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Foreign Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: The UK's international counter-terrorism policy, HC 330

Tuesday 16 January 2024

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[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Royston Smith (Chair); Dan Carden; Neil Coyle; Fabian Hamilton; Brendan O'Hara; Henry Smith; Graham Stringer.

Questions 94 - 125

Witnesses

I: Jerome Drevon, Jihad and Modern Conflict Senior Analyst, International Crisis Group; Edmund Fitton-Brown, Former Co-ordinator, UN Sanctions Monitoring Team; Dr Lina Khatib, Director, SOAS Middle East Institute; and Dr Inga Trauthig, Visiting Fellow, Institute for Middle Eastern Studies, KCL.



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Jerome Drevon, Edmund Fitton-Brown, Dr Lina Khatib and Dr Inga Trauthig.

Chair: Welcome to today's Foreign Affairs Committee meeting. We have four witnesses before us today to talk about our counter-terrorism inquiry. Will the witnesses please introduce themselves?

Edmund Fitton-Brown: I am Edmund Fitton-Brown. I am a former British diplomat and a former United Nations counter-terrorism co-ordinator and currently working with the counter-extremism project.

Dr Lina Khatib: I am Lina Khatib. I am currently director of the SOAS Middle East Institute at SOAS University of London.

Jerome Drevon: Hello everyone. I am Jerome Drevon. I am senior analyst on jihad and modern conflict for the International Crisis Group and I used to be adviser for non-state armed groups with the International Committee of the Red Cross.

Dr Inga Trauthig: I am Inga Trauthig. I am the head of research of the Propaganda Research Lab at the University of Texas at Austin. I am also an affiliate of the Institute of Middle Eastern Studies at King's College London. At King's I did my PhD focusing on Libya and was a research fellow of the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation.

Q94 **Chair:** Thank you. This is a question for all of you, so feel free to chip in. Why, after more than two decades of counter-terrorism operations in the Middle East and North Africa, does terrorism emanating from the region remain a consistent threat to the UK?

Dr Inga Trauthig: What we have seen in terms of trends in transnational Salafi jihadism is, on the one hand, definitely a lowering of the threat level. That is certainly the case when we look at Libya: Islamic State in Libya is a couple of hundred fighters in the desert at this point. However, Islamic State still remains a threat because they are interested in Governments, they are interested in creating more space, they are interested in the mid to long term also in attracting again more foreign fighters and probably directing resources towards attacking the West. Where Islamic State in particular is growing—and that is of concern—is in the Sahel countries and in West Africa. I would say the threat there first is local. They are interested in recruiting locally and exploiting local resources. My concerns are that they are then afterwards connecting better again to the other Islamic State provinces in, for instance, Sinai and Libya, and those almost open borders will be exploited more. So that is from that perspective really focusing on Libya.

Jerome Drevon: I think the level of threat has really changed for the past few years. There was a phase, from 2014 onwards, when we had a group, Islamic State, that was controlling territory. It managed to get a lot of



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European citizens sent from abroad and so on to train them, initially to fight locally, and then some of them went back to their countries of origin, where they knew people, they were well-connected and so on and could launch armed activities. That has very much changed since the fall of Baghuz. When Baghuz fell and Islamic State lost its territory in Syria, it lost its ability to both gather foreign fighters and train them. So now the threat is mostly people that could be potentially inspired by the ideas of the group, but nothing well organised and structured, the way it was before. It means that even if there are still people that could join armed activities and be willing to fight, the threat level is not the same because they're not trained in the same way, they're not as prepared and so on.

The other change that that occurred, particularly in Syria, is armed groups that have opposed and fought Islamic State, and even clamped down on those networks locally, renouncing global jihad, like the group HTS that was former Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria, and rejecting these ideas and trying to clamp down on it to focus more on their local and national fight. Even though there are still threats, the level of threat is very different from the Middle East at least.

Dr Lina Khatib: Okay, my take is going to be a bit different. You asked, "Why are we still dealing with this threat to our interests in the region after 20 years?" It is because we have not been addressing the root causes as well as we should. For as long as the drivers are there, the threat will continue.

Now, as we heard, it ebbs and flows. It goes up and down. But look at what happened with the awakening in Iraq back when we thought al-Qaeda in Iraq was on the decline, we patted ourselves on the back because we thought our counter-terrorism strategy at the time was working. Who knew that ISIS would eventually emerge? The dynamics were very much about local grievances that had not been addressed, because the issue of good governance had not really featured as part of counter-terrorism strategy, either in the UK or in the US. So you had circumstances for local communities that made being with al-Qaeda attractive and, later on, being with ISIS attractive, and I worry that we are now seeing similar dynamics, although on a smaller scale, in places like Iraq and Syria.

Although ISIS is on the decline, the drivers have not been fully addressed. For me, that is a key part of the equation. The drivers are what we should pay attention to, not just the tactical aspects and technical aspects of dealing with terrorist groups.

Edmund Fitton-Brown: I think the threat endures because the groups that threaten us endure. And I think that is because of enduring conflict in the region. The conflict has not been addressed, and poor governance in the region has not been addressed. Maybe the question could just as easily be, "Why is the threat less than you might expect?" And I think that it is less than you might expect because of the effectiveness of counter-terrorism measures, which have dramatically improved over the past 20



years. But the latent threat is there, and if we relax on counter-terrorism, we are likely to suffer for it.

- Q95 **Chair:** If you are both saying that governance is potentially part of the problem, what should the UK and the US have been doing and what should they be doing now to try and address those root causes, perhaps governance in particular?

Dr Lina Khatib: I was looking at our Integrated Review Refresh. Governance is not mentioned once in those documents. The Middle East is barely mentioned anyway. It is explicitly said in the Integrated Review, "These are the priority areas," the Euro-Atlantic area, and I agree with that, but the Middle East is not seen as very important, and that means that the resources dedicated to the Middle East will be minimal. Of course, now we have Ukraine as a more pressing issue—on our doorstep, really. The issue of governance is not mentioned.

What I am detecting is this. These documents talk about top-level co-operation with our partners about countering terrorism, for example, which is very good. They also sometimes go down to the granular level of, for example, focusing on, addressing, climate challenges, irregular migration, supporting women's rights or humanitarian assistance. This is also part of the Middle East and North Africa development strategy for the UK. Governance sits in the middle and it is absent. If we are doing top-level partnerships, that means, "Let's support the Iraqi army and support the Syrian Democratic Forces to counter ISIS." But we are not looking at the middle level, which is the more difficult one and which is where governance sits. This is the political question. The political side of counter-terrorism, which is more complicated, requires a lot more investment than we are currently dedicating, not just in terms of money but in terms of how we do things.

What we did not do with Iraq, for example, is address the issue of good governance. We gave a lot of technical support to the Iraqi army. We gave a lot of funding and weapons training, but we did not really pay attention to how the country was governed, including how the army itself was being governed. That is, as we know, one of the key reasons why the army did not fight when ISIS emerged in a place like Mosul. So that was a big mistake. But this requires a lot of investment. Again, I know it's difficult because we have finite resources and we need to prioritise, and right now our priority remains Ukraine, but we cannot have it both ways.

Edmund Fitton-Brown: I think that is right. Of course, investment in that area can also look like interference. From having direct experience of working in British embassies in the Middle East and having many friends and former colleagues who are still doing it, I know that a lot of good work is going on, but there is only so much that you can do as outsiders and, of course, it's slowed by the enduring conflict. The conflict is difficult. If you look at the complexities in Iraq, you can see why it is extremely hard to reform the governance of the country.



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Dr Inga Trauthig: Could I add something? It is just one concrete example that has been on my mind a lot in the last two years at least. Britain, in co-operation with other partners—the US-European partners—made huge advances in Tunisian counter-terrorism, building local capacity. Tunisia adopted a criminal justice model. They didn't have the same heavy, military counter-terrorism as other North African countries. We have been focusing a lot on the chaos, civil wars etc. so far, but I am thinking also with regard to states and regimes in the region.

