HOUSE OF COMMONS

Foreign Affairs Committee

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

Tuesday 23 January 2024

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Alicia Kearns (Chair); Dan Carden; Fabian Hamilton; Mr Ranil Jayawardena; Bob Seely; Henry Smith; Royston Smith.

Questions 119-191

Witnesses

I: Rt hon. Jack Straw, former Secretary of State for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

II: Professor Ali Ansari, Professor at the School of History, St Andrew's University, and Behnam Ben Taleblu, Senior Fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies

III: Baroness Ashton of Upholland, Former Vice President of the European Commission and former High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy; Sir Mark Lyall Grant, former UK Ambassador to UN and National Security Adviser; and Mike Singh; Managing Director at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– Benham Ben Taleblu:
committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/125333/html/

Examination of Witness

Witness: Jack Straw.

Q119 **Chair:** Welcome to this session of the Foreign Affairs Committee, where we will be focusing on Iran. First, we are very privileged to be joined by the right hon. Jack Straw. Would you mind giving a brief introduction to yourself, Jack?

Jack Straw: My name is Jack Straw. Between 1979 and 2015, I was the Member of Parliament for Blackburn in Lancashire. I was in the British Cabinet between 1997 and 2010. In that period, between 2001 and 2006, I was the Foreign Secretary. It was in that capacity that I got heavily involved in Iran and went there on a number of occasions; I have been there subsequently on a number of occasions. I wrote a book about British-Iranian relations, which was published in 2019 and again in 2020, called "The English Job: Understanding Iran". I am currently chairman of the British Iranian Chamber of Commerce.

Q120 **Chair:** Thank you. Drawing on your experience as Foreign Secretary and the time that you have spent looking at Iran since then, how would you say that the UK's relationship with Iran has changed over the last two decades?

Jack Straw: It has become more difficult. That is because the Iranian regime has itself become more difficult. When I first went there, 23 years ago, you still had Ayatollah Khamenei as the supreme leader, but it was a more pluralistic society. President Khatami had been elected in a relatively free election; it was not completely free at all, but he had got elected, and he was seeking to pursue his own agenda. He was prevented from doing so from time to time, but he joked to me and he joked publicly that he was actually the leader of the opposition.

To some extent that continued under President Rouhani, but because the regime is, in my judgment, much more vulnerable than it has ever been since the revolution in 1979, it feels the fact that it has lost the consent of the vast majority of the Iranian public. It has then done the only thing that it thinks it can do, which is become more repressive. There are plenty of examples of that, such as the way in which they have dealt with protests, including the protests from September 2022 onwards after the death of Mahsa Amini, but also in the way in which they are controlling elections. It is always slightly guided, and you have the Council of Guardians, which filters out candidates. The constitution says that they should filter out candidates to check whether they are good Muslims—I paraphrase, but that is the essence of it. These days, they are filtering out almost anybody who they think will be a nuisance to the regime.

Q121 **Chair:** Forgive me, but when you talk about the regime being more vulnerable and the opposition within, what is your assessment of how stable Iran is in terms of its hierarchy and the way in which it structures itself?

Jack Straw: On the outside, it is pretty stable. It has had a long time to establish strong agencies of the state, of which the strongest and most coherent by a long shot is the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. However, it has always been the case that within Iran—even within the hardliners—there is much jockeying for position and great arguments between them. That has just been a kind of eternal verity there, but now they are having to maintain their power through repression. It is becoming a sort of classic authoritarian regime, and it means that there is a kind of brittleness to it that was not there, in my view, to the same extent 20 or 25 years ago.

Q122 **Henry Smith:** You spoke about the Iranian regime becoming more difficult—that is, of course, on top of the fact that the Iranians' structure of government is very complex. How do you think British diplomacy should best navigate that to be most effective?

Jack Straw: As it is, we do have diplomatic relations with Iran—thankfully we never lost them—and some skilled Iran watchers, two of whom you are going to talk to straight after me. You have a small cadre of Farsi speakers in the Foreign Office, and a good example is the current ambassador, Simon Shercliff, whom I first met 23 years ago on my first visit to Tehran, shortly after I became Foreign Secretary.

It is really hard to develop good relations, particularly at a time like this. Almost everything with Iran is, and always has been, transactional. The Iranians are very alive to how they are treated—if we want something, they want something, and so on. Of course, personal relations matter a bit, but not to the same extent.

One of the problems is that they are always looking over their shoulders. Just to give you one very revealing example of this, my opposite number for almost the whole time I was Foreign Secretary was Khatami's Foreign Minister, Kamal Kharazi, and I developed a good relationship with him. We had the E3 negotiations in those days, and we had a meeting in either Brussels or Paris about a new text, which we were agreeing with them. It had been brokered and brokered and brokered, and he was there with good diplomats—a good delegation—and we agreed the text. We signed on the dotted line, and everybody breathed a sigh of relief, because at last these negotiations were over, and we went back to our capitals.

The next day, I was on a very crowded train to our house in in west Oxfordshire, where we now live permanently, and the phone rings, and the office says, "Foreign Secretary, Mr Kharazi is on the phone. He needs to talk to you urgently." Anyway, to cut a long story short, I had to go into the loo to take this call, because otherwise everybody was going to be listening, and he comes on and he wants to reopen the negotiation—because, he says, somebody had raised this issue. Anyway, I said, "I had no idea you were going to call me. I haven't got the papers with me; I'm sorry about that. And if you want to know, I'm in a train lavatory." He went on, and he said, "Well, you know, you've got to do me a favour." So I said, "Kamal, you've no idea how difficult it is negotiating with the Government of Iran." And he came straight back and said, "Jack, you have

no idea how difficult it is to negotiate within the Government of Iran." It's partly that they like to use that, but it also reveals a truth.

Q123 **Henry Smith:** Clearly, there is huge value in us having an ambassador in Tehran. How do you think the British Government should be best deploying his diplomatic efforts in country?

Jack Straw: In the way that Ambassador Shercliff is doing it. I think you will find that there are restrictions on the number of diplomats we can have there, so the post is significantly smaller than it was before the invasion of the embassy November 2011, which was an outrageous piece of enterprise by parts of the Iranian Government, with other parts not knowing it and it getting out of control, but anyway. It took a lot of effort, as you know, just to get things back to a kind of normality. It is about building up relations as far as you can, not only with members of the Government, but also with everybody else. Now, the Iranians are paranoid about us to a much greater extent than they were, and they're paranoid about British diplomats, as well, but I think Simon Shercliff does a brilliant job navigating his way through that.

Q124 **Henry Smith:** Briefly on the wider diplomatic efforts from the UK, obviously we have the BBC Persian service. A lot of their journalists have been threatened, which perhaps speaks to the paranoia in the regime; they have even faced death threats. How do you believe we should be trying to deploy that soft power?

Jack Straw: We need the soft power, and it is a tribute to BBC Persian that it does cause such paranoia. They are simply trying to do a good job and tell people truths about what is going on within Iran. One of the paradoxes of Iran is how inventive the Iranians are at finding their way through the controls on the internet and things like this. They always have been. If the regime tightens the screw, yes, it will have some success, but in my experience, the Iranians are adept at finding a way through.

Q125 **Mr Jayawardena:** You do not favour proscription of the IRGC, do you?

Jack Straw: No.

Q126 **Mr Jayawardena:** Would you explain why, given that they are supporters of militant groups like Hamas, Hezbollah and the Houthis, and have repeatedly plotted terror attacks around the world, including here?

Jack Straw: Yes. It is because the IRGC is a fundamental part of the Iranian state. There are other countries that tick all the boxes of supporting Hamas, Hezbollah and the Houthis, and who covertly try to undermine people and kill people; we saw that in Salisbury. I understand the argument, but I would like to say that the powers given under the Terrorism Act 2000 to proscribe organisations were ones for which I was responsible, so I am very familiar with that Act; it was I who introduced the Act and got it through. Those powers were not designed to proscribe states, which is essentially what you would be doing.

This is not just another group. The IRGC is the most powerful institution of the Iranian Government, so a decision to proscribe the IRGC carries with it

very large implications. I think—I cannot be certain—that it would almost be bound to involve, de facto, a decision to break diplomatic relations with Iran. It is not just another group. That is the issue. It is one thing to conceive of that happening as part of a démarche by Canada, New Zealand, Australia, obviously the US, EU countries and a range of other countries, if it was decided that the situation was so extreme that that needed to happen, but those making the decision need to be aware of what they are doing.

Q127 **Mr Jayawardena:** The IRGC has been linked to kidnap and assassination plots in the UK—I think counter-terror police confirmed last year that there had been 15 such plots. Given what you have said about their intrinsic place within the Iranian state, what would be your view as to how the Government should respond today to the threat posed by them both here and abroad?

