 2 million 155 mm and 152 mm shells a year to hold positions, and they are getting an estimated half of that, we are effectively undermining their ability to defend themselves against the Russian state, which is now on a war-economy footing when we are not.

Lord Cameron: The way you asked the question was, do I think that the UK will continue to commit? Absolutely. I think that it is very good that there is such cross-party consensus about this. This is not an issue of contention in British politics, whereas it is a little bit more in American politics and in some European countries. There is wholehearted support from people in this country for the economic, diplomatic and military support. Indeed, the way that people took Ukrainian refugees into their own homes speaks to that. We understand the dangers of letting European boundaries be redrawn by force and the danger of not responding to aggression. I have great confidence in that.

Where I would agree with you is that from all the things I have seen since becoming Foreign Secretary with respect to this sort of dossier, I have been incredibly impressed by the work that has been done and the support, the way we are working with the Ukrainians, and the diplomatic support. All that, and the leadership we are giving internationally, is great. The one area where I want to see more, which I am talking to the Defence Secretary and the Prime Minister about, is how we do more to get our and others' production of arms and armaments for Ukraine on to more of a mobilised footing. There is more to be done on that. I don't have an answer today, but I am very focused on it.

Q688 **Bob Seely:** We are still not on that mobilised footing. If the Americans pull back in their support for any reason, are you confident that the UK and its European allies can make up the difference, considering that our total supply of 155 mm shells could probably have kept the Ukrainians going for a month at their current usage rate of 5,000 to 7,000 shells over a summer day?

Lord Cameron: If you add the UK and Europe together, in terms of military support, we are about equivalent to what the US has given. The direct answer to your question is that we really need the Americans to come forward with this package, which I am pretty confident they will, because, ultimately, there is a majority for it in Congress. I have been on



HOUSE OF COMMONS

the Hill myself and had meetings with everyone from the Speaker to Marjorie Taylor Greene—who is not that supportive—and there is a majority, so I think that will happen. But the point is, that is not enough. We want the European support to go through—that needs to happen; we want the US support to go through; and we are going to have our package, which we will be announcing shortly. We need all three of those things, but we also have to recognise now that, beyond helping Ukraine through this winter, and to help them take the fight to Russia, particularly in terms of the attacks they have made on Russian facilities in Crimea, on warships and the rest of it, we also need production on a more industrialised footing.

Q689 Bob Seely: Before we go on to the next question, I want to ask for greater clarity from the FCDO and the Ministry of Defence over our level of supply and the European Union's level of supply. I ask that not because we want to make secret information public, but because, if we are giving 2 million shells a year to the Ukrainians, it is important that the Russians know they cannot just wait for us to fade away. You need that clarity over supply. Can you give us that commitment today?

Lord Cameron: What I can tell you is that our commitment is such that, with our allies, we want to demonstrate to Putin very clearly that he cannot wait us out: we are prepared to support Ukraine through '24, '25, '26. We are prepared to give that support, because this is absolutely the challenge of our generation. I do not want to get into numbers of shells or all the rest of it. Add up the GDP of the countries of the coalition and we outrank Russia 25 to one. It should not be impossible for us to get on a sufficient industrialised footing—

Bob Seely: But it also takes willpower, because you could say that with Afghan 100 times over, and that didn't work out so good in the end.

Lord Cameron: I think there is a very big difference with a war on our continent, where we can see the effect on our security so directly. I do not sense any slippage in this country in support for Ukraine and, when I talk to European Foreign Ministers, there is huge enthusiasm for doing as much as we can—

Q690 Bob Seely: But we are still not on a war footing. We are still not on—

Lord Cameron: I have answered that question—we need to do more on that on front.

Bob Seely: Okay, thank you.