Kais Saied, on his authoritarian trajectory, is effectively dismantling what the UK and other countries have been working towards—namely, Tunisia has got so much better at diminishing its terrorist attacks and diminishing the threat coming from Tunisia in terms of attacks towards the West and, with regard to the UK in particular and aviation security, how to protect tourist sites, given that the 2015 attack was really successful. Now, I see very, very little follow-up in trying to put pressure on the Tunisian Government in terms of how counter-terrorism there is being politicised in the same way as it is in Egypt, Algeria and, partly, Morocco.

Jerome Drevon: I have one additional point. There are countries like Tunisia, Iraq and so on for which we can speak about promoting some reforms and good governance, even though it has failed to a large extent, but what if we look at it more broadly? When I was at the International Committee of the Red Cross, I used to deal with armed groups in different regions. We did statistics about populations living under armed groups and so we realised that right now there are 60 million citizens, civilians, who live directly under the control of armed groups; they are entirely under their control. This is nearly the size of France or the UK, plus at least 100 million, between 100 million and 120 million, who live in zones, areas, that are contested, whose control is contested, by insurgents and by states.

Military solutions are very unlikely to end the situation any time soon because they have been tried. In the Sahel, the military intervention for the past 10, 11 or 12 years has not prevented armed groups from expanding their influence. In Somalia, the counter-insurgency started after 2006 and we are still in the same situation where half of the country is under the control of al-Shabaab.

With Crisis Group, we have tried to raise one question: what do we do with these groups? In terms of so-called jihadi insurgents, there are some that want to attack Western countries that probably have to be opposed, including through military means. However, there are others that are fighting their own insurgencies. What are we doing with them? Are we looking to speak potentially with some of them or encourage a transformation of some of them? Are there potentials and prospects of even entering into negotiations and finding out what type of agreements could emerge with some of them? That does not mean that it is not problematic because of the way they behave locally, how they impose their views on the population and their unwillingness to share power. But military solutions have not prevented their expansions. We should also be questioning alternative means, including forms of engagement potentially



in some regions, even though we do not have clear the responses of what would happen in those cases.

- Q96 **Graham Stringer:** For nearly 100 years, there have been radical Islamic movements in North Africa and the Middle East around the Muslim Brotherhood. That has waxed and waned. However, is it not America and the United Kingdom's invasion of Iraq, the bombing of Libya and so on that has given a huge boost to terrorism? It is not the Middle East or North Africa. It represents something, the invasion and occupation for 20 years of Afghanistan. Is that not a bigger driver than anything you have mentioned, and would it not be better, first, if we had not done those things and secondly, if we got out because we seem to be making it worse?

Dr Lina Khatib: I guess I will answer this one. There is no denying that the invasion of Iraq is something we are living with until today, in terms of consequences. Without the invasion of Iraq, would we have seen al-Qaeda in Iraq rise the way it did? Probably not. Would we have later on seen ISIS and the way it rose, as I was saying, as a result of the domino effect of bad governance, corruption, sectarianism and all that, and using the presence of occupying forces as an excuse for these groups to assert and present themselves as trying to liberate their countries from foreign forces? Of course, our presence there did not help, to put it very mildly, and we are still living with the consequences.

Let us also not forget the kind of Government we helped install in Iraq, which was—again, putting it mildly—very flawed and contributed to the problem. For me, the invasion of Iraq was bad enough because it was an illegal invasion and should not have happened in the first place, but how we handled the aftermath of the invasion is an equally bad scenario. We could have had the invasion and then handled the situation differently, but we did not. We did not invest enough. We did not pay enough attention. We and the US had a very self-serving narrative about victory, about achieving our objectives and about regime change, approaching it in a very simplistic way and importing the deeply flawed model of Government from Lebanon that is based on sectarian representation and parachuting it on to Iraq. The way we handled the situation planted the seeds of a lot of what we are dealing with today and also made existing issues worse. So, yes, if we are going to talk about historical revisionism, this is something that has been very well documented.

Edmund Fitton-Brown: I do not think it does any favours to the UK, the US or, indeed, the region itself to suggest that this is all done by outsiders. There was extensive Islamist terrorism throughout the 1990s and there was no invasion to respond to then.

- Q97 **Graham Stringer:** I was asking whether the case could be made that those invasions and interferences had made it worse and had given more fertile ground to radical Islam.

Edmund Fitton-Brown: I think in Iraq, clearly, yes.

Dr Inga Trauthig: Can I elaborate a bit on that?



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Chair: Quickly, because we do not want to get bogged down in a retrospective rather than discussing what we are doing at the moment.

Dr Inga Trauthig: I want to push back slightly. I think the Iraq invasion was a counter-terrorism blunder, because of what the Iraq war and invasion triggered, but also because it diverted resources that would have been needed in Afghanistan to deal more effectively with the Taliban, and al-Qaeda in particular, whose forces were there at that point. That was one counter-terrorism blunder.

The other one was the withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 and how that was handled. That puts a bit of a different twist on the issue of what went wrong. I also want to push back—simply because I focused so much on Libya—on the idea that the 2011 NATO intervention and bombing basically triggered Islamic State. There is a mass of factors—regional, local and so on—that came on top of that. I can elaborate on that when answering a different question, if someone is interested.

Q98 **Brendan O’Hara:** Could I maybe go a bit deeper into the issue of Iraq, Syria and where we are currently? In 2019, we boldly announced that Daesh had been defeated. That appears certainly not to have been the case. How, why and to what extent have Daesh or ISIS been able to reorganise in Iraq and Syria? Where are we now?

Dr Khatib: Now, in terms of numbers of fighters, I think the estimate is between 3,000 and 5,000. I think it is between 5,000 and 7,000 in Iraq and Syria together. Then, of course, you have the ISIS prisoners, who are still in camps in Iraq, as well as in Syria. I think the numbers there are around 10,000. Numbers vary, but we are definitely talking about thousands of fighters who are still at large and fighting, as well as fighters who are in prison camps. That is in terms of the armed entities, but we know that ISIS was not limited to just those numbers. It was much bigger than that, and not all of them were killed. What happened to them? What happened is that, in Iraq in particular, they metaphorically shaved their beards and reintegrated into their societies.

A lot of former ISIS members are still out there, but they are now operating as an underground mafia. They are engaged in business to make money. That source of funding for ISIS continues. Some of the businesses they are engaged in are bona fide, above-ground businesses; that is as well as the illegal stuff. In a way, they are laying low: they are waiting for a moment to resurrect.

Meanwhile, in Syria, we are seeing attempts at resurgence every now and then. We have seen attempts to free people from camps, and attacks by ISIS continue. One of the complications in Syria is, of course, that our partner in countering ISIS is the Syrian Democratic Forces. Here we have to be a bit careful, because the Syrian Democratic Forces also benefit from the continuation of ISIS as a problem, and from the continuation of the prisons in which ISIS fighters are held. In a way, they use that as a political card, especially because of their situation: the tension with Turkey. Most of the SDF is Kurdish, and Turkey is engaged in a fight with



them. At one point in 2022, they said, “We have no capacity to fight ISIS any more, because we are now dealing militarily with Turkey, which is attacking us.” In a way, ISIS benefits from this situation.

As I said, to a degree, the SDF need ISIS to be there, so they can say to the West, “This is why you need us on the ground.” At the same time, because of their fight with Turkey, their capacity is declining a little bit, which means less capacity to fight ISIS. Meanwhile, crucially, right now you have rising tribal attacks happening against the Syrian Democratic Forces. These are Arab tribes who—again, the issue of governance is huge—see them as corrupt, and as engaging in all kinds of transgressions. These tribal divisions are something that ISIS in Syria is trying to exploit as well.