Jack Straw: In the same way that we have to respond to similar threats from the Russian Federation. With respect, people need to be aware of what we are talking about. I am not aware of anybody talking about proscribing the Russian army or the Russian air force; it would seem to be slightly odd, but that is the consequence of seeking to proscribe the IRGC. Even if we were to proscribe the IRGC, it wouldn't stop them doing all these things because none of them is done overtly. If you want to counter terrorism, you have to take counter-terrorist measures. Yes, proscription has some effect with non-state groups, but am highly sceptical about its effect on state groups.

Q128 **Mr Jayawardena:** Do you have any sympathy with the hunger strikers opposite the Foreign Office?

Jack Straw: I walked past them today. Of course I have sympathy with them, but I am afraid that sympathy can't make a policy.

Q129 **Chair:** Forgive me, my understanding of the terror legislation is that yours was far more comprehensive. The Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation has said that the decision for it not to target states is a political decision, and that nothing in the Act actually restricts us from targeting states.

Although I completely agree that the Iranians would perceive this as an attack on Iran and would therefore probably close our embassy and bring in all sorts of measures, only last night we saw on TV a documentary that showed that the IRGC has been holding events with British student organisations across the UK, and very senior IRGC generals have been actively recruiting through them. At the moment, unfortunately the words they use during those calls are not sufficient for us to target them under any sort of legislation, but the mere act of IRGC generals working with British student groups across the UK is incredibly concerning, because we know they are trying to recruit people to activate on the ground. Surely proscription would give us some sort of ability to deal with those who support, finance and organise around the IRGC. The reality is that the IRGC is probably the No. 1 sponsor of terrorism that we are currently facing in the UK and in Europe.

Jack Straw: It would have some marginal effect, but you then have to measure that against the consequences. That is my point. The independent adviser is correct that the words of the Terrorism Act, which has been amended since, allow it to be used against state agencies, but my point is that it was never intended in that way and it hasn't been used in that way. If you don't mind me saying so, I think the call for proscription of the IRGC arises from abhorrence of some of the things that happen in Iran, and falls into the category of, "Something must be done." As Foreign Secretary, I felt—I am sure the current office holder feels this—that I was often faced with that demand: "Something must be done."

I remember having the same conversation about Zimbabwe. We went in for proscriptions because there was great feeling about it, so "something was done," but I am highly sceptical about whether there was any positive effect, certainly from the things I did. That is the problem. There is a terrorist challenge from agencies of the Iranian state, for sure, but I don't see that proscription is going to resolve them, and there would be lots of other consequences. If we want to make the decision that we are going to abandon relations with Iran, so be it, but I am not in that position, and I think we would lose very greatly if we were to do that.

Q130 **Chair:** Thank you. There are two more questions that we want to cover with you. What policy options are available to us when it comes to preventing Iran from getting nuclear weapons? Is that contingent on US support, given what we are facing and where we are going?

Jack Straw: Very sadly, the policy options are far fewer now than they were before the then President Trump broke up the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action in 2018. It was a very ill-advised policy, which has had the opposite consequences to those he said he intended.

You have to work through the board of governors of the International Atomic Energy Agency, and we need the US on side in the board of governors. If you can get them on side and there is, as it were, a good reason, you can then have a resolution from the board of governors referring Iran to the Security Council. We used that—I used that with colleagues on the board of governors—in, I think, 2005 or '06, after President Ahmadinejad was elected. The Iranians really disliked the idea. It is a potent diplomatic tool, in my view. Lord Cameron will be able to tell you more about how far he has got with colleagues in the Administration in Washington about using it, but it is one of the critical things.

Q131 **Dan Carden:** Good afternoon, Mr Straw. I think you have said in the past that sanctions were an effective tool in bringing Iran to the negotiating table for the JCPOA. I wondered how you see the effectiveness of sanctions with Iran, ranging over time and looking into the future.

*[*ROYSTON SMITH *took the Chair]*

Jack Straw: Two things led to the JCPOA in the end being signed in 2015: the earlier change of US President to Barack Obama, and then, in 2013, the election of President Rouhani, a dark horse who kept his tinder very dry—he boasted subsequently that he had had only 5% in the opinion

polls when he slipped past the Guardian Council as a candidate. But also sanctions had hit the Iranian economy and people. Some of the hardliners really welcomed that but others, including Rouhani, were able to argue that sanctions were damaging to the Iranian economy and people, and that there was a way through this. I dare say the argument went, "Well, look, we've always said that we're not planning a bomb, so what do we lose if we agree to some restrictions on the nuclear programme?"

Although the Iranians have been able to break through the sanctions against the oil they have—they were helped by the relatively high price of oil and gas—their economy is still in trouble. There are a couple of things, and one is unemployment which is running high—this is on their figures, by the way—at 7.6%, but with 20% or a fifth of 15 to 24-year-olds without work, and 11% of graduates. The other day, the Chamber of Commerce was complaining that non-oil exports were down $4 billion. Another really interesting number is that gross fixed capital formation—the percentage of GDP that is invested rather than consumed—had dropped from 30% in 2009 to 18% in the latest data.

Those are regime figures, but they show that the Iranians have trouble. For sure, in a negotiation over a son of JCPOA, what they would most want would be sanctions relief in return for whatever.

Q132 **Dan Carden:** What about in the current context of relations between the UK and Iran?

Jack Straw: I would advise against unilateral sanctions. You can do them on individuals—that's a different matter—but in terms of economic sanctions, the total trade that we have with Iran is, I think, about £400 million a year, and it is all in items that are exempt from sanctions—even US sanctions—like medicines and certain agricultural products.

Q133 **Fabian Hamilton:** Good to see you again, Jack. Last year, I met Rafael Grossi, the director general of the IAEA in Vienna. He told me that the tables had turned considerably on the JCPOA. While two or three years ago, the EU and the United States were desperate for Iran to get back on board, now it was the other way around—Iran was begging to join or revitalise the JCPOA, but unfortunately the EU was not that interested and the US was too taken up with its own internal issues and the possibility of Mr Trump coming back. What is your view of that?

Jack Straw: It is certainly the case that the Iranians, rhetorically, say they want to resume the JCPOA. There is material in the regime newspapers saying that virtually every day. They would wish there to be a new international deal, because it would give them sanctions relief; it would increase their international respectability; and it would be something that might actually have an effect for the majority of the population in Iran. So just now the prize for them is really very substantial. But there is a big question mark about how serious they would be in a negotiation just at the moment, about what they would be willing to concede.

In terms of the JCPOA partners, which for these purposes are the E3 plus the United States—in the US, you won't get any movement unless and until there is re-election of a Democratic President. It was President Trump's decision in 2018, as I mentioned, that actually greatly helped, assisted, the expansion of Iran's nuclear programme. They are now enriching a lot of highly enriched uranium, which they couldn't do before. It can't be the JCPOA itself, because a lot of the time limits set in the original JCPOA are going quite shortly to start expiring; there is the springback mechanism, too.

If you had a regime in Tehran that was really serious about negotiations and really wanted to do something for the living standards of its population, and you had an American President who was aligned—it has been an all-party issue here and, roughly speaking, it is in France and Germany—you could see a negotiation taking place, but it would not be the JCPOA; it would be a successor. But I don't see that happening.

Chair: Jack, thank you very much for giving us your time. We have to stop at 3, sadly; we could go on for hours. We are grateful to you. We are now going to not suspend but just bring in Behnam and Ali, if we can, and then get straight on. Jack, thank you very much.

Jack Straw: Thank you very much. I shall listen to them.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Professor Ali Ansari and Behnam Ben Taleblu.

Q134 **Chair:** Thank you for joining us today. We are very grateful to you for giving up your time. Could you—Ali, I will come to you first, if I may—introduce yourselves in a sentence or so, just so that we are aware of who you are and what you do?

Professor Ansari: I am Ali Ansari, professor of Iranian history at the University of St Andrews.

Behnam Ben Taleblu: I am Behnam Ben Taleblu, a senior fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies think-tank in Washington DC.

Q135 **Fabian Hamilton:** Professor Ansari, it is good to see you back at the Foreign Affairs Committee. Could you describe the stability and popularity of the Iranian regime at home and what their key priorities are today—apart from staying in power, of course?

Professor Ansari: I think their priority is to stay in power, basically, but the authority of the regime has been waning, certainly since 2009, since we had the Green Movement protests, and it has been waning at a fairly steady pace since then. Obviously, since last year's protests also, a very deep crisis of authority has affected them. The latest internal polling that they did about the forthcoming parliamentary elections suggested that only 10% of the citizens of Tehran were willing to vote in the next parliamentary elections. That goes up a little bit for the rural areas, but the interesting thing is that the trendline is downward; about six months

ago, it was 15% of the citizens of Tehran who were willing to vote. The situation is extremely bad for them, but the principal preoccupation of the regime at the moment is the succession planning post-Khamenei. I am personally of the view that he is preparing to hand over to his son, so that should make for an interesting development in the politics of the Islamic Republic.