Q691 Henry Smith: Foreign Secretary, thank you for appearing before us. I want to turn to a different part of the globe: the British Indian Ocean Territory. You will be aware that negotiations on future sovereignty have been going on between London and Port Louis for just over a year now. Diego Garcia has been extremely strategically important, both in various actions in the Cold War, Iraq and Afghanistan and now with a new Cold War and, indeed, the Chinese belt and road initiative. What is your view on the strategic security and military importance of British sovereignty



remaining over Diego Garcia?

Lord Cameron: I started this session by saying that I think we face a very insecure, dangerous and difficult world with conflicts and that we need to maintain our security, strengthen our alliances, hold our friends close and protect ourselves as well as we can, and we should think about this issue in that context. Diego Garcia is an important national asset, the use of which we share with the Americans. In any negotiation we have with the Mauritians, the overriding question must be the safety, security and usability of this base. That is it; that is the thing that matters more than anything. We must look at all the risks and dangers that there could be in any change of circumstance. That is the way we will proceed.

Q692 **Henry Smith:** There is a precedent in terms of negotiations over the future of British overseas territories. The Anglo-Sino agreement on Hong Kong was very much lauded at the time. It is now not worth the paper it is written on. Are you concerned that, with growing Chinese influence in the Indian ocean and in many former Commonwealth countries around the world, from the Caribbean to the Pacific, a treaty on the future of the British Indian Ocean Territory—the Chagos islands—would be vulnerable in the future to the Chinese and potentially other states abusing that and us then surrendering a very important security situation, including for the Americans, of course?

Lord Cameron: That is absolutely the right question, and it is the question that I am asking. With any negotiated outcome, it has to be beyond doubt that there is no danger to this vital national US-UK asset of not being able to function and operate properly. Whether that is Chinese influence or what might happen in the future to Mauritius, or what might happen with other states and the outer islands, all those questions are absolutely front and centre in my mind in looking at this issue.

Q693 **Henry Smith:** Are you concerned that the negotiations might be setting a dangerous precedent for other British overseas territories that are either uninhabited or sparsely populated? I am not talking about Gibraltar, which has a functioning democracy and a clear will, or even the Falkland Islands, but perhaps South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands.

Lord Cameron: Again, that is great question. What has happened is an advisory judgment by the International Court of Justice—it is an advisory judgment, not a final judgment. We have to think very carefully about the effect of concluding a negotiation that changed the nature of our arrangements with Diego Garcia that could be used as a precedent in other cases. I do not think it is necessary just about the less-inhabited overseas territories; there will be other situations and assets that we have that are particularly important. The questions that you are asking are the questions that I am asking, and I will not be happy unless we have very good answers to those questions.

Q694 **Henry Smith:** Finally, I am very pleased to hear you talk about the judgment as an advisory judgment. This is not like a domestic court of law, as you know, where a jury decides. It is often where countries that, historically, are not allies or friends of the UK use the opportunity to



HOUSE OF COMMONS

make a statement against British interests around the world. Are you concerned that this may also set a dangerous precedent for the sovereign base areas in Cyprus?

Lord Cameron: Again, I feel that we are positively joined at the hip over these questions. I have come into the Department and have checked the progress that we are making on this issue. When I was Prime Minister, it was all about trying to see if we could relocate Chagossians back on to the outer islands; lots of work was done, and it was not possible. It is exactly what I am asking. As I say, there is a negotiation ongoing. The absolutely crucial thing is the safety, security and long-term viability of this base in a difficult and dangerous world. Anything that gets in the way of that is a major problem that we have to consider. Also, as a country that has other overseas possessions and territories, some of which have very important intelligence and security assets on them, we have to think of the effect on those. If all of those questions can be resolved, that would be good. If they cannot, obviously we will have to think very carefully about this.

Q695 **Chair:** A few months ago I was a guest of the Kosovan Government so that I could go into the weapons that were used on the 24 September Banjska terror attack. I know, Foreign Secretary, that you have just returned from Kosovo yourself. Is it not long overdue for the UK to publicly share its conclusions on what took place that day?