Again, the capacity of ISIS has lessened, and the numbers have decreased, but these dynamics are very concerning. They plant the seed for ISIS to try to appeal to those tribes again, to try to appeal to local communities to get them back on board.

Edmund Fitton-Brown: I think the prognosis in Syria is grim. It’s not great in Iraq either, but it is very serious in Syria. The problem is that, essentially, the old pax Assad that used to exist has broken down, but Assad is still there. What you have is this small minority of Alawites with their foreign backers—the Iranians, Hezbollah and Russia—holding on, but the majority of the population in Syria is Sunni Arab, and they never envisage that they will make peace with Assad. This is the problem. It means that people like Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham, or al-Qaeda in Syria—the Hurras al-Din—or ISIS are going to hold on in Syria, because they anticipate that their time will come again.

Q99 **Brendan O’Hara:** In your opinion, are we in danger of overlooking or underplaying the threat? Are we doing that because we almost want to believe too much that what we said in 2019—that DAESH was defeated—remains true today? If we are underplaying it, why are we underplaying it?

Jerome Drevon: There are two sides. First, yes, there can be a renewal, and there is this presence in the eastern part of Syria. At the same time, when we look at Syria, there is not one Syria—there are four Syrias. There is what is controlled by the regime, what is controlled by the former al-Qaeda affiliate in the north-west, what is under pro-Turkish militias, and what is under the SDF.

Most of what we are speaking about is under the SDF—the Kurdish forces—with the potential for renewal and so on. At the same time, Islamic State is trying to expand in other regions, but more in terms of getting more logistic networks that it is trying to develop. It tried at some point to hide people in the north-west of the country, but that was unsuccessful.

That leads to the other point: Islamic State has not been able to restructure itself in terms of leadership. It lost its last three or four leaders, and nobody knows where the current leader is. Most of the high-



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level commanders have been killed, including the commander who was coordinating the groups with other provinces in Africa. There is still strong pressure on them, and there is real intelligence on their network, and that has been so successful. Even though some of the grievances still exist, ultimately it is an organisation, and an organisation depends on strong leadership that is able to direct, to issue orders, to command and control, and so on. At the moment, Islamic State does not have that, as long as there is a US troop presence on the ground and US intelligence. This should not be overlooked; the inability of Islamic State to reconstitute itself is real.

Dr Trauthig: The bottom line is that we are not trying to underplay; we are trying to understand what is going on. For me, the basic sum of what has been said so far—especially with Islamic State, but with the transnational jihadi movement—is that they are surviving exactly how Baghdadi had envisioned it: they are remaining and expanding.

Remaining means retreating into the local populations, trying to get prisoners out, trying to get local resources in, expanding and trying to find new locales in which to grow—the Sahel, for instance. We are trying to understand what that means. The power dynamic shifted; it went somehow towards the Sahel in west Africa and away from the Islamic State core, but not entirely, because the thousands of fighters who remain and are covered are also in Iraq and Syria.

Western policymakers as well as researchers are trying to understand how is it that west Africa has been proclaimed multiple times on ISIS propaganda everywhere as a place for hijra—for Muslims to immigrate there to live under Sharia. But there is no new transnational hub for foreign fighters; they mostly migrate between the countries there. That is why there are just a couple of things we can add, where we still see how the internal power dynamics play out. Will the ISIS core rise much more? Then the ideology will probably harden again. That is how I see it.

Q100 **Brendan O'Hara:** How wary should we be of a renewed, refreshed and resurgent ISIS? This morning, I spoke with Alex Crawford from Sky News about this; she has recently done a report. She was in the al-Hol camp, which is essentially an incubator for Daesh and ISIS. She said that the camp was huge, and that there is an active presence inside the camp. There is a section of the camp that is so dangerous that the guards call it the mini-caliphate. The people they spoke to talked of strong ISIS supporters, and a prevalence of ISIS ideology. The children were hostile, throwing stones and chanting anti-Western slogans. The residents have no lives, no jobs, and little hope of getting out, and are too dangerous for Governments to deal with. She said that there is a whole generation growing up like this, who have known nothing but the camp. She said it is a ticking timebomb of growing radicalism, hatred and hopelessness. That is pretty damning. How accurate is Alex Crawford's assessment?

Dr Khatib: I would say very accurate. My brother is a humanitarian, and he worked partly on that camp for a while. He verified exactly that kind of dynamic, and he is one of many humanitarians who have been to that



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camp to work there. Absolutely, it is an incubator. We have to remember that there are women and children in camps who are not ISIS fighters, but they are growing up in that kind of environment, and every now and then, ISIS tries to free the men fighters who are in the camps.

Our approach is to pretend that these camps exist in a bubble, far away from us. In a way, we are perhaps waiting for the prisoners to eventually die out. Maybe that is our approach: "We'll just wait until they vanish." I think that is a big mistake. We are not dealing with the issue of al-Hol, or the catastrophe that might happen if we don't take ownership of the situation. These people need to be tried in courts of justice. The children need to be rehabilitated. That is what we should be doing—not just us as the UK, but the anti-ISIS or anti-Daesh coalition. We have a responsibility to do that, yet as you know, there is no coherence in the coalition about it.

Jerome Drevon: We have to differentiate between local citizens from Syria and Iraq, and foreigners. Many Syrians have been reintegrated into their communities. Many organisations, including local organisations, have served as intermediaries in reintegrating these people into their families, often with a tribal deal that they will not re-engage with Islamic State. That has been successful. Thousands of people have been reintegrated successfully into their communities.

Ultimately, as European citizens, we have to think of the European citizens who remain there, and I think it is a mistake to just ignore those citizens and allow them to stay there without knowing what will happen next. Many of them have committed crimes. They should be repatriated in their countries, judged and followed up. If we ignore them and let them stay, what if they escape and rejoin armed activities? What if Turkish forces invade Syria further, and the Kurds can't protect the camp any more? What if something happens to American troops in Syria? Ultimately, the Americans are under domestic public pressure to withdraw for the same outcome locally. The situation is very precarious.

Q101 **Brendan O'Hara:** Are we prepared, or preparing, for any of those eventualities?

Jerome Drevon: We are not. There is a lesson from the 2000s, in that many of the individuals who went and mobilised for jihad in Iraq in the 2000s were involved in the 2010s as commanders of Islamic State and so on, because there was no follow-up on them. We cannot just ignore them. All of them have to be repatriated. We cannot just withdraw their nationalities and think that letting them stay in the area will solve itself.

Q102 **Neil Coyle:** Is there also an issue about missing a potential intelligence asset? At least three of you have mentioned foreign fighters. Can you give us an idea of numbers of international foreign fighters—particularly Brits, but also in general?

Jerome Drevon: In terms of repatriation?

Neil Coyle: In terms of how many there are. We know roughly how many Brits went—



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Jerome Drevon: We are talking about low thousands.

Neil Coyle: Below 1,000?

Jerome Drevon: Yes, 1,000 to 2,000.

Neil Coyle: All foreign fighters?

Edmund Fitton-Brown: Except it is probably worth going back to the origin of the numbers who went when the caliphate first sprang up. Then you are talking about something above 40,000 foreign fighters. If you think about a rate of attrition—the number who died—people cannot give exact figures, but they tend to say that probably less than half have died. That means that you have more than 20,000 people who need to be accounted for in one way or another. Some of them are still in the region. Some of them have relocated elsewhere. Many have returned to their home. Some have gone through judicial systems and prosecutions, or in some cases it has not been possible to prosecute, and they have simply returned home. Obviously, the issue arises then of what the recidivism rate will be.

This is a very serious issue, and there has never been a foreign fighter issue on this scale before. I think that comes back to Mr O'Hara's point: are we dealing with this? People are dealing with it. There is a lot of effort being made, and the United Nations is making a lot of effort. Some countries have pushed hard on repatriations, particularly Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan—the central Asian republics have been very good, and a number of other countries have been pretty good on repatriations. It is still not good enough. The numbers in al-Hol camp have been driven down, but they are still far too high.