Q136 **Fabian Hamilton:** A return of the monarchy.

Professor Ansari: I would call it an Islamic despotism, but yes—that is exactly what we are seeing.

Q137 **Fabian Hamilton:** Do you think that the low public opinion, which, as you have described, is descending rapidly, is having an effect on the regime's decisions internationally and abroad—who it funds, what it does and what kind of trouble it stirs up in the region?

Professor Ansari: I think it is, in so far as there are two consequences of that. One is that it needs to flex its muscles abroad to some extent in order to reassure its supporters—its diminishing support at home—that it actually is what it says on the tin, so to speak. However, on the other hand, it does have an unnerving effect on them, in the sense that they are quite well aware that while they can have a lot of—how shall we say?—tactical expressions of power throughout the Middle East through their proxies, the idea of getting into a larger conflict, say, with the United States, is really not something that they look forward to, because they do not have the popular support to sustain anything like that. They are much more nervous, to my mind, than some of the imagery that I think some people will present, even abroad. They are much more nervous than the way in which they present themselves suggests.

Q138 **Fabian Hamilton:** What about Russia, though? How is their internal popularity affecting the relationship with Russia and what they do with Russia to try to disrupt things?

*[*ALICIA KEARNS *resumed the Chair]*

Professor Ansari: I think the decision of the Islamic Republic to actually double down with a Russian alliance following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 will rank in time as one of the biggest strategic blunders that the Islamic Republic or any Iranian state has made over the last 100 or 150 years. Many people in Iran were quite shocked by the way in which the regime has realigned itself so emphatically with the Russians. To my mind, it shows the very tight relationship between the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the Russian military; it is basically the binding of a military-industrial complex between the two powers. Many Iranians had complained. Interestingly enough, even some who one would say were regime insiders said clearly, "It is quite difficult for us to protest about the occupation of Palestine when we are quite willing to support the occupation of Ukraine." They are quite aware of the contradictions in the policy, but obviously for the regime hardliners and the inside core, this is about survival, and Putin offers them a firm hand and unconditional support.

Q139 **Fabian Hamilton:** A few months ago, I met some of the women involved in the women's protest that was so much in the news last year. Interestingly, they told me that the regime would fall pretty soon. One of them said within six months, but that has not happened; the other said within the next two or three years. What are the prospects of that actually happening or, perhaps, the regime becoming more "moderate"?

Professor Ansari: The prospect of the regime becoming more moderate is unlikely, I have to say, unless there is a serious change in personnel at the top. The regime would have to change character for that to happen, at the moment.

My argument about the state of the regime is that it is much more fragile than people think. Yes, it can last—it has sustainability, and it will use violence to support that. The more violence it uses, of course, the more its authority weakens, but it could take a very small trigger for things to unravel very quickly. That is the point: it is much more fragile than people suggest.

With the argument about whether it will be six months or two years, people can debate endlessly about the length of time. The point really is that when you look at the structure and nature of the Iranian state and the way in which they have taken it forward, certainly since 2009, it is away from what Jack was saying prior. When you go back to the Khatami years, you have a certain degree of popular mandate there; even if there is no love lost, people will accept it if they think that the direction of travel is the right way. Now people are basically firmly of the view that the direction of travel is not in the right direction and there is really very little left for them—there are very few stakeholders in this system now—and it will not take much for the system to begin to unravel. The question for people like me is to try to ascertain when or what that may be.

But, of course, predicting revolutions is a mug's game, as we know. When we look at the Arab spring, who knew it would take someone to self-immolate in Tunis to set off the Arab spring? Nobody could predict these things. The fact is, though, that if you look at Iran today, there are umpteen little triggers, including I have to say the recent fracas with Pakistan, which didn't go down terribly well at all among Iranians. There are all sorts of things.

My own view, very strongly, and I know I am not in a majority in this view, is that the regime is much more fragile than people think.

Q140 **Fabian Hamilton:** Could the regime collapse without extreme violence?

Professor Ansari: In my view, no.

Q141 **Mr Jayawardena:** We just heard from a former Foreign Secretary. Professor, if you were in the shoes of the current Foreign Secretary, what would you do to engage with the regime, given all that we have heard and all that you have said, particularly given that the JCPOA seems to have stalled?

Professor Ansari: The first thing I would do is to make sure that Iran policy was not synonymous with the JCPOA. For far too long, we have seen them as synonymous. A huge amount of time and effort, quite understandably on some levels, has been diverted towards the nuclear negotiations, but we need to have a broader contextual understanding of the political landscape in Iran, and we have to have a broader understanding of where we want to be in the long term and how we are planning to get there.

In simple terms, what we have to do is enable those elements in Iranian wider society that are really more sympathetic to our own ideals and values and diminish the role of those that are antithetical to those. At the moment, we are far too reactive, in my view. As one former diplomat said to me, British policy towards Iran over the last 20 years has been really an exercise in crisis management. We need to move out of that crisis management mode and really think a little more deeply about what we want and how we want to get there. So I think an element of strategic thinking, policy planning, moving forward with a coherent policy.

I wrote a paper for the Foreign Office a while back. I spent two years as a knowledge exchange fellow in there, which was an interesting and very enlightening experience. One of the things I argued very heavily was that we need to move into a situation where we have a coherent strategy about what we want going forward. This does mean that we have to have a means of basically engaging those elements that we think are sympathetic to our values and diminishing those that are not. At the moment, part of our problem is that we end up, inadvertently, obviously, actually enabling those who are not remotely sympathetic to anything we stand for.

Q142 **Mr Jayawardena:** Drilling down specifically on the nuclear talks, what would your percentage likelihood be of the prospect of revival in those nuclear talks?

Professor Ansari: Well, my own view is, and we have said this, that the nuclear talks are comatose, and comatose is a generous way of looking at it. My own view is that they are dead. What the nuclear talks and the experience of the nuclear talks provide us with is a template, if we ever were able to revive them or move forward, to build on, going forward. Of course, you don't want to waste all the effort that has gone on beforehand. There is a huge amount that can be used.

But at the moment, as has been said earlier, we have got to a situation where the west had, up until 2022, almost until the day that the Russians invaded Ukraine, an enthusiasm, or an eagerness—enthusiasm is probably the wrong word—just to get this done and get the JCPOA back up and running; now I think the mood music has changed quite dramatically. Again, as I say, I think the Iranians have badly miscalculated what their support of Russia in this war in Ukraine has done to European public opinion, to say nothing else.

What we should be doing about the JCPOA, to be perfectly honest, is to have a really frank assessment of what the pros and cons of that negotiating procedure were. At the moment, we fetishise that agreement a bit too much, to be honest. It is a diplomatic agreement. It is not a holy grail. It needs to be seen as a diplomatic agreement that has strengths and weaknesses. We need to take the strengths and get rid of the weaknesses.

Q143 **Mr Jayawardena:** On balance, was it the right thing to do in the first place?

Professor Ansari: Yes, on balance I would say that it was the right thing to do. Personally, and I have written about this, I don't think that the American negotiators at the time handled it in the best way they possibly could. That is my own view, and I have written about this, so it is very explicit. Certainly under John Kerry, my view is that they played a very strong hand badly. That is my own view. As I said, it is something that others would disagree with.

Chair: We will discuss this a lot more with the next panel. Royston, you wanted to bring us on to regional influence.

Q144 **Royston Smith:** I do. Mr Taleblu, should the UK's position be to carry on with the status quo when we know that the malign influence of Iran through its proxies is destabilising the Middle East and North Africa?

Behnam Ben Taleblu: Thank you for the question; it is a good one, particularly in light of recent UK strikes in concert with the United States against Iran's newest, most lethally armed proxy in the Arabian peninsula—the Houthis in Yemen. The Houthis are the only proxy or partner of the Islamic Republic with medium-range ballistic missiles. They are the only ones to have used anti-ship ballistic missiles, and they were the first to use land-attack cruise missiles. This is not some low-level insurgency that Iran is supporting. This is an army on scale with some nation states. That is one thing to keep in mind. When we talk about a hands-off policy or a policy that deters us in the West rather than Iran and its proxies in the heartland of the Middle East, these are the dividends that Iran sees. The most lethal arms the Houthis have acquired were actually acquired during periods of the ceasefire in 2022 and 2023 between the Houthis and Saudi Arabia. Step No.1 for transatlantic policy towards Iran and the Houthis is: no own goals. We have to be cognisant here that the more restraint we show towards these groups, the more of an incentive they have to press their advantage. You see that with the Houthis now copying Iran's perfection of maritime harassment, which we have seen for decades in the Persian Gulf and Strait of Hormuz, and the ability to reverse-engineer and produce some of these systems that we thought only belonged to states, not non-state actors. The list goes on and on.