Lord Cameron: What do you mean by that? We have a pretty clear view about what happened that day. I am not really aware—do you want us to write it down and publish it?

Q696 **Chair:** I want the British Government to share with the world what its assessment is. So far, all it has said is that it was a terror attack and that it was awful. It has not said who armed the militia. It has not said publicly that all of the serious weaponry that was being used had serial numbers that lined up identically, were from 2021 and came directly from Serbian military. It has not said whether Belgrade commissioned it. There have been no public—

Lord Cameron: It is a very good question. My view, rather like yours, is that, having been there, the Banjska attack could have been really quite a chilling event. If you look at the quantity of arms that were brought into Kosovo and at the number of people, had this group not been interrupted by a Kosovan police operation, you could have had a whole string of attacks on Kosovan police stations. You could have had roadblocks. This was not light weaponry. There were mortars. There was some very heavy equipment there.

If you are saying that it would be good to set out what the dangers are and the full extent of our knowledge, I am very happy to take that away. I am fully aware of how dangerous it was, and that was one of the reasons I wanted to go to Kosovo and to meet with KFOR commanding officers, the British troops and others to try to make an assessment for myself about the nature of what is happening in Kosovo.

Q697 **Chair:** That would be enormously helpful. I understand that another Five



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Eyes country has delivered an entire investigation but is unwilling to publish those results, so it is important for the UK to demonstrate resolve by explaining exactly what happened that day. Vučić still says that what happened that day did not happen. NATO dismissed my concerns when I said last year that there were weapons being smuggled illegally into Kosovo by militias and stored in churches, and that is pretty much exactly what happened, despite the British Government and NATO saying that that was not what was happening. On the world stage, no Government has come forward and said, "This is what happened. This is who armed them. This is where it comes from."

The truth matters, and we know in the Balkans that there is a lot of effort taken to dismiss the truth and rewrite the truth, but I am interested in why there has been no response from the EU and the US, in particular. The EU has put negative measures on Kosovo. There is an incredible imbalance in fairness in the way in which Kosovo is being treated. Given your visit, given what you saw, and given that the UK has opted out of the Quint grouping and the Pristina-Belgrade dialogue, is it now time for us to find our backbone in the Balkans and really make sure that we see the EU and the US shift and that we get to a better and more fair place when it comes to Kosovo and its treatment?

Lord Cameron: First of all, on the whole dossier, the only problem is that there is always a question of what you can and can't publish, and if you do not publish everything, you are always going to be left with people saying, "Well, you haven't really told us all the extra stuff you might know about that was going on." That might be the difficulty, but trying to explain clearly what we think happened and could have happened is a worthwhile exercise.

What I would say about the British position is that we did not opt out of these dialogues—we are outside of the EU. As I have said, we should make the most of our new position of being friends, neighbours and partners of the EU and not members. On this occasion, it means that we should be clear about our own views, our own policy and our own approach, and in line with what you are saying we should show a frustration—a growing frustration—with the attitude of the Serbian Government.

Of course, we have not changed in our view that we want to give Serbia a chance of having a Euro-Atlantic disposition. We have not changed in our view that, if they should choose, they should be offered that future. But I feel a sense of growing frustration that they are behaving in this way and doing these things, and we should be clear about that. As for whether the EU and the US are feeling that frustration, I don't know—you would have to ask them. I sense from the conversations I have had that there is a frustration, because they recognise that Banjska was a moment of great danger.

Standing back from this, my sense is that the posture of the West when it comes to Kosovo and the western Balkans more generally is sort of set in a time before Russia's invasion of Ukraine and we need to think a lot about



HOUSE OF COMMONS

what has changed, because Russia wants to do more to destabilise the Balkans, wants to do more through its proxies, including Serbia, and wants to make this area and countries like Moldova less safe. So we should be raising our game about what we can do to combat that.