On the point about the threat, the question is whether the threat is current or long term. Currently, the threat is suppressed by very effective CT action, and by the fact that Islamic State has lost its capability to direct terrorist attacks, but long term, the threat is going to be very high indeed.

Dr Trauthig: On the numbers, I think we have had Western foreign fighters in mind for the last couple of minutes, but one of the biggest CT challenges is also in North Africa. Tunisia had one of the biggest foreign fighter mobilisations, of at least 3,000 Tunisian foreign fighters, and few of them have been accounted for. Some of them are certainly in the Levant, and some of them are probably in Libyan prisons and so on. If something like a big outbreak happens in the Levant, and those Tunisian foreign fighters return to North Africa, they will organise there again, they will connect with Libya again, and they will do their very best to try to exploit migration routes, for instance. That, too, will be a challenge for the West. In answer to the question on whether we are prepared for that, I do not think we are. The problem is: how can the UK put pressure on a country like Tunisia to take back their citizens, or legitimately argue that it should, if the UK does not take back its citizens?

Q103 **Henry Smith:** Why do you think that al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula



has remained so resilient, given recent leadership losses?

Dr Khatib: It is interesting, because ISIS, in that area, is not very strong, but al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula is rising and attacking more. One of the current controversies, which I do not have hard evidence on but is worth investigating, is the pragmatic relationship between the Houthis and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. Very recently, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula used a drone attack, and it was not known to have that kind of weapon in its arsenal. It is highly likely that that drone was provided by the Houthis.

Interestingly, the Houthis for a while were fighting against al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, but that has stopped, from what I can tell. The fight is now shifting to al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula attacking, in southern Yemen, mainly the Southern Transitional Council. That group used to be very much supported by the UAE. Of course, the UAE has more or less reduced its engagement in Yemen, which has translated into fewer resources dedicated to the STC. Meanwhile, you had the Houthis rising. In a way, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula took advantage of this situation. It took advantage of the truce that had been imposed for a while in Yemen to re-group, so it is not really about al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula being so clever and strategic; it is more about taking advantage of various opportunities that all happened to come together.

Q104 **Henry Smith:** Last week, we saw the US, the UK and other forces strike against Houthi targets as a result of the drone attacks against shipping in the Red Sea. Do you see al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula further working with the Houthis to ratchet up and increase attacks, either on shipping or against other Western interests?

Edmund Fitton-Brown: I do not see the relationship between the Houthis and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula as being operationally collaborative in that way. I would not expect that to happen, but I think Lina is absolutely right when she says that the shift from the Houthis fighting al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula to an element of co-operation and deconfliction has definitely helped both sides.

Interestingly, one of the key members of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula is the son of Saif al-Adel. Saif al-Adel is of course the new leader of al-Qaeda since the killing of Zawahiri. Saif al-Adel is in Iran, and there are a number of interesting dimensions to that. One is the question of whether Saif al-Adel intends to relocate to Yemen at some point. He might, because al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, as you said, has been very successful and resilient, so if he was looking for a safe haven, that would be a possibility. The Yemeni conflict provides that sort of safe haven. It is very much in Iran's interests. The Houthis are their proxy, and now they are hosting al-Qaeda's leader and the son of the leader of al-Qaeda is in AQAP. So Iran may have had a role in this.

Q105 **Henry Smith:** Inga, how effective have the media capabilities of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula been as tools for radicalisation and recruitment, and why?



Dr Trauthig: That is a really good starting point, because it adds very well to what has already been said. Interestingly, al-Qaeda is trying much more to exploit the Hamas attack on Israel in its propaganda by really piggy-backing on the “success” of Hamas. For instance, it eulogised al-Arouri, the Hamas leader who was killed in Lebanon. It is proving far more flexible. It is not aligning with Hamas, because ideologically they are an enemy, but it is kind of piggy-backing on them. It has been relatively good at that, but it is a bit more piecemeal. From my understanding of al-Qaeda’s media capabilities, they are kind of like Af-Pak; their core is really important.

This anecdote is not mine; it is from Elisabeth Kendall, a researcher of Yemen. She told me that al-Qaeda’s media, and particularly its propaganda, is so much better. It takes the bigger causes: for instance, it has piggy-backed on Hamas and injustice against Muslims, and has translated those into the Yemeni context. Compare that with when the Islamic State tried to find more of a base and be more successful in Yemen. Yemenis laughed at them, and their outfits that looked super foreign, and did not blend in with the local tribes.

Q106 **Henry Smith:** Jerome, what would be the advantages and disadvantages of the UK proscribing the Houthis as a terror group?

Jerome Drevon: The value of terrorist listing in general is not always only operational; a lot of it is about stigmatisation. Some of the direct issues would be about the population living directly under the Houthis. Last year, some exceptions were granted by the UN Security Council about humanitarian assistance in those areas. So, first, it would have a humanitarian impact on the population, but then, what is the purpose? Ultimately, we have a group that is controlling a state. There was a war launched by the Saudis against the Houthis that has not actually diminished their power. It has not ejected them from power.

So what is the objective beyond stigmatisation? Maybe we can achieve some constraints on their financial resources and so on, but the issue of terrorist listing goes beyond the Houthis. The issue of terrorist listing is that once you are listed, it is much more difficult to be delisted. What if at some point we need to have a political process or some type of negotiation with the Houthis? To what extent will that even be possible? Will it simply be prevented, both by the stigma associated with it and by some of the conditions and requirements that are associated with terrorist listing? There would be public pressure, and domestically it could be much more difficult to justify the delisting of a group that ultimately is behaving the same way. I think we should go beyond just the idea of securitisation of the threat and think politically about the Houthis. That cannot be solved only through listing armed groups like them.

Q107 **Henry Smith:** Lina, you will be aware that yesterday the Houthis declared that US and British ships, even if they are not heading to Israel, will be considered legitimate targets. Do you think that constitutes an act of terror? How do you think the UK should further respond?



Dr Lina Khatib: I consider it an act of terror. It is very clear to me. In terms of whether I regard the Houthis as a terrorist group, personally, yes, I do. I do not think that you need a designation for a group to be seen as conducting terrorist activities. I think one of the biggest mistakes, frankly, that we all made was to allow the Houthis breathing space in 2018. With the Hodeidah scenario at that time, I know for a fact that Saudi Arabia thought for a while that they were about to have a military edge over the Houthis, but they were told to stop, and the Stockholm process started. Now it is beginning to be debated again—whether it was the right decision at the time to say, “No, let’s actually stop this and try to negotiate.” They in a way used it to their advantage, empowered themselves and more or less took over northern Yemen, and here we are.

I would say that the Houthis need to be dealt with decisively. Right now, the way we are dealing with the Houthis is obviously tit for tat, with retaliation for their retaliation. Unfortunately, I see them benefiting from this, because it elevates their status domestically. That is why I think they are now saying that US and UK ships are legitimate targets. They feel that this is gaining them local support. Even regional popularity is growing, because some people in the region who are very upset about Gaza are seeing in the Houthis a bit of vindication. It is a very dangerous set of circumstances, which, of course, Iran is very happy about.

What we need to do is link up all those dots. One of the biggest issues that I am critical of in terms of our approach to this region is having the artificial separation between Shi’a groups and Sunni groups, and between Iran at the level of the nuclear issue and Iran’s regional involvement all over the Middle East and North Africa. What we are seeing today is all those connections playing out. We need a different approach that is more comprehensive and places the Houthis within this comprehensive framework, linking all those issues together.

Chair: Can I jump in, Henry?

Henry Smith: Yes, if I can come back in very quickly afterwards.