I would just add a quick footnote to what my colleague Professor Ansari said about Iran and Russia. This is respectfully where I disagree a little bit. I actually think that had Western policy been a bit more forceful towards Iran and the breadth and depth of the challenge posed by the Islamic

Republic, the Islamic Republic would think twice about continued drone proliferation. On balance, if you are an Iranian decision maker today, you do not believe that you have paid a heavy price for proliferating drones to Russia. You do not believe that you have paid a heavy price, such that, for the first time ever, an Iranian ballistic missile has shown up in an arms expo in Moscow in August 2023. In September 2023, the Russian Defence Minister visited Iran, and for the first time the Russians inspected that same missile. *The Wall Street Journal* reported earlier this year that an Iranian missile sale from Iran to Russia is still on the books. What is now drones targeting European civilians and critical infrastructure in Ukraine may soon turn into ballistic missiles. This was a relationship that was the inverse in the 1990s. Russia was providing military hardware to Iran. Now Iran is providing military hardware to Russia. All of this is to say, the more restraint you show, the more likely you are to underwrite the next round of escalation by an exceptionally resolute adversary.

Q145 **Royston Smith:** It sounds like you are saying that we should be taking steps to reverse Iranian expansionism in the Middle East. Are there effective partnerships that we can create to bring about the dismantling of their affiliates and to push back on Iran itself? How do you see us taking control of this situation, which is starting to look like it is becoming out of control?

Behnam Ben Taleblu: One has to take a long-term view about this. Even for the US, which has used the military option far more than, for example, the United Kingdom has, deterrence was not lost overnight. The US policy did not fail in the Middle East overnight, and it will not be restored or resurrected overnight. That is one thing to keep in mind. We have to have a shared template—the UK, the US, the Five Eyes countries and the transatlantic partnership. It has to have a shared assessment of three things. One is time; how much time do all these countries believe they should devote to this problem? One is political capital; how much should each different politician be able to agree to a consensus on what should be the proper outcome in the region? Then there is cost; how much is this going to cost taxpayers in the UK and the US? Being able to agree on these three things are key principles that are missing, both on this side of the Atlantic and the other.

Once you philosophically agree on these things, then there are the capabilities. The UK, after the United States, has the world's second-largest sanctions shop, but it has not used them anywhere as effectively as the United States has. The UK also sits at a very critical crossroads in the global regulatory sanctions architecture, not just because of the macroeconomic impact its penalties can have, but because of the punitive impact naming and shaming can have. I think that a much more rigorous sanctions architecture can inspire the Europeans, Australia and New Zealand to follow suit and get people to support UN Security Council resolutions, be they 1701 in Lebanon, where that has been violated, or the multiple arms embargoes in Yemen, where the Iranians have violated multiple UN Security Council resolutions. That means using UK

autonomous measures to support international predicates, such as UN Security Council resolutions that the Iranians are violating.

Lastly, there is not being afraid to call a spade a spade. The proscription of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps is not the end of the policy; that is the price floor of a new kind of coherent policy, in my view. I think that the good doctor might disagree with me on that, but in essence, being able to call a spade a spade should begin the conversations as to, "What does a longer-term proper UK policy towards Iran and its affiliates and proxies look like?"

Then, the only exogenous variable, which matters very much and is probably the elephant in the room, is, "What is UK policy towards the host country of these militias?" The UK policy towards Baghdad is very different to UK policy towards Damascus and to UK policy towards Beirut. Being able to align, "What is the relationship with the state and the proxy?", "How punctured is the state by the Iranian threat network?", and "Is the state even present?"—Yemen is a good example of that—also needs to be taken into consideration.

Q146 **Royston Smith:** Lastly, briefly if you can, what about regional partners? What about other countries in the region and what they are prepared to do to try and push back on this threat?

Behnam Ben Taleblu: It depends a great deal also on what their assessment of cost, time horizon and interest is. For example, when Saudi Arabia was very interested in taking on the Houthis, it lacked sustained Western support. That lack of sustained Western support, in my view, is why, in December 2023, when the Houthi anti-ship attacks were stepping up, there were open-source reports by major news agencies, such as Reuters, saying that the Saudis were the ones beseeching the Americans to please not fire on the Houthis for potential violation of the ceasefire.

So, step No. 1 has to be no own-goals. If I may borrow a line from the former Quds Force chief, Qasem Soleimani—he said this in 2010 and it became public in 2013—"We're not like the Americans. We don't abandon our friends." I think that you could easily say "the UK" or "the transatlantic relationship" there. We should not be abandoning our friends. We should be able to borrow from the Iranian proxy model, actually, which is that if you have a friend who is shooting at someone that you want to shoot at, empower them to continue that, rather than undercut them.

Q147 **Dan Carden:** Ali, following on from that and sticking to the affiliates and proxies of Iran, to what extent is the Iranian Government in control of its proxies?

Professor Ansari: It depends which one it is. I think that, with Hezbollah, it has a much tighter relationship. I think that the way to look at them is that there are varying degrees of relations—so first cousins, second cousins and that type of thing. I do think that they have probably more control, or more influence, on these proxies than they would like us to believe.

They are always actually arguing in terms of plausible deniability, but the fact is that, even with the Houthis—who are being enabled, supported and supplied by the Iranians—the Iranians might say at one stage, "Well, we never gave the go ahead or the green light," and so on and so forth, but in some cases that is a slightly tendentious argument. They want to be able to argue that they are not—you know, the whole system of Government and the whole political ecosystem in Iran is all about plausible deniability, so you are always going to be quite vague about what that relationship is. I think that one of the things that we have improved upon, really over the last decade at least, is to acknowledge—I think we probably knew about it, but we did not want to acknowledge it—that actually this level of control and proxy control is much greater than we would have originally accepted.

Q148 **Henry Smith:** Jack Straw spoke about the fact that he believed that the IRGC should not be proscribed because it is an integral part of the Iranian state. Professor Ansari, how do you think that UK diplomatic policy should position itself in dealing with those actors whom the IRGC actively supports, be that the Houthis, Hezbollah, Hamas and so on, and in our dealings directly with the Government in Tehran?

Professor Ansari: First, to go back to what my colleague has been saying, I also think that we need to rebuild our relationships in the region to some extent and make sure that we know who our friends are, who we are going to be able to work with, and how we push back against elements of Iranian aggression—which I think is pretty bland or pretty bold, in some aspects. It is important to realise that we will not be able to do this on our own. Britain will not be able to act on its own. Britain has certain soft power assets, which are extremely important, and some hard power assets, but we cannot do this on our own. As well as working with the United States, we need to have allies in the region. There is an aspect of British policy towards Iran that is directed towards Washington. That is important, but part of the issue is that, in some cases, we have often limited it to Washington. It needs to be broader, including European allies and others. It requires a much more coherent and concerted diplomatic effort across the board, including in the region, and sometimes with people who are not necessarily aligned with us on every single facet, but none the less are aligned with us on some of the more important aspects of what we need to get done.

Q149 **Royston Smith:** Mr Taleblu, what is your take on the difference between dealing with the IRGC and its proxies, and our direct dealings with Tehran?

Behnam Ben Taleblu: That is an excellent question. Washington itself grappled with this issue. In October 2007, the Bush Administration decided to only target the Quds Force using terrorism authorities, because it feared precisely what the former Foreign Secretary mentioned: what would the consequences be of listing an entire organisation? It took literally a decade, from October 2007 until October 2017, for Washington to align ways, means, ends and the last ingredient—political will, which is sometimes the most important issue. Usually, when there is a legal problem, there is a legal solution, so that can be taken off the table.

In a country like the UK, the counter-terrorism penalty importantly allows you to use the judicial apparatus at home as a national security tool against what the former head of MI5 said about IRGC-inspired attempts: potential kidnappings and—God forbid—acts of terrorism, or potentially using either the UK financial system or UK sovereign territory as a jurisdiction to plan future attacks. You want to deny the regime in Tehran that long arm. The main benefit of the UK's proscription of the IRGC would be not letting the regime use the UK as a permissive jurisdiction. The secondary one would be the political naming and shaming, which would be a massive wind beneath the wings of the Iranian diaspora—and I do not mean just the diaspora in the UK. It has been very interesting to see that, particularly in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the UK and across the European Union, the force championing the proscription of the IRGC has often been in concert with great work by parliamentarians and the Iranian diaspora. That really picked up in September 2022 with the Mahsa Amini protests, which carried on for the year of protests that touched 150 different cities, towns and villages. It also allows you to align strategy with values.