Our policy is, I would say, hard-headed and realistic. Lord Peach—Stuart Peach, as you would know him, who is my former CDS—went to Serbia and discussed all these matters with Vučić in a pretty frank way, and we should continue to do that. Our patience should wear rather thin.

Q698 Chair: I have to say it is an enormous relief to hear that, because Britain has not displayed a muscular policy when it has come to this. Even when Vučić again threatened British politicians, Serbia has been given a chance.

Very briefly before we move on, Serbia held its elections before Christmas. We had a vague tweet from the Minister for Europe saying that there might be some concerns here. Last week, we then saw a leading Serbian politician kidnapped and beaten brutally because he went to lay flowers on the grave of an Albanian girl who was murdered by Serb forces. The brutality against him was really quite severe, yet I have heard nothing from our Minister for Europe. What is your position on the current status of democracy in Serbia, and particularly on that politician?

Lord Cameron: First of all, we have called for Serbia to investigate and act quickly on reports of serious election irregularities and to implement the recommendations of the OSCE and others. We share the concern of others about the way the elections were run. On the case of Nikola Sandulovic, we are aware of the reports and we have asked for more information. It sounds extremely concerning, and I want to be fully apprised of the facts of the case before reacting, but I will take away that point and react accordingly.

Q699 Chair: Thank you; I will wait to hear. The politician has said that the person who participated in his beating was the same man who led the terror attack against Kosovo, who then escaped to Serbia and still lives freely in Serbia.

Lord Cameron: I am aware of that.

Q700 Brendan O'Hara: Can I take us to the arbitrary detention of British nationals? My first question is, how will your approach to securing the release of UK nationals who are arbitrarily detained overseas be different from that of any of your predecessors?

Lord Cameron: Let me take a step back. I have a huge concern about this issue. Just so that you know where I come from, when I was Prime Minister we had the sorts of problems that you are referring to, but we also had the terrible terrorist hostage kidnaps. It is the most heartbreaking thing that you have to deal with as a Prime Minister when you have British citizens taken hostage and brutally murdered in the desert and families desperately wanting help. I know that that is different to what you would call state hostages, but it made me think a lot about how we handle these issues in a way to ensure that we are as effective as



HOUSE OF COMMONS

we possibly can be at getting people out of detention, getting people home, helping hostages, finding when terrorists have taken hostages and trying to get those hostages back. What is the best that we can do, plus what is the best way of reassuring family members and others that the system is really working for them?

This is a long-winded answer, but where I have got to, and I would be very interested in your views—I read your report, and we have not replied to it, because I want to think about it more—is that the advantage of the American system of having an outside person is that it is reassuring to the families. There is this person; it is the hostage person—it is the prisoner person. That is good, but is it actually as effective as a really deep case-by-case analysis, working things out in every case and using the whole of Government—all the resources, diplomats and expertise that you have? I think there is something between these two.

When you look at our record, I do not think it is fair to say that we are less good than other countries. When you look at all the cases of detention, from the most well-known and famous all the way down to others, we have quite a good record. What I am interested in discussing with officials, but I would love your input, is whether there is something that is the best of both worlds. We keep the case by case and the deep, thoughtful work on how to work each individual case—whether you want publicity or not, whether you want contacts, whether there are trade-offs, and all these questions—but then have a named person, possibly within the Department, but possibly assisting from outside the Department, so that families know that it is not just the Minister dealing with this, but this person inside the institution. That is what I am looking at, but I am very interested in your views. Having said that, David Rutley, who is the Minister who does this, looks at these cases every month. He is incredibly diligent, and I want people to know that these cases get a huge amount of attention. But that is the way that I am thinking about it.

Q701 Brendan O'Hara: I suppose the obvious question would then be, do you think the current system is working well for the families of Ryan Cornelius or Jagtar Singh Johal?

Lord Cameron: Yes, I do. If you take those cases, we look at them regularly and meet with family members. We discuss them between Ministers and officials, and a huge amount of work goes into them. Could we do more to make the system a bit more visible and transparent to people, in the way that I am suggesting? Maybe that would help.