Q108 **Chair:** I don’t know whether Henry was going to come to these points, but I want to pick up two things. One is about the Houthis working with al-Qaeda and carrying out attacks on the Southern Transitional Council in regard to Vice-President al-Zubaidi’s comments yesterday. He said that he does not think the targeted attacks on the Houthis are going to achieve what they want to achieve, and I think he also made some suggestion that they could do the job if they were helped and armed. I don’t see that happening in the short term. I am interested in your view on al-Qaeda and the Houthis working together in that way.

Secondly, when you speak to the UN special envoy and the US special envoy to Yemen, they both think that the Houthis will be part of the peace road map—the road map has to include the Houthis, of course, but within government, in the way that Hezbollah are in Lebanon. You are suggesting that we should proscribe the Houthis as terrorists, and that they should be nothing to do with the solution. How would that work if



they were part of the future governance arrangements?

Dr Lina Khatib: This is the thing. We have designated Hezbollah as a terrorist group. What have we achieved with that, in terms of changing the political status quo in Lebanon? Frankly, nothing. That is why, for me, the issue is not the designation. When I talk about dealing with them decisively, it means holding them accountable not in a tit-for-tat retaliatory way as we have been doing, but through this comprehensive strategy I am proposing, which actually links up the Yemen file with the Lebanon file with the glaring elephant in the room, which is the Iran regional intervention file—something that neither the UK nor the US has really wanted to address. I have been talking about it for more than a decade, to the extent that some people are trolling me online, saying, “Make sure you talk about Iran!” There is a reason why I keep talking about Iran: because it is there and it is linking up all those groups. Let us not forget who is also training the Houthis—Hezbollah from Lebanon. This artificial separation we use for our own purposes, because it allows us to zoom in on limited things and pat ourselves on the back, will not solve the problem.

If we really want to solve the problem with the Houthis, they do need to be part of the solution, because they are a reality on the ground. It is clear that we cannot eradicate them militarily, and neither can we eradicate Hezbollah militarily. We have to remember that the Saudis have been a bit uncomfortable with our attacks on the Houthis in retaliation for their attacks, because they are keen to have a deal with the Houthis. At the same time, the Houthis, interestingly, are not attacking Saudi Arabia. They are not attacking Saudi ships; they are attacking our ships and international ships. That tells you something. They are trying to increase their political status, but at the same time, they have not given up on the potential for being part of a governance deal for Yemen. When I say “decisively”, we need to show that we mean business. These retaliatory attacks are just making them appear more popular.

Q109 **Chair:** Is there something in what Vice-President al-Zubaidi says about the Southern Transitional Council being armed, supported or whatever, in order to push back on the Houthis? If we are saying they are a terrorist organisation and we are now striking them, and al-Qaeda is no friend of ours, is there something in that suggestion? I have no view on it; I only read it yesterday.

Dr Lina Khatib: I would advocate a package—a carrot and stick package. On the one hand, we need to do something to force them to show that continuing down this path is not going to be in their interest. The weakness of the Southern Transitional Council is obviously part of it. But here you also have to bear in mind Saudi-UAE sensitivities regarding that. One of the things that Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula has taken advantage of recently is a lack of coherence between Saudi Arabia and the UAE regarding what to do about Yemen. We need to have that conversation with the UAE and Saudi Arabia, in order to decide exactly how to deal with the STC. In return, that would be part of the equation when it comes to what to do about the Houthis, as well as Al-Qaeda in the



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Arabian Peninsula. Having this three-way conversation with Saudi Arabia and the UAE is crucial, especially now.

Edmund Fitton-Brown: I would agree with that. Trying to second-guess Saudi Arabia and its allies over Yemen internal politics would be a mistake. I cannot see us wanting to get involved in that in any way. I agree that there is an elephant in the room, which is Iran, and clearly, developing coherent British/American/Western policies towards Iran will be important.

Where I differ from Lina is that I see what is happening in the Red Sea as a distinct challenge that has to be met, and has to be met now. The Government and the US Government have played this precisely correctly. This is not anything to do with the Middle East; this is not anything to do with Gaza. This is a threat to international shipping and international trade, and it has to be faced down. I do not think these are tit-for-tat attacks; I think this is a surgical attempt to degrade the Houthi capability to mount these attacks. The Houthis will continue to mount them. They will be defiant. But whether they will be effective—whether they will be able to maintain them at the level that they were—is not so clear. In that respect, we have a chance of success.

Q110 **Henry Smith:** Finally, Edmund, the UK is the penholder at the UN when it comes to Yemen. What more can be done in that forum to try to contain and address the situation?

Edmund Fitton-Brown: It was good that a resolution was passed. The very fact that Russia and China did not veto—that was good work in New York. Of course, the UN is heavily invested in a peace process in Yemen, and we all want to see a peace process in Yemen. It was interesting that the announcement of progress between the Saudis and the Houthis came when this maritime campaign was already well under way, and when it was becoming clear that there would be a counter-action from the US, the UK and others. How real is that progress, and how likely is it to lead to a peace agreement? It is hard to imagine the Houthis simultaneously holding constructive talks in Yemen about peace and making accommodations with the various other factions in Yemen while conducting this policy in the Red Sea, which, quite apart from its impact on international shipping, could have an impact on Hodeidah and its ability to take in trade and aid that Yemen desperately needs.

I think this Houthi policy is fundamentally contradictory. I think it can be faced down and I think it will fade away. Of course, we must continue to support the UN in pushing this peace process, because the fundamental problem is that when you have ungoverned space and when you have conflict, you then have terrorism as a result, but I don't think that that is a reason not to face the Houthis down in the Red Sea.

Q111 **Dan Carden:** It is great to have you all here today. Can I focus on the UK relations with the Gulf states? Mr Fitton-Brown, how well does the UK use multilateral and bilateral trade and security agreements in order to use its influence to counter terrorism in the Gulf region?



Edmund Fitton-Brown: Generally, it does it well. The relations with all of the Gulf countries are good. They are very strong with Saudi Arabia, very strong with Oman—actually, I won't even single them out, because they are all strong. There is some work with the GCC, so you do it in a collective way. The UK is also plugged into efforts that the Americans and others are making. The intelligence relationship with Oman is a very important one. The Saudis have been crucial counter-terrorist partners for us in the era since 9/11. So it is pretty good.

What I worry a little still is that there is still a lot of private donor money that goes from Arabian Peninsula countries to terrorist groups. That has always been the case; it was true that money was going to al-Qaeda, ISIS and the Taliban from the peninsula. Whether those Governments are strong enough in facing that down or whether they are too quick to accommodate the proclivities of their individual citizens and wealthy donors with strong Islamist sympathies—I think there is a problem there. One of the things that 7 October highlighted is that there is a problem of Qatari tolerance of Hamas.

Dr Lina Khatib: I will add a complication. Saudi Arabia remains disappointed, first at how we—both us and the United States—have dealt with Iran and its regional interventions, generally speaking, since 2008. Because of what I was talking about earlier—the issue of Iran's regional intervention—Saudi Arabia and the UAE felt for a while that they were, in a way, left to deal with this on their own. Now they have both found their own individual ways of trying to contain Iran, because they feel this is the pragmatic way forward. Their preferred solution, of course, was a bit different, many years back: they wanted a more decisive alliance with the West to stop Iran in its tracks. That did not happen. That is one disappointment.

The second disappointment is Yemen. When it comes to the war Saudi Arabia has been leading against the Houthis, again, it felt let down—especially the current Administration in Saudi Arabia. It remains a bit of an issue in UK-Saudi relations. At the level of trade, of course, things are going very well, and at the level of counter-terrorism, intelligence sharing, and so on. However, at the political level, there is this sticking point that I don't think has been resolved yet. It is something to bear in mind.