Q150 **Henry Smith:** I will play devil's advocate for a moment. I believe in proscription of the IRGC, but I respect different arguments. Do you think there is any validity in the view that if Britain does not proscribe the IRGC, then it allows new lines of communications when, say, other Five Eyes countries have proscribed the IRGC?

Behnam Ben Taleblu: I do not think it blurs them. In the 2020s, if you may forgive the analogy, sir, the Five Eyes countries should be seeing 2020 on all the counter-terrorism threats. Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK and the US should be able to designate Hamas, Hezbollah, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in its entirety—and any other offshoot of the axis of resistance—using the terrorism proscription authority. That may differ due to how much of these are extraterritorial, versus penalties at home. If I could play devil's advocate myself, the strongest reason to not designate is the potential blowback. We hear this from diplomats all around jurisdictions that see the strategic validity of a proscription but fear blowback.

The one thing we should not permit the Islamic republic to do is dangle a sword of Damocles over policy options from Western capitals they disagree with. God forbid, something might happen like with the US embassy in 1979. The British empirical example is that, even sans IRGC proscription, you had the Basij and the alleged randomised mob—which, as Professor Ansari knows, is not so randomised—taking over the UK embassy in Tehran. I remember vividly the photo of them turning a portrait of Her Majesty upside down. That nullifies even the best argument against this.

Q151 **Fabian Hamilton:** Professor Ansari, do you think responses such as limited airstrikes on Houthi bases in Yemen are sufficient to contain the major threats that they pose against the West?

Professor Ansari: Do you mean specifically the Houthis?

Fabian Hamilton: Yes, specifically the Houthis.

Professor Ansari: I think any sort of military action can only really work in the long term in the context of a political policy, if I may put it that way. Military action of this sort, if it is effective—we would certainly hope it is—will certainly curtail and restrict Houthi actions for a certain amount of time, because it will obviously degrade their ability to act. But ultimately, if you want longer-term success, you need to frame it within the wider policy of what you are planning to do in Yemen or the Arabian peninsula, or other aspects of your policy. These things can deal with very specific problems in terms of the Houthis and their ability to strike ships, but at the end of the day, things may come back in a year's time or whatever if you just leave it to fester. The problem in our policy, really, is that we have left things to fester for far too long. That is the problem.

Q152 **Fabian Hamilton:** Mr Taleblu, do you agree with Professor Ansari on that?

Behnam Ben Taleblu: I would agree. There needs to be a political predicate to the use of force in the Middle East. That is something that I think applies to Israel, America and the UK—it applies to anyone using force. That force has to serve a larger political purpose. I will say that there is still utility in the joint UK-US airstrikes. I was a little puzzled myself as to why the UK took part in only two of the airstrikes—the first one and the most recent one—while the rest were believed to have been carried out by the US alone, even though this is a major maritime operation by the Houthis targeting all international shipping, so it behoves the UK to partake in more, not less.

The problem here, of course, is that we need to be better about restricting the supply interdictions under multinational authorities from anywhere—Persian Gulf, Strait of Hormuz, Gulf of Oman, Arabian Sea, Indian Ocean, Gulf of Aden, Bab el-Mandeb, Red Sea. We need to make sure all the coalitions that support blocking weapons proliferation have the funding to continue, have the interoperability between services and share intelligence about Iranian smuggling practices, whether they are on land or at sea. Again, this is a question of political will, funding and time.

The Houthis did not pose this threat overnight, and they will not cease it overnight. At best, airstrikes are akin to handicapping them. The adversary still has the will and intent to continue to fight, but these airstrikes can handicap them—particularly the most recent ones, which are targeting weapons that are literally being put on rail launchers, because it means there is good intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance as to what these folks are doing on the coastline.

Q153 **Fabian Hamilton:** If there were a sustained action against the Houthis or other Iranian proxies, is there a risk that that would provoke a more severe negative public reaction in Iran, or even, perhaps, military action against the UK and its allies in the region? Is there that danger, or would it have the adverse effect?

Professor Ansari: Personally, to echo what was said earlier, I do not think we should worry about that too much. First of all, I do not think there is the public support. The general public mood in Iran is very antithetical; the public almost dislike the regime so much that any setback the regime happens to face in the region will be celebrated. I would not worry about there being a mass uprising of people in support of the regime—they've barely been able to get supporters out in support of Palestine. I mean, this is Iran! Compare and contrast with London. They are in a very different place at the moment.

As I was saying earlier, this is really the waning of that sort of narrative and political authority over the past 10 years. They will obviously seek to try, and they will always say, "We will respond in due course," but you have to re-establish that balance of deterrence with them. You have to be able to say to them, "There are limits to what you can and cannot do, and you must not go further." Back in the Obama Administration, when they talked very loosely about closing the Straits of Hormuz, there were very strong indications to them of, "Don't go there. If you go there, there will be consequences," and they backed off. They will back off when they feel there are red lines that we stick to. When there are red lines that we don't stick to, unfortunately, that is where things get out of hand.

Behnam Ben Taleblu: May I just add a colourful footnote? Since 2009, the Iranian population has been chanting, "Na Ghaze, na Lobnan, janam fadaye Iran," or, "Not Gaza, not Lebanon, my life only for Iran," or, since 2018, "Soryeh ro Raha Kun, Fekri be Hale Ma Kun," which is, "Forsake Syria. Think about us." We have a largely nationalist population that is protesting against the adventurism of a largely Islamist regime. Those two things are like water and oil—they simply don't mix. I want to strongly echo what Dr Ansari just said: I think the population would absolutely celebrate the defeat of any elements of the axis of resistance in whichever jurisdiction it may come.

The only confounding factor for Western policy is that, in the absence of this strong enforcement of older Western red lines, this is a terror network that has a high level of resolve and a high level of interest in probing where we may not respond with the use of force. What I mean by that is, if we strike back at an interest, the Houthis will not be deterred by several one-off joint strikes by the US and the UK. They have an interest in continuing to impede maritime shipping, and they have an interest in throwing off our attempt to deter them, they have—and will continue to try to expand—capabilities to continue to say, "No, we are not deterred."

That means it is going to be about time; it is about meting out punishment over time. In terms of that will to continue a policy over time—I mean that as an American, because we have done 180s in our policies in Washington; we have not signalled a certain commitment and credibility because of our political system—we have adversaries now that are so resolute they will run the risks of absorbing strikes, because they will gamble that, not only do we not have the resolve or authority, but we do not have the time to see it through.

Q154 **Fabian Hamilton:** You have partially answered the next question I was going to pose, but I will pose it anyway because I am interested in your response. Surely these proxies simply thrive on conflict. Yes, they have to see that we are consistent in our opposition and attacks on them, but surely they actually enjoy the fact that we are trying to deter them, because conflict is what they want. Is that a fair argument?

Behnam Ben Taleblu: Partially. They also wish to survive and cement their rule. With the Houthis in Yemen, for example, we are talking about being willing to intervene in a conflict, either between Israel and the Palestinians or Israel and Lebanese Hezbollah since 2018, but they only recently received, or developed and received, the capability to act on that intent. Once Khamenei in Iran started talking about the axis of resistance coming online in response to the Israeli response to 7 October, the Houthis saw an opportunity both to cement their rule and signal their utility in this axis.

So they do thrive on conflict—absolutely—but they need a different kind of oxygen at home. If they do not have the capability, they do not have the ability to act on their intent. That is why, again, the punishment, deterrence, coercion element matters just as much as the political solution.

Q155 **Fabian Hamilton:** But shouldn't we be following the money here?

Behnam Ben Taleblu: Absolutely.

Professor Ansari: Absolutely. There are many ways to deal with this. Following the money is an important one we do not do enough of. I was going to slightly caveat or qualify this by saying that they do thrive on elements of confrontation, but conflict is something that they are a little bit more reticent about. The reason I say that is because what they thrive on is the threat of conflict. Do you see what I mean? They always work on the basis that we will turn the other cheek or back off.

We were talking about this yesterday. If you look at the recent fracas with Pakistan, it has been quite interesting. The Iranians launch a missile strike into Pakistan, and the Pakistanis launch a missile strike back. Then, apparently, the Iranians said, "No Iranians died"—I do not know how they worked that one out. They basically decided that these were not Iranians, but Baluchis, and therefore that they could now close it down. If you look at that on the face of it, it is absurd—of course it is absurd—but they are not looking for anything wider. They are quite happy to close it down.

Q156 **Chair:** I think that is a very valid point. They almost seem to be looking for everything but outright warfare. They are looking at everything they can cause until that point.