Q702 Brendan O'Hara: In the case of Jagtar, for example, the UN working group has said that he is being arbitrarily detained. Why is the Government not calling for his release, while at the same time robustly asserting their right to provide him with ongoing consular assistance?

Lord Cameron: We have looked at this case. Philip has been dealing with it longer than I have, so he might want to speak to you. We have looked at this case and worked out that that is the right thing to do, and that that is the right focus to have. I am happy to meet family members and



HOUSE OF COMMONS

explain why we have reached the conclusion we have. That is the strength of the case-by-case approach: you have to ask yourself what is the most important thing, whether that is consular access, calling on the Indian authorities to take this step or that step, or what have you. That is what we do.

Q703 **Brendan O'Hara:** I know the families are keen to meet you. I am delighted by what you said there. It would be acceptable, then, to contact the families and arrange a meeting between you, your Department and Jagtar's family.

Lord Cameron: I will certainly have a look. I have a list of some of the most complex cases with me. This one I have already discussed with officials. As I said, Minister Rutley is the one who deals with all these important consular cases, because it is important to have one Minister. In this case, Tariq Ahmad has also been involved, but I am happy to have a look at it.

Q704 **Chair:** Can I just pick up on that briefly? Apologies. When we have had evidence in the past, David Rutley as consular Minister has not looked after the cases. It has sat with the geographical Minister, not with the consular Minister, to the point that, on the first day of Vladimir Kara-Murza's trial, when David Rutley appeared before us, he had never heard of Vladimir Kara-Murza. Has it now shifted under your leadership?

Lord Cameron: Before I put my foot in it, Philip, do you want to explain?

Sir Philip Barton: What the Foreign Secretary is describing is that every month, David Rutley, as the Minister for consular affairs, sits down with Jennifer Anderson, who, as you know, is consular director. They look in the round at all the high-profile cases.

Q705 **Chair:** Fine. The cases technically sit in the geographical sector.

Sir Philip Barton: Individual cases go there because they are best placed. We are not describing a change in that regard.

Lord Cameron: My point is that there might be an additional structural thing we put in place, to try to get some of the best bits of the US system, without getting what I think can be a disadvantage. You do not want Ministers to go, "Oh, it's all dealt with by this other guy." I am trying to get the best of both worlds.

Chair: We look forward to discussing it further.

Q706 **Brendan O'Hara:** I have one last brief question about the situation of Jimmy Lai. I understand you met the family. Given that Mr Lai is a UK national, did you consider whether his detention is a wrongful act against the UK? Why do the Government accept China's position that the Vienna convention does not apply to dual nationals?

Lord Cameron: What we have said in this case is that we think China should repeal this law. It is a political trial, and they should release Jimmy Lai. On the issue of whether we refer to something specifically as arbitrary



HOUSE OF COMMONS

detention, there is a complex set of legal arguments about whether you should or should not in, each case, do that. I am happy to write to you about it, because I do not want to mislead you in any way. The most important thing is that we are saying, "Scrap the law, end the trial, release him."

Chair: Bob, did you want to come in briefly?

Q707 **Bob Seely:** The Jimmy Lai and Vladimir Kara-Murza cases are very basic black and white, right and wrong. The UK does seem to have a bit of reputation of not kicking off enough in defence of its nationals, whether they are dual national or not. Jimmy Lai has never been a Chinese citizen. We have a reputation for slightly soft-peddling, rather than kicking off in defence of our people who are political prisoners elsewhere in the world, Jimmy Lai and Vladimir Kara-Murza in particular.