The other issue that I would flag is that we in the UK are very supportive of reform of the United Nations, including adding permanent members to the Security Council. Looking at the members that are proposed, we have, for example, India and Brazil, but we do not have any country from the Gulf region. In my opinion, Saudi Arabia belongs in that group. We as the UK need to acknowledge that huge changes are happening in the Gulf at the level of political assertiveness, vision, investment in diplomacy and investment in geopolitical weight, yet we are still, in a way, adhering to our old dynamics of how we understand this part of the world: we still see it as largely based on rentierism, on just business transactions—

Q112 **Dan Carden:** In terms of how we engage not only in the Gulf region, but around the world, where is the balance at the moment between us



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engaging on trade and security and Britain espousing its democratic human rights values? Is the balance right at the moment?

Dr Lina Khatib: It was never balanced in the first place, let's face it. We talk the talk and that's it, and then we act very pragmatically. Every single country in the world is the same in that regard. Most countries in the world, unfortunately, are flawed in that regard. If you have a very strict set of criteria that you apply before you engage, you will end up having very few alliances. Everybody is being very pragmatic. However, we also have to remember that in Saudi Arabia, regardless of the many human rights transgressions that still happen, the human rights situation has actually improved. Women have more rights, for example, than they used to, and there is a lot more political participation for women, as well as participation in public life. That is an improvement.

Again, I am not saying we pretend that these countries are not engaging in behaviours that do not match our values, but, at the same time, using our values, you either say, "Okay, we only talk to and engage with countries that are exactly like us," or you engage pragmatically. Declaring a kind of purity test based on values is just not helpful in this context, so I will never advocate cutting relations with any country in the Gulf on the basis that they don't apply the same democratic values that we apply in our liberal democracy.

Dan Carden: Can I bring Mr Fitton-Brown in on this point?

Edmund Fitton-Brown: I think Lina makes some very good points there. I always wish we would emphasise more the rule of law than, if you like, Western liberal values. Of course, we have our Western liberal values and we are proud of them, but we cannot impose them on other people. One of the key questions you have to ask is, "Do these countries have rule of law?" To a large degree, yes they do, even though that law can seem harsh to us.

That links, of course, to enforcement in the Red Sea; it is about the law of the sea. Indeed, most of what we are dealing with in the world at the moment is between lawless countries and the countries that are wedded to the rules-based international system. I think that there is thread there to hold on to about rule of law.

Q113 **Dan Carden:** Do you think our relationship is as strong as it could be?

Edmund Fitton-Brown: With which one?

Dan Carden: With the Gulf states generally. What hinders our relationship, maybe in comparison to others?

Edmund Fitton-Brown: We have extremely strong relations in each country. We tend to send good ambassadors there, and the history tends to help us; it is not unhelpful, although sometimes current affairs can bring turbulence.



On that point about rule of law, I do wonder whether we sometimes seem to be very hostile to Sharia law in countries that actually choose to use Sharia law. It seems strange to me that we lecture people about the death penalty when, whatever we think of the death penalty in the UK or elsewhere, the fact is that the Americans have it, the Russians have it, the Chinese have it—and it is prescribed under Sharia—and yet we allow ourselves, for example, to butt heads with the Iraqi authorities, who have enough to deal with without having to be lectured by the West about having the death penalty. I think that is one area where we could be more careful.

Coming back to Lina's point, I think it is interesting to see the progress that has happened in Saudi Arabia. When you look at the Arabian Peninsula, of course they are all significant countries, but Saudi Arabia is by far the largest and it is the leader. Of course, it is also the leader of the Islamic world because of the location of the holy places in Mecca and Medina. And if Saudi Arabia continues to progress towards reform, then that is a major gain in terms of the stabilisation of the region.

Q114 **Fabian Hamilton:** Dr Khatib, can I start with you, please? Why do you think the security situation in North Africa has continued to deteriorate following the Arab Spring?

Dr Lina Khatib: Oh—following the Arab Spring?

Fabian Hamilton: Going back a few years.

Dr Lina Khatib: Unfortunately, again, if we look at Tunisia in particular—because that is where thousands of fighters went to join ISIS after the Arab Spring—a lot of it has to do with socioeconomic dynamics in the country. People had a lot of hope after the revolution in Tunisia, and a lot of people were educated and expected to climb up the social ladder, and yet they were faced with a reality of social relegation. All that investment in education did not lead to jobs, and Tunisia had very high unemployment. In certain areas, it was around 50% unemployment.

That led to a lot of disillusionment—people feeling that that democracy was not really serving them. That is exploited by entities like ISIS, which, of course, had presented a so-called Islamic utopia to these people, giving them a sense of purpose, a source of income, and a sense of belonging—of social status—that they crave. A lot of migrants went from places like Tunisia to Syria and Iraq at that time to join ISIS for that reason. So that is one aspect.

Then, of course, you have the situation in Libya, which was alluded to earlier. Again, the dynamics on the ground—the lack of good governance—were exploited by all kinds of militias and armed groups that had used the lack of good governance in Libya to fund themselves, in fact. And those militias also found their connections with al-Qaeda, ISIS and other such groups.

Fabian Hamilton: Thank you; can I ask Dr Trauthig for her thoughts?



Dr Inga Trauthig: Thank you, Lina, for laying the groundwork. I am going to home in specifically on the Salafi jihadi resurgence in North Africa, because I think there are concrete items that could be added to the plate. Tunisia did an amnesty, which got out over 1,000 prisoners, out of which a couple of hundred had clear jihadi connections and commitments. The Tunisian Government after the Arab Spring was Islamist and didn't want to suppress Islamist currents or Salafists the same way they had been suppressed, so those currents could operate in the country for at least two years pretty much unwatched. This all helped to set up this threat. On top of that, Libya had a lot of other problems, with a lot of weaponry in the country. Islamic State Libya was really seen as like the biggest province outside of the core. They got multiple millions, allegedly—a lot of money, I am sure—to set up Islamic State. So on top of the socioeconomic grievances and internal power competition and so on, there have been specific mistakes or actions that we can pin down, and the Salafist jihadis in north Africa exploit that.

Q115 **Fabian Hamilton:** Can I move to you, Mr Fitton-Brown? The UN reports that Daesh Libya has focused its recruitment on scientists that may be able to produce so-called biological materials. How seriously should we take those reports in the UK?

Edmund Fitton-Brown: With non-conventional weapons, this is always a worry. There is an established intent for Daesh to develop that kind of weaponry. They tried to do it using the academic facilities that they controlled in Iraq during the era of the so-called caliphate. In spite of that, their capability in Libya is not that great. It not a large presence; it is not a presence that controls significant territory or facilities. I think it would be one to watch, but I wouldn't say it is the biggest concern that we should have.

Q116 **Fabian Hamilton:** Is Haftar affected by any of this, or is he just funded by some of the international players that are trying to interfere in Libya?

Edmund Fitton-Brown: In a way, I would like to defer to Inga on that.

Dr Inga Trauthig: Is Haftar affected in any way by potentially considering Islamic State surging a threat? No. Honestly, in the couple of attacks that we have seen, especially in the last two years, maybe they have attacked an LNA convoy in the south or something. My very brief summary on Islamic State in Libya is that we have an interesting case where—there is a saying in terrorism studies: "The more violence, the more jihadi violence." It is not the case in Libya. Libya is so perpetually structured around militias and armed groups at this point, and Islamic State is kind of scrambling in the desert. On Haftar, I think that is a whole other discussion about UAE counter-terrorism and alliances in the region and what might be going wrong, but that is a quick answer to the question.

Q117 **Fabian Hamilton:** Thank you. Do you think that cells of the Russian Wagner Group, following the death of Prigozhin, or even the Russian state, are continuing to fuel terrorism in Libya?