I apologise for having to step out—I am trying to arrange my daughter's hospital appointments and it is causing all sorts of hell. I am interested in al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and Daesh in Iran. I know we have had air strikes only recently, but are we seeing any signs of them trying to capitalise on what is happening in the Red Sea, and the Houthis being

obviously distracted and slightly degraded?

Behnam Ben Taleblu: Have we seen those two terror groups try to capitalise on that within Iran or—

Chair: Within the region. Essentially, they have additional opportunities, the Houthis are distracted, they have been trying to make more progress into Iran.

Behnam Ben Taleblu: I have a little bit of a conflicted view about al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, because they were largely, not exclusively, believed to be operating in eastern Yemen on the land border. The problem is that even the UN has not been able to assert that, for some of the earlier short-range ballistic missiles that entered Yemen, the most highly likely route, or one of the likeliest routes, was overland from Oman, having been sent via dhow on sea, and through AQAP-controlled territory. I have long wondered, do the Houthis have laissez-passer with AQAP, or do they know how to turn the other cheek or have a system of turning a blind eye?

The other thing was that, until the killing of the al-Qaeda official al-Masri in Iran, which we believe was alleged to have been done by the Israelis, Iran was the only country in which al-Qaeda was not either drone-struck or formally targeted. One wonders about the relationship between the Government of the Islamic Republic, the world's foremost state sponsor of terrorism, and al-Qaeda.

ISIS is an altogether different operation, because Iran struck ISIS in the east. It has been firing missiles at Syria, alleging that ISIS is there, for a while—or alleging that it is striking ISIS targets there for a while. So that might be a little bit different. But I do not know the degree to which these two groups will be able to capitalise on it externally.

Q157 **Chair:** You set out very clearly how the relationship between Iran and Russia has evolved and the changes we have seen in the last few decades. For me, that is now a strategic partnership. It is not the way it used to be historically. How can the West cause fissures in their relationship? How can we divide them? It is a bit like people talking about China and Russia being best friends—they are just not; there are so many fissures we could be exploiting. I am less accustomed to where we could be doing that with Russia and Iran—where their interests do not align and we could seek opportunity.

Behnam Ben Taleblu: The first thing I would say is a corollary to what Dr Ansari was saying about the evolving relationship. If you are an Iranian nationalist—and those are the people who have been protesting across the country since 2017—no country has taken away more territory or done more damage to the honour of Iranians than the neighbour across the Caspian Sea to the north in different forms: tsarist, the Soviet Union or the current Russian Federation. It could be Caspian Sea fishing, demilitarising rights, or the fact that the Russians treat the Caspian Sea as their own lake, or their own pond, and the Iranians just have to go along

to get along, whether that is the caviar trade or anything else. That is something to bring up.

The corollary to that is that the Islamic Republic may not mind, because it gets something in return from the Russians. You want to be able to publicise that the Government of Iran is doing this at the expense of the Iranian national interest. That might mean foreign broadcasters amplifying that the Government of the Islamic Republic is a poor guardian of the Iranian national interest—something you see in every iteration of street protests. That is something to bring up. The Iran-Russia relationship is the best example of that. Iranian officials do not get treated well by the Russians. In the leaked Zarif audio tape, he talked about how difficult it was when he was Prime Minister to even negotiate with Lavrov, even within the confines of the JCPOA. There are tons of material to draw on there.

I would add one important policy point besides messaging. Within the context of the JCPOA—I know that is the next panel—the snapback option needs to be considered. I say that not just because of the massive nuclear escalation that has gone unpunished—the E3 and the US have been unable even to issue a resolution of censure at the board of governors, which is a gross own goal. The reason snapback has to be considered is the defence of the UN Security Council. With Russia and Iran developing tighter ties, Russia is now slated to be the Islamic Republic's lawyer on the Security Council, basically blocking any diplomatic pressure path the E3 and the US can put forward via the UN. Unless you snap back and restore the previous multilateral architecture, that had tough missile, military and nuclear dimensions to it, you are about to enter the period of time where the Russians can be the Iranians' lawyer on the Council, because snapback expires in 2025. We want to walk that back.

Professor Ansari: First, I entirely agree with you: it is a strategic relationship now. To add to what was said, we also have to see these conflicts as part of a single continuum. Defeating Russia is an important aspect of our confrontation, basically, with Iran.

Q158 **Dan Carden:** Leading on from that, for people watching what is happening in the region, the word "escalation" has taken hold. To what extent are we seeing an escalation in tensions across the region, and how worried should people be?

Professor Ansari: The problem here is that the danger of accidental escalation is very real. We have to be very aware of that. My problem with some of this approach is that we are so scared of our own shadow at the moment—if we are so worried about escalation, we end up actually encouraging it. Hopefully that makes sense. My point is that we need to be a bit more forthright to be able to deter. At the moment, what we are doing, as Behnam has said very well, is effectively enabling, and not exacting a sufficient cost to, those who are escalating. The danger of an accidental escalation is very real; I think it is very real also from Iran, even though there are those in the leadership who would not want a wider conflict. As I have written about recently, one of the problems with Iran is

that there are some people in the country who would want to live up to the rhetoric, and they have very bombastic rhetoric. They are enthusiastically in support of the war against Israel, and there are some within the regime who would like to see it go further.

Behnam Ben Taleblu: I wholeheartedly agree, with a small caveat. On the point about rhetoric, you should always believe your adversaries. If we do not listen to what Putin is saying and are then surprised by his invasion of Ukraine, we are doing ourselves a disservice.

The second thing I would say is about "escalation". One reason why I believe it is not the right word is that, when you look at what the US and the UK have been doing in a very restrained manner, they are, at best, trying to achieve parity with an actor that is so willing to escalate. The US and the west are not escalating the conflict. I have seen immense restraint from this transatlantic partnership in the face of Iran bringing its acts of resistance online. They are literally developing a strategy of integrating their militias in a way that we have never seen before. They have a foreign legion across five countries that have different kinds of armaments—again, having medium-range ballistic missiles in the hands of a group is no joke. The cat's out of the bag on this one. What we are doing, at best, in these strikes is achieving parity, and I think it would behove policymakers on both sides of the Atlantic to say this is not escalation. This is barely achieving parity.

Q159 **Chair:** Thank you both ever so much. We are really grateful for your time today. I am going to suspend the session until 10.50, so that we can get our next witnesses with us online.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Baroness Ashton of Upholland, Sir Mark Lyall Grant and Mike Singh.

Q160 **Chair:** Welcome back to this hearing of the Foreign Affairs Committee, which is part of our inquiry into the Middle East and North Africa. We are doing hearings today on Iran, and this panel is specifically on Iran's nuclear ambitions. We are delighted to have a very esteemed panel with us. Starting with Sir Mark Lyall Grant, could you kindly introduce yourselves?

Sir Mark Lyall Grant: My name is Mark Lyall Grant. I am a former diplomat and ambassador to the United Nations, and I was National Security Adviser between 2015 and 2017.

Baroness Ashton: I am Cathy Ashton. I was the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy from 2009 to 2014. In that position, I led the P5+1 or E3+3 talks with Iran on their nuclear programme.

Mike Singh: I am Mike Singh, and I am also a former diplomat. I was senior director for the Middle East at the National Security Council during the George W. Bush Administration, and was responsible for Iran policy in that regard. I am currently managing director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy in Washington DC.

Q161 **Mr Jayawardena:** Perhaps I can go to Baroness Ashton first. Let me put it very simply: is there any life left in the JCPOA?

Baroness Ashton: There isn't any life left in the JCPOA in the context of a formal agreement that we can rely on and look to to guarantee that Iran is not building a nuclear weapon. Informally, there are still plenty of links that have the potential to enable us to use elements of the JCPOA to continue to try to safeguard ourselves in the context of Iran's nuclear weapons. The formal side doesn't exist really, in the sense that it is not a formal agreement under the UN Security Council, but there are still informal elements in operation.

Mr Jayawardena: Sir Mark, do you agree with that?

Sir Mark Lyall Grant: Yes, I do. It is fair to say that it is on life support, but I don't think it is in the West's interests to kill it off entirely. There are certain steps that could be taken to do that, but as long as there is the possibility of still having some diplomacy around the prevention of Iran acquiring a nuclear weapon, I think we have to keep every avenue open to achieve that.

Q162 **Mr Jayawardena:** Baroness Ashton, what do you think the United Kingdom could be doing right now to ensure that bringing folks back to the table remains an option in the future?

Baroness Ashton: In my experience, the most important thing is to do two things at once. First, we should continue to work with our colleagues in Europe and across the Atlantic and, as far as possible, with China—I recognise that it is impossible with Russia—to try to make sure the context and contacts that we have are not completely lost, so that we continue to try to develop strategies and ideas as a team.