Lord Cameron: I don't think that is fair. I used to worry about this a lot, and was always kicking the tyres as Prime Minister—I am doing that again as Foreign Secretary. The point is that you have got to ask what actually works. My instinct is always to go in, size 10s blazing, saying, "We've got to make a fuss about this, we've got to do more." But then you've got to listen to the officials. It might not change your mind, but it might, because it might be that there are some important ways that we think we might get this done if we make this argument rather than that argument. Let's look at the facts and figures—

Q708 **Bob Seely:** Fair enough. In what way has that helped either Jimmy Lai or Vladimir Kara-Murza?

Lord Cameron: In those cases, we haven't yet met with success. My argument—I was actually talking to my predecessor this morning about this—is that if you look at the whole set of detained people, and look at, "Does Britain do okay on this?", I think the picture is a better one. I feel this as the Prime Minister when Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe was originally taken: we have got to permanently kick the tyres and ask ourselves, "Have we done the right thing? Have we raised the right arguments? Have we used the right level of publicity? Have we intervened at the right level? Have we intervened often enough? What works?" Those are the questions we have got to ask. I am a bit like you, but there is a danger of falling into the trap of just thinking that if you shout and beat your fists, you get the results. It is always worth having that conversation with people who have spent a lot of time thinking about it to work out what is best.

Q709 **Graham Stringer:** When you were Prime Minister, Foreign Secretary, you and George Osborne—and others, it was not a party political issue—had a very optimistic view of China's developing role in the world. I think it is fair to say that. It is no longer possible to sustain that optimistic view. How do you see the Government's policy in regards to China developing as it becomes more aggressive and hostile?

Lord Cameron: I think you put the question in exactly the right way, Graham. A lot has changed. In 2010, the greatest priority for the Government was to get the economy growing, to get investment into the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

country, to get our exporters exporting, and all the rest of it. There seemed to be an opportunity to have a better relationship with China, and we achieved that. There were some good wins on trade and investment, and what have you. But a lot has changed since then. We have had the situation with the Uyghurs; we have had the situation with Hong Kong; we have had the wolf warrior diplomacy—we have had a China that is a lot more assertive and aggressive in lots of different ways.

The Government policy—which I agree with; I was keen to sign up and join the Government on this basis—is that we have the protect, align, and engage strands, and every one of those is important. I think we need to keep moving on all of them. The protect strand—things like the National Security Act and the National Security and Investment Act, and getting Huawei out of telecommunications equipment—is important. There may be other things we need to do. The align strand—working with other partners in the G7 and elsewhere, many of which actually have a more engaged relationship with China at the moment, to align—is important. But the engage bit is important. This is still a fifth of humanity. We are not going to solve climate change without talking with the Chinese. We are not going to try and work out the rules for the road on AI without at least engaging with the Chinese. I think that is how the policy should go. It is challenging, because there are a lot of issues between us at the moment, but that is what diplomacy is all about.

Q710 Graham Stringer: I will ask a very specific question and then make a general point. You mentioned Hong Kong. Do you think we should apply Magnitsky sanctions to those Chinese officials that are—to generalise—repressing democracy and imprisoning pro-democracy activists and trade unionists?

Secondly, you very fairly say that we need a tougher policy towards China. My impression of the Department is that it is still operating to the old policy, rather than a new policy. You mentioned Huawei. There was an enormous amount of resistance within the Department to getting Huawei out of our system. When those from the Chinese consulate in Manchester beat up Manchester citizens on the streets of Manchester, there was resistance from the Department to taking official action. It let those involved quietly sneak out of the country. I would be interested in your comments on that.

Lord Cameron: I am going to defend my civil servants: I am not sure that they ever fully adopted the George Osborne-David Cameron policy, so you might find some consistency there. What matters is getting the right results. The situation in Manchester was before my time, but I am sure Philip would say that ultimately, those involved are out of the country, and there was not a massive tit-for-tat with a whole bunch of British diplomats being sent home, so we got the result that was necessary.