Dr Inga Trauthig: The Russians came to Libya a couple of years ago on the side of Haftar—that has been pretty clear—and I think they fuel Libyan instability. They are definitely, as Wagner is in other places, interested in exploiting natural resources and having their allies basically contribute to further instability. Russia knows that Libya being unstable is a secondary threat for Europe, for instance. It is hard for me to say they fuel terrorism. They fuel Libyan instability, out of which Salafi jihadi terrorism is also trying to prosper and take an advantage, maybe.

Q118 **Fabian Hamilton:** Moving back to you, Mr Fitton-Brown, because you are a former ambassador to Egypt, as I recall—

Edmund Fitton-Brown: Not ambassador, but I was a diplomat there.

Fabian Hamilton: Sorry, diplomat—my apologies. I can't remember whether you were there when I last went there. What strengths and weaknesses—perhaps somebody else would like to come in on this too—would you draw from Egypt's suppression of terrorism, and in particular their efforts in targeting Daesh Sinai?

Edmund Fitton-Brown: They seem to have been fairly successful with Daesh Sinai, but you can ask why Daesh Sinai became a concern in the first place. It shouldn't really have been much of a concern. It is not as if the Sinai particularly leads anywhere; it is something of a cul-de-sac. What that reflects is that the relationship between the Government in Cairo and the people of Sinai was not good. That meant that there was a lot of natural hostility to Egyptian authority and sympathy for Daesh.

There was an interesting point there, in that there appeared to be some Daesh control of some tunnels into Gaza. Obviously, Gaza is under Hamas control; Hamas is not sympathetic to Daesh. But there is some presence of Daesh within Gaza. It was concerning that you had a potential link there across into Palestine.

The Egyptians have had a very long-running domestic extremism problem—the longest of all, of course, going back to the history that we spoke about earlier. They have a way of dealing with it, which is that they know best and they don't really want to contract it out to partners or allies. That has caused a lot of problems in their dealings with the UK in the past, whereby they simply will not tell you if there is a problem in Egypt, and then something happens and you have an attack. Then, understandably perhaps, other countries or companies react to that and they don't feel safe anymore, so they react in a way that the Egyptians consider to be unhelpful to Egypt's prosperity. It's a tricky relationship.

I think the Americans have been working that hard as well. They have a very strong relationship with the Egyptians, but it is not an easy one. They have had to work hard with them over managing the Gaza issue, and of course the Houthi attacks in the Red Sea are highly relevant to the Egyptian economy, because of the Suez canal. Egypt is a critical partner and ally in the region, but not an easy one.



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Jerome Drevon: I did my PhD on radicals in Egypt. I totally agree with you that the success of the Egyptians in Sinai is very relative. I spent time in the region of northern Sinai. We are speaking about a very small region that is increasingly isolated from the world and it still took Egyptian forces a few years to quell the threat, and they did not do so entirely because occasionally there are still sporadic attacks. I think success there is all relative.

There is a major question mark about Egypt: the nature of the new Egyptian regime under Sisi; the nature of repression; the number of political prisoners; and the atrocious conditions in Egyptian prisons. We have to question what the outcome will be in the long run, because ultimately radicalism, including the kind that led to the formation of al-Qaeda, is an outcome of repression in Egyptian prisons in the '60s that was nothing compared to the current repression.

Under Nasser, maybe 10 people were executed by the regime and that only lasted for a few years. Now we speak about 30,000 to 40,000 political prisoners in atrocious circumstances, in which those ideas spread, because it is the most conducive environment. But we never question it.

We question the role of Tunisia and Libya, for the right reasons, but we never question Egypt, because somehow there is this fear: "What will happen to the regime if it falls? We cannot allow it to fall, because it is the largest Arab country, it's so central in the region and so on." But we still have to question what will happen later and what type of reintegration there will be, considering that we have a fragile regime that is the most exclusionary of any other fragile forces, and that is nothing compared to what Mubarak was, for example.

Q119 **Fabian Hamilton:** Can I move us back to you, Dr Trauthig? Do you think that the UK's existing counter-terrorism policies in the Maghreb are coherent and achievable?

Dr Inga Trauthig: Okay, I am going to try to start dissecting UK counter-terrorism policies in the Maghreb. When we look at the last couple of years, there were limited successes—for example, in the 2016 battle against ISIS in Sirte. The UK was a country that supported—together especially with the US, but also partially with Italy—the local Libyan forces in really driving Islamic State out of Sirte.

Did the UK do much after that? They trained a couple of alleged CT forces in Tripoli that don't seem to have much impact. They definitely left Sirte kind of to itself and to the Libyans. I do not think that is a very good strategy.

Similarly we have seen CT successes in Tunisia—very different CT successes, like: reforming and restructuring the security services, as I said; and implementing criminal justice counter-terrorism versus very security-driven counter-terrorism; and even creating partially an independent CVE sector, which is obviously complementary to CT efforts.



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I am currently mostly concerned about the fact that I do not see any of these North African countries under the UK's CT or even security policy agenda. I remember reading the integrated review and the refresh. In prominent parts—at the very beginning, for instance—it keeps talking about the Gulf and Africa, and I kept asking myself, “Does this include North Africa.” I don't think so, for the folks who wrote it. Only later does the document talk a bit more about the Middle East and North Africa, but the overall idea that was conveyed to me was self-reliance in terms of security in the Middle East. With regard to counter-terrorism, I find that really problematic, because then I am looking at other countries and thinking, “Okay, self-reliance among individual countries that really among themselves really don't get along? Egypt supports a completely different part from Libya and others, and Libya itself can't even really secure the security of its own citizens.”

I don't want to over-emphasise this, but you have blocs of countries where political Islam is very accepted, and others that want to fight anything that is close to political Islam, so self-reliance in terms of counter-terrorism in the Middle East and North Africa is really not a good idea. What I detected from the UK's counter-terrorism policy over the last couple of years, at least with regard to North Africa, was that it is taking a step back. It is about not really having a good strategy, but rather supporting the US in some important efforts—but not really following through. I was a bit disappointed with the integrated review.

Q120 Fabian Hamilton: Looking forward, what should the UK's counter-terrorism objectives in the region be over the next five to 10 years?

Dr Inga Trauthig: I am going to deduce that from what I see as the biggest threats currently in North Africa, in terms of how the terrorist threat could escalate. The first is the authoritarian trajectory of Kais Saied. The UK should try to work with European and American allies in influencing the Tunisian regime and trying to put pressure, for instance, Kais Saied and the Tunisian regime, who are now politicising CT measures and putting hundreds of people who are definitely not terrorists into prison.

We have already spoken about the foreign fighters. I think there is definitely a huge threat that they could come back to Tunisia, to the region or to somewhere else. I know the UK has been really struggling to approach that.

Islamic State provinces in Libya and Sinai are continuing to bubble. I think the UK should work as much as it can with Five Eyes and other intelligence partners. The Moroccans are really good partners, for instance, as are the Spanish. The decentralised but still bubbling jihadi threat in North Africa and the Sahel needs as many eyes as possible, so there should be co-operation with well-established partners, and then bringing countries from the region in under conditions would be a good idea.

Q121 Fabian Hamilton: Let me ask this to anybody else who wants to come in: what do you think is the overlap between terrorism and organised



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crime in North Africa? Does it have an impact on the UK and its security interests, regionally and here at home?

Dr Lina Khatib: I would say—not limited to North Africa, but generally speaking—this is something that I have personally struggled with in conversations with the Foreign Office here. There is this separation between dealing with armed groups in the Middle East and North Africa and dealing with organised crime, when very often it is the same actors—armed groups that are terrorists—that are engaged in organised crime. Hezbollah is one example and Daesh/ISIS is another. Of course, some organised crime is carried out by actors who are not armed, but Syria, with the captagon trade, is a huge example of that. We need to formulate policies that allow us to link those two dimensions together, because that is the reality on the ground.