Secondly, and linked to that, we should find ways to keep talking to Iran. I spent four and a half years—a huge amount of time—on the Iran nuclear issue and the talks. You can argue that, certainly in the President Ahmadinejad years, that was not necessarily going to go anywhere—I am sure Mike will have comments about that—but it paid off in the sense that we had a process and a way of collaborating, as well as talking with Iran, so that when we were able to move forward it was easy to slot into that. It is important to find ways to keep things alive. I agree with Mark: the JCPOA is on life support, but it is still worth having.

Q163 **Mr Jayawardena:** Perhaps I can turn to Mr Singh. Baroness Ashton gave you an in to the question, but are there other existing policies or economic mechanisms that could also prove useful?

Mike Singh: I think the JCPOA has been dead for some time, and obviously Iran has moved forward quite rapidly with its nuclear programme, which is now quite advanced. As Iran has moved forward, our policy options have narrowed considerably. It is not so much a question of whether we could bring Iran back to the table; I think that Iran is generally always willing to come to the table and negotiate—sometimes seriously, sometimes not seriously. The question is: what could we

possibly do to motivate Iran to halt its nuclear progress or, ideally, reverse it to a point where we could be comfortable that Iran could not rapidly have a nuclear weapon? At this stage, that would require the application of various forms of pressure and even then it would be quite challenging. Sanctions and the threat of military attack would absolutely need to be part of the equation, and I think those things would be quite challenging to mount at this stage of the game.

Sir Mark Lyall Grant: Could I add one point to what the other two have said? We should not forget that, for 10 years, this was an E3+3 negotiation, which meant that it involved the Russians and the Chinese. For many years, we were able to work with them because there was a common goal. Interestingly, certainly during the time that I was the lead negotiator for the UK, there was a subtle difference between the Russian attitude and the Chinese attitude. The Russian attitude was that they did not want a nuclear-armed Iran as a neighbour, and they were prepared to pay some political or economic price to prevent that from happening.

China was a slightly different situation. They took the view that a nuclear-armed Iran was not a particular strategic problem for China, and therefore they were not willing to impose the sort of sanctions that would have some consequences for China. Their mantra always was, "We're happy to sanction Iran but we're not prepared to sanction Chinese companies." Russia had a more open attitude.

Obviously, since then, and particularly in the last couple of years, Russia has moved closer to Iran because of the Ukrainian invasion. None the less, we should not lose sight of the fact that there is an overlap of interest between us and at least the Russians in preventing Iran from having nuclear weapons. We need to deploy that as best we can.

Q164 **Mr Jayawardena:** As well as thinking about diplomatic and economic efforts—Mr Singh mentioned sanctions—are there other mechanisms that we should be thinking about?

Sir Mark Lyall Grant: There are always things that you can think about. The obvious one is implementing the snapback mechanism in the JCPOA, but that is essentially—excuse the phrasing—a nuclear weapon itself. It would basically put an end to the JCPOA, so I would not recommend that at this stage. Certainly, we need to make sure that Iran does not feel as comfortable as it appears to be at the moment—gradually building up stockpiles and continuing to breach the JCPOA arrangements. We need to find ways somehow of making them less comfortable, but without completing blowing the whole thing out of the water, because we would then be left with military action. Of course, that is always an option, but it is a last resort and it has very uncertain consequences.

Q165 **Mr Jayawardena:** Baroness Ashton, given your experience in the European Union context, what role do you see the EU having with regards to future engagement with Iran on this issue? Is there the appetite or the will to take tough decisions to make progress, and ideally reach some resolution?

Baroness Ashton: Certainly in my time in office, the EU was an important ally to the United States, especially on sanctions. EU countries all stuck together and followed the lead of the E3, and they were almost unquestioning in their attitude. They absolutely trusted Britain, France and Germany working together to operate for the EU. As you know, under the UN, the High Representative—my role—was designated as the person to co-ordinate and lead the talks. There was a very strong EU connection and commitment, and it worked extremely collaboratively, especially with the US.

There is no question: economic issues have a role to play in all of this. It is very relevant to remember that when President Rouhani came into office at the end of Ahmadinejad's term, he did so on a sort of manifesto that said he would resolve the economic challenges faced by the Iranian people, and there was no way that he could do that unless he could lift sanctions. So the sanctions were very effective in that particular context.

There is still the potential for the European Union to play a role both in terms of its sanctioning ability and in, if you like, the carrot part of the equation, which is always to be remembered because it can have its uses in terms of opening up the economy. There is definitely something that can be done there. Whether there is real appetite to put it high on the agenda, I think is harder to say. It is harder to say because other priorities are clearly taking over, and we are in a different time.

Q166 **Chair:** Cathy, to push you slightly, my concern is that this is very low down on the EU agenda, even though realistically, if we look for the foremost guarantor of instability in the Middle East, it is Iran. Roads seem to lead back to Iran increasingly and, again—we have had the conversations—the lack of restraint has enabled that. Spain, for example, chose not to take part in the recent Red Sea airstrikes, but they have a frigate in the region. We are not seeing France, Germany or others stepping up—Germany is obviously coming to terms with its Zeitenwende when it comes to Ukraine alone—so surely we cannot rely on the EU to lead on this. That therefore takes us to the US, but it is in an election period. Trump has said that Iran would be a priority for him but he would be looking at—I think this is the phrase—"aggressive containment".

Baroness Ashton: There are two or three quick comments that I would make. First, I do not underestimate the disappointment in European countries when President Trump effectively pulled the plug on the JCPOA. All the efforts, all the years of work, were thrown away in that context. It was clear that, having done that, we would have to go back to square one and think again. There is no real sense that they can rely on the US to continue with it, because it is down to presidential action, not Congress, so even if President Trump elected, or President Biden re-elected, continued on a similar path, we do not know what is coming down the track. As economic issues are so important, long-term investment is critical, and companies do not invest long term if they cannot see the stability.

Secondly, it is a different set of questions in terms of military action with Iran. There are always, within the EU countries, those who are more

reluctant to engage, and there is always a bigger question mark for some countries about what happens next. We see that historically in many actions that have been taken over the years, where two or three countries are very proactive, and others say, "We don't want to do something that might make the situation worse"—in their eyes—"and might invite the problem to get bigger or the war to grow." Because action has happened relatively swiftly, I wonder if some of the diplomatic action underneath it needs to be strengthened so that you can have those conversations. Obviously, we are not there in the EU able to do that, so it does rely on the US to be able to do more of it.

Q167 **Bob Seely:** Sir Mark, you explained eloquently the overlap between our interest and the Russian interests. To what extent does the hardening of Russia's approach to the West, its intense dislike of it and the fact that it sees itself in a geopolitical struggle with the West, blind Russia to your original proposition about it not wanting a nuclear-armed Iran? Is the cost to Russia of significant Iranian drone and other support in the Ukraine war that it has to hand over some kind of ballistic or advanced technology that will help the Iranians make strides in either conventional weaponry or, potentially, nuclear weaponry?

Sir Mark Lyall Grant: There is definitely a risk that the equation in Putin's mind has changed, because of Russia's increasing reliance on Iran. I have not seen any evidence that they are promising technology transfer to Iran as part of that overall deal, but I think that it does change the equation that I mentioned earlier about Russia being willing to pay a price in order to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. But I do not think that it changes their fundamental interest that they do not want to see an Iranian nuclear power on their doorstep. I think that issue is still there.

Q168 **Bob Seely:** Is that attitude still absolutely firm, given the closer and much more intense military and geopolitical relationship that we have been talking about between the Iranians and the Russians?

Sir Mark Lyall Grant: Who can say what Putin's latest thinking is? In my view, the deep strategy of Russia has not fundamentally changed. It is easy to forget that the whole rationale behind the JCPOA process and negotiations was to prevent us from reaching the famous fork in the road, as it used to be called, where either we had to accept a nuclear-armed Iran or we bombed them to stop it happening. Both choices are obviously deeply unpalatable, which is why we went the extra mile for year after year through the negotiations to try to reach an agreement. The fork in the road may be much closer than it was—undoubtedly it is—but I do not think we have quite run out of road for some form of negotiation.

Q169 **Chair:** Mike, people often talk about Iran's assembly and deployment—well, let's focus on assembly, because I don't think anyone could talk about deployment—of nuclear weapons being an inevitability. What is your perspective?

Mike Singh: I do not think it is an inevitability. Making nuclear weapons is not a straightforward task, but Iran is certainly extremely close. We think

it could have the weapons-grade uranium for a single nuclear weapon in about seven days, and enough for six nuclear weapons in a month. We know that Iran has the delivery vehicles it would need for nuclear weapons, so the time-consuming bit, as it were, would be the weaponisation element between fabricating the fuel and marrying it to a delivery vehicle.