On Huawei, it was difficult. It was one of the few things that, after leaving office, I asked for a proper briefing about, because the advice changed quite radically from about 2015, when I think I last discussed it as Prime Minister, to 2017-18, when that happened. I wanted to understand what



HOUSE OF COMMONS

had changed. Perhaps we might need a more private setting in which to go through that. I do not think there was any resistance in the Foreign Office; the situation had changed, and what the Americans were doing had changed. That did not necessarily mean that we had to follow the Americans because they were allies, but it changed the nature of Huawei's business in Britain, if I can put it that way.

I would say that the Department has a lot of people who understand China very deeply, and who want us to have a relationship that can bear a load, so that we can deal with things like climate change, and make sure that we have diplomatic relations, but there is no naivety. I do not sense in the Department any naivety on this. It knows that China has changed in the last few years, and become more assertive and more aggressive, and that is why the protect part of the policy is so important.

Q711 Graham Stringer: Let me try to get to the same point by asking a different question. You were very generous to your predecessor in your opening remarks. Can you name a single benefit that came from his recent trip to Beijing?

Lord Cameron: Yes, I can. Most importantly, his Mansion House speech was excellent. It really is a good speech on Britain's relationship with China, the difficulties, pitfalls and problems, and how we should approach them. I think it is really good. We need a relationship where we can discuss climate change, AI and trade matters, and where we have proper dialogue. The way to be able to raise cases such as that of Jimmy Lai is to have a dialogue at a decent level.

Q712 Chair: Forgive me, Foreign Secretary, but I am going to push you for a benefit, because I need to bring in Brendan.

Lord Cameron: Okay. Any benefit? Yes, I think things probably would be worse without it. That is a very Sir Humphrey answer, but I think that is true. We've got all sorts of disputes, including about their embassy and our embassy. We would be much worse without it.

Q713 Brendan O'Hara: Do you agree with Parliament's Intelligence and Security Committee, which said in its China report last year, "it is possible that David Cameron's role as Vice President of a £1 bn China-UK investment fund" was "in some part engineered by the Chinese state to lend credibility to Chinese investment, as well as to the broader China brand"?

Lord Cameron: I might if it had ever happened, but there was no fund; it never got going. It never started, and it never happened. It is a bit like the blind man in the dark room looking for the black cat that isn't there.

Q714 Brendan O'Hara: You said at the beginning that China is incredibly aggressive. Is that in reference to things like partner countries in the belt and road initiative who are unable to pay their loans having their critical national infrastructure taken in lieu of payment?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Lord Cameron: I think they are assertive in lots of different fora, whether it is in the South China sea, or with respect to Taiwan, or in the dome of cyberspace.

Q715 **Brendan O'Hara:** But you have been a friend of China up until very recently. Just weeks before becoming Foreign Secretary, you spoke at an investment event for Port City Colombo, whose main developer is owned by a state-owned company based in Beijing. Do you regret that now, particularly given that, as I understand it, that port is now in the hands of the Chinese Government?

Lord Cameron: Like many former Prime Ministers, I worked with the Washington Speakers Bureau. This opportunity came up, and I did it as a friend of Sri Lanka, actually. I met the Sri Lankan President, Ranil Wickremesinghe, when I was there on holiday, and I went and had a look at Port Colombo. His view was, having taken over from the Rajapaksas—the less said about them, the better—that this was something he was keen to support and make progress with, and so when this opportunity came up, I thought it was a sensible thing to do.

Q716 **Brendan O'Hara:** But that was only—what?—three or four months ago. Weeks before taking this job, where you are now seen as being quite hawkish on China, you were actively promoting Chinese investment in Sri Lanka.

Lord Cameron: I was actively promoting Sri Lanka. As I understand it, our high commission in Sri Lanka has facilitated British businesses to go and look at Port Colombo and at whether they ought to invest in it. If you take a step back, what is Port Colombo about? Fundamentally, Dubai, with the Dubai International Financial Centre, built a very effective way of attracting international businesses into the country principally by having British law and British judges making judgments about land, building, title, the rule of law and all the rest of it. Many other countries, including Sri Lanka, are trying to copy this model, and my advice—

Chair: Foreign Secretary—

Lord Cameron: Two seconds. In the speech I gave, I said the more you can copy DIFC, the better off you will be. That was why I did it.