Edmund Fitton-Brown: I would echo that. There is a worry about siloing between people dealing with organised crime and people dealing with terrorism, and they need to be better integrated. There shouldn't be a sense that terrorism is a bigger deal than organised crime. I'm not sure it is; you can make a case for the reverse. When the UN passed resolution 2482, which talked about the overlap between organised crime and terrorism, it felt as though that was a grab for resources: "If we say that organised crime is linked with terrorism, we will get more resources for it." That reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of the priority, and the fluidity, between the two.

Q122 **Graham Stringer:** I think Inga has answered most of the questions that I wanted to ask about self-reliance; she gave a pretty comprehensive answer on that. There is just one issue left: under the Integrated Review, by pursuing a policy of self-reliance, are we losing knowledge and expertise, and de-skilling ourselves, when it comes to our response to terrorism?

Dr Trauthig: I think it is not a beneficial policy for the FCDO to pursue in the Middle East and North Africa, because there was successful counter-terrorism and intelligence co-operation between European countries in the EU, when the UK was still part of it, and some North African countries, such as Morocco. Obviously, local forces have other insights than Western forces. The American base in Niger is extremely important, and it remains to be seen if the Americans can keep it, in terms of drone surveillance. The Moroccan state—I do not want to condone this; I am not saying it is the best approach—has very strong security apparatus, and there are approximately 50,000 auxiliary agents in Morocco, who feed information to the security services. Morocco has never had a claimed Islamic State attack. There is not a good outlook for the UK from pushing self-reliance and removing themselves, unless that goes hand in hand with continuing exchange and collaboration, in which two sides are always giving.

Q123 **Graham Stringer:** Edmund, you said Iran was the elephant in the room. I understand why you said that, but it is not really, is it? It is the main motivator of anti-Western armed activity in the Middle East. I suppose my question, if you recognise that it is rather more than elephant, is this:



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has the policy of the United States, the European Union and the United Kingdom, under Obama and different European regimes, been too soft on Iran? The basis of our policy has been to say, "You can have a bit more uranium and oil revenues if you behave a bit better," putting it simply, and they haven't behaved better; if anything, they have behaved a good deal worse. Do you think we should change our policy?

Edmund Fitton-Brown: You make a fair point. We talk a lot about this so-called axis of resistance—the Houthis, Hezbollah, Hamas, these Iraqi Shi'a militias. Iran, of course, is the co-ordinator of all that. Iran, for many years, has pursued these extremely aggressive, asymmetric policies. It is just more comfortable with conflict than we are, or than Saudi Arabia or the Gulf states are, so it has gained a lot of advantage.

There has been a perception in the region that Iran has advanced on a number of fronts and grown stronger. Maybe the main fault in the way we responded was that we separated out the nuclear issue from the axis of resistance issue, and prioritised the nuclear issue. We had the JCPOA. Personally, I think the JCPOA was a good agreement. If you are looking to try to tie the Iranians down to a system that gave you really early warning before the attempted break-out, JCPOA was pretty good. The worst of all possible worlds was to have the JCPOA, and to have the Americans withdraw from it. I do not want to be too critical of the JCPOA; I think it was not a bad deal. People can legitimately criticise it, and say that it should have been even stronger, but it was a worthy effort to create something that would give us assurance. The problem was that in so doing, we parked the issue of all this asymmetric aggression from the Iranians. They are behaving, this year and last year, as if they feel that they have a licence to do this indefinitely, and it is leading us towards a point where we will have to find a way of sending a message to them that this cannot continue.

Q124 **Graham Stringer:** Can I follow that up with a quick question and answer, hopefully? *The Economist* had an editorial in the middle of December, I think, saying that Iran was weaker than it had been for some time. Do you agree with the assessment of *The Economist*?

Edmund Fitton-Brown: I think you can make that case. Of course, one of the things that people always used to say when they were negotiating JCPOA and saying, "Let's not be too bellicose", was that as this was happening, we saw civil society flourishing in Iran. We saw these protest movements, and we saw the authorities increasingly struggling to contain them. Sometimes you would talk to people who want to do business in Iran, such as oil companies, and they would say, "We know where we will be in 20 years' time". It will have changed; it is a question of how you get to that change. I understand what *The Economist* means. The Iranians are strong only if you regard them as strong in terms of being able to make trouble. They are not strong in terms of being able to secure the interests of their people.

Q125 **Chair:** I am grateful to you all for coming. We are overrunning just a bit, so will you indulge us for one more question, if you do not mind? The



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House of Lords International Relations Committee did a report in 2017 that suggested that the UK should focus on its own international or national interests, rather than mirroring those of the US. The joint strike on the Houthis underlines that position that we can be seen as mirroring, if not tending to just mirror what the US does. It suggested that perhaps we should not do that quite so much. What are your thoughts on that?

Edmund Fitton-Brown: I think we are strongest when we work in concert with the Americans. That is partly to do with the special relationship, and it is partly to do with the depth and the organic nature of the intelligence relationship with the Americans. But if you are reinsuring for all future political outcomes in Washington DC, some attention needs to be paid by the UK and by European like-minded countries to what our independent capability is if we have to act independently of the US.

Dr Khatib: Again, I think alignment with the US is very important. I would not say that we need to strike our own path just for the sake of it, but there are certain files that perhaps Washington has been ignoring where we could have pushed more, such as the Iran issue. I 100% agree with what was said earlier about the way in which we have been handling Iran. The UK could have played a more decisive role in shifting that. How much are we trying to strike our own path in a way that would positively influence Washington? We ally ourselves with Washington—I think that is important—but are we trying to also influence Washington? I am not sure that we are, and I think we should. The issue of Israel and Palestine is another one where I think we could secure some benefit, and relations with the Gulf are also an important one, because of our historical relationships in that region. We have an edge when it comes to our long engagement in the region that could be beneficial for Washington, and I am not sure that we are leveraging that enough.

Jerome Drevon: I think to a large extent that the issue we have seen with the war in Ukraine is the inability of European countries, including but not only the UK, to have their strategic independence. To a large extent, we are relying on US support. That was the case in order for Ukraine to defend itself against Russia. And even when the UK and France wanted to go into Libya, they couldn't do it without US support, and when they were thinking of strikes against Syria after the chemical attacks, they couldn't do that without US support, either.

There is one thing in thinking about being more assertive and more independent, but you have to have the means to do so. Those means have to be strengthened, but I don't think the UK can strengthen them by itself; it has to be done within a European context, because the strategic interests of the UK are much more aligned with those of European countries than solely with those of the US, even though, as has been said, a lot of shared interest still exists with the US.

We also have to be aware of the elephant in the room. What will happen at the end of the year with the elections in the US? We have seen Trump receive his first mandate. What would happen with a second mandate? What type of position would he take towards NATO, Ukraine policy,



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European countries and so on? The UK has to reflect on the potential consequences within a year.

Dr Trauthig: Building on everything that has been said, I largely agree. Collaborating with the US in North Africa and the Sahel is extremely important. The Brits helped the Libyan forces and the US to defeat ISIS in Sirte and to drive them out of Sirte. In 2019 it was AFRICOM alone that assassinated all senior Libyan ISIS forces in the south of Libya. The Niger base is also super-important, so definitely collaborating with the US there.

I want to underline the point that Jerome has made about Trump winning a sweeping victory in the Republican primary in Iowa. There is the potential of another Trump presidency, but I am not going to make the mistake of making any sort of forecast, other than saying that it is unpredictable. When the British work with the Americans, they should keep the benefits in mind but evaluate on the basis of the issue. With the Houthis, I think that makes sense, but think about your other partners—maybe you don't want to alienate the Europeans—and your own bilateral relations. For instance, the Americans have a strong relationship with the Egyptians. The British also have a strong relationship, but it is different from the one that the Americans have.

Chair: On that note, may I thank you all for sparing us the time today and for your excellent contributions? You have been very helpful.