Going back to what Sir Mark was saying, Iran could get international assistance with these pieces and perhaps shorten that timeline. That is where we need to be concerned about the role that Russia could play. I respectfully disagree with Sir Mark—I think we have seen a sea change in Russia's approach towards non-proliferation issues in general. I do not think we can have any confidence that Russia is still committed—if it ever was, very strongly—to preventing Iran from having a nuclear weapon. There is every reason to worry that Russia could help Iran at this stage.

There is also reason to worry that, even without Russian assistance, Iran could undertake in a clandestine manner many of the weaponisation activities it would need to take. Alarmingly, Iran is building a new underground facility in the Natanz region. The IAEA has written about it in its reports. Iran has not informed the IAEA of the purpose of that facility. It is possible that Iran could conduct the necessary activities in that type of facility, and even if it takes Iran something like six months to build a small nuclear arsenal, we would have much shorter notice in terms of the intelligence warning. So it is not an inevitability, but it is quite close.

Q170 **Chair:** If Iran were to reach the capability of having a nuclear weapon, would they announce it? Is it something they would want proactively to share and therefore use as deterrence and to show that they have a greater arsenal? More importantly, how do we prevent it, if we can?

Mike Singh: My assumption is that, yes, they would want us to know. They would want to announce it, whether by doing a test or by simply saying, "Look, we have it," because a lot of the value of having nuclear weapons is other countries knowing that you have them. That is something we should expect; we should also expect that Iran would not just produce a single weapon but would want multiple weapons as insurance against a potential strike.

We are at the point where our policy options are quite narrow. The intelligence warning will be quite short, so we need to think seriously about all the options we might consider last resorts. We do not know that we are at the last resort, in that we do not know when—or whether—Iran will make the decision to cross the threshold or remain on this side of it, but now is the time to consider any last resort option.

Q171 **Chair:** Cathy and Mark, what would you be doing, if you were sat in King Charles Street trying to understand what the UK could do to prevent Iran from getting to the final stages of having a nuclear weapon?

Baroness Ashton: I would be talking to Saudi Arabia, because the rapprochement that we are beginning to see between Saudi and Iran is really important. It was partly done in Beijing, as you know, by the

Chinese. That is an important relationship on both sides. It is often misunderstood, but it has been an important relationship for both. So I would be talking to the Saudis about Iran.

I would be trying to continue some level of dialogue with Iran. I am not somebody who thinks that the obvious thing is to go to the last resort now; we have to do everything we can to end up anywhere but the last resort. I would be looking to other countries in the region that could give advice and support as to how they would want to approach this. That includes, at some level—whatever contact we still have with them—Russia. As you can imagine from all that I have done in my work on Ukraine, I am not somebody who says that easily.

The Russians certainly did not play the most significant role, but they did play a role. I slightly disagree with Mr Singh, because my experience of four and a half years with the Russians—for a week a month, for most of it—was that they were very keen for Iran not to have a nuclear weapon. They were very concerned about even giving Iran control of the facilities that Russia had built, because they were concerned about the quality of the way in which Iran might look after them—that they could become a risk. There was no suggestion to me other than that they wanted to make sure that there was not a nuclear-armed Iran.

As for the Chinese, though they took a different view—Sir Mark rightly identified it—there was a sense that having a region that could become very quickly nuclear armed, not just with Iran but beyond Iran, was something that China did not see as in its interests economically, politically or in any other way. We still have some of these underpinning issues as to where countries sit with this. I would be talking to the European Union. I would be talking to the Americans, of course. I would be talking to the region, but especially to Saudi Arabia.

Chair: Mike, I know that Royston wants to touch on something very similar, so I might let him come to you.

Q172 **Royston Smith:** Mike, is the posture of the West encouraging or discouraging Iran's proliferation activities?

Mike Singh: Unfortunately, I have to judge that our posture is encouraging Iranian proliferation activities—not actively, perhaps, but certainly passively. Iran is not really paying a price either for moving ahead with its own nuclear programme or for the activities we see in support of proxies like the Houthis, where Iran is providing quite advanced capabilities to very irresponsible actors, in the Houthis and Hezbollah. Over the past several years, we have seen that US sanctions, especially against Iran, have not been vigorously enforced. In fact, Iran's oil exports are at high points—pre-sanctions highs, even. Iran is really pulling in quite a bit of revenue through trade with the Chinese.

When it comes to the actions that the Houthis have taken against international shipping—essentially shutting down commercial shipping through the Red Sea—the Houthis have suffered some strikes as a result

of that, but Iran, as has often been the case in the past, really pays no price itself for the actions that it enables and makes possible. I do not think that we have landed on an effective non-proliferation policy with respect to Iran.

I have to add to that a piece of the earlier discussion. The E3, I must say, have been so reluctant to exercise the snapback mechanism in the JCPOA, even though the E3 are the only parties that are still committed to the JCPOA and this mechanism was built into the agreement essentially to address exactly the situation we have now: Iranian non-compliance and Iran's march forward with its nuclear programme. In fact, what we see is that the E3 are quite deterred from exercising snapback by Iranian threats.

Q173 **Royston Smith:** Are there any opportunities for the UK to use whatever leverage it does have more effectively?

Mike Singh: I think there could be, beyond whatever sanctions power the UK has, but we have to be realistic. Ultimately, what we have seen in the past is that, without US enforcement of sanctions, UK sanctions will not be able to play a big role, although things like the proscription of IRGC would be positive steps forward. The power and the leverage that the UK has perhaps comes back to the snapback mechanism in the JCPOA. If, in fact, we feel as though that is not something that Iran would want to see because of the international isolation that could follow, it behoves the UK to think about how to use that leverage to affect Iranian calculations. But I am not sure that we have seen that; in fact, we have seen the opposite. We have seen Iran affecting UK, French and German calculations in a much more effective way.

Q174 **Dan Carden:** The issue of sanctions has come up a couple of time already today. Sir Mark, why is there a sense that sanctions are going to be less effective today than they have been in the past?

Sir Mark Lyall Grant: Sanctions have been very effective in the Iranian context in order to get Iran to the negotiating table. The JCPOA would not have been negotiated had it not been for the sanctions and the threat of more sanctions, but what made those sanctions effective was that they were universal. They were agreed with the Russians and the Chinese eventually—they were watered down by them but none the less agreed by them—and they were endorsed by the UN Security Council. That has an impact. Mr Singh was saying that the sanctions are not effective without the Americans, but the reality is that they are not effective without the Russians and the Chinese. As we have seen, the diversion of Iranian trade goes, without any particular problems, to China and Russia.

I do not think the individual sanctions that the United Kingdom could produce would have any impact strategically on Iran. I agree that Iran is relatively comfortable at the moment, but what we are seeing more widely in the region—I don't know if we will come on to the region—is that Iran wants to keep the situation bubbling without passing a threshold of escalation that would lead to a wider regional conflict. I think that they are

probably in the same mindset when it comes to the nuclear breakout. They are comfortable in the situation they are in now, whereby they are developing stockpiles and enrichment, but they are still several days or weeks away from that breakout capability. I do not think they would rush into announcing that they are a nuclear power, because that would bring into play a much wider range of countries in the world than is in play at the moment. It would be directly against the UN Security Council resolutions, for instance. I do not think they feel that they need to breach that threshold any more than they are breaching the threshold by expanding Hezbollah or expanding the war, using Hamas and the Houthis.

Q175 **Bob Seely:** Effectively, you are describing a status quo that does not exist. You are saying that nothing dramatic has happened but, actually, what is happening is that Iran is developing nuclear weapons. At some point in the next year to three years, it is going to announce this to the world in some way, or it will find an opportunity to do so, or it will be pushed into a position where it decides to do it, reacting to events. The danger is that Iran is now becoming a nuclear power—a nuclear-armed state—as we talk. I am not being very articulate, but I am trying to articulate a sense of urgency, whereas you are basically saying that we are in a status quo situation. We are not; we are in a position where Iran is about to test or have the capability to have nuclear weapons. That is really significant and serious, isn't it?

Sir Mark Lyall Grant: Absolutely. I am not suggesting that we are comfortable; what I was saying was that Iran is comfortable in not taking that final step over the threshold because of the consequences that they think they will face. You are absolutely right: we are not in any sort of comfortable position. But I am also saying that we, as the United Kingdom, do not have the leverage, through sanctions, to change that dynamic.

Q176 **Bob Seely:** So once Iran decides to step over that threshold, all the preparation work has been done. It is not like it is going to take a great deal of time. It is going to be standing on one side of a line, and the following day it crosses that line and the world changes again in a very dramatic way. That, effectively, is happening now.

I have a question related to that, Sir Mark. You said