Q717 **Chair:** The question isn't about the substance; the question is about your interest. You said you were doing it as a friend of Sri Lanka, but Sri Lanka's Investment Minister said the decision to have you speak was taken by the Chinese company; it wasn't a decision made by the Sri Lankan Government.

Lord Cameron: The decision to have me speak was a decision I made when asked via the Washington Speakers Bureau, and the event was organised by an accountancy firm based in Sri Lanka.

Q718 **Chair:** Promoting the belt and road initiative.

Lord Cameron: No, promoting this particular project at the request of the President of Sri Lanka.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q719 **Chair:** Your words were: "The Belt and Road Initiative will bring new opportunities for bilateral co-operation."

Lord Cameron: I don't know where you are quoting that from. Belt and road initiative projects—

Q720 **Chair:** In 2018, after a dinner with President Xi Jinping, you released a statement saying that.

Lord Cameron: Well, you are now taking something from 2018 and applying it to—

Q721 **Chair:** But the point stands, in terms of your views.

Lord Cameron: I have explained exactly what I was doing and why I was doing it. These DIFC-type developments are sensible, but the more countries can make them like the DIFC, the better they will be.

Q722 **Brendan O'Hara:** Do you regret doing it?

Lord Cameron: No.

Q723 **Henry Smith:** BGI is a Chinese state genomics firm that is harvesting information. It is used by the NHS and private medical providers in this country. The US has deemed it a military threat and has imposed restrictions on its activities in the United States. Do you think the UK Government should do likewise?

Lord Cameron: I would have to go away and look at it. I should declare an interest: after leaving office, I did some work with Illumina, a company that does genome sequencing that is BGI's major competitor, so I don't want to give you a flip answer. When I was working with Illumina, it had a number of concerns about BGI. I am very happy to go away and have a look at it.

Chair: With apologies to colleagues, the last question goes to Royston.

Q724 **Royston Smith:** Foreign Secretary, if everything is a priority, nothing is. However, our priorities as a country ought to be where we can leverage the most influence. That would be Yemen with the Houthis because of Iran, but similarly Lebanon. What is our strategy on Lebanon? It is in an awful state. What is the UK's strategy for Lebanon?

Lord Cameron: Our strategy in Lebanon is to work with the Americans and French principally, because they have huge interests, expertise and commitments there. Our interest is to try to help Lebanon put together a functioning Government, to build up the Lebanese armed forces, who we have spent a lot of money and time training, to get Hezbollah to move north of the Litani river, to get the border properly demarked, and to try to get UNIFIL and Lebanese armed forces into the south of the country so that you have some security and stability, and the chance of there not being an escalation. It is very easy to say all those things, but it is extremely hard to bring them about. In as much as there is a plan, that's the plan. Every plan needs to start with a single step, but that is what we are going to try to do.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q725 **Royston Smith:** Have we had a single step so far?

Lord Cameron: Yes, we have. I have met the Lebanese Prime Minister twice—I have only been doing this job for a month—and I have had conversations about this with the French Foreign Minister, the Secretary of State in America and others. It is obviously a time of very high tension in the south of Lebanon, so it is quite difficult to get these single steps, but we are starting to work out who will fund the Lebanese armed force expansion, who can contribute to UNIFIL, how you bring resolution 1701 back to life, and how you start taking these steps. A lot of work is being done on that right now.

Chair: Brilliant. Foreign Secretary, thank you ever so much. We are particularly grateful for you undertaking to look again at our report on hostage taking, and we look forward to further sessions. I am sure you will be coming back to us once the Procedure Committee has reported. We are very grateful to you both for taking the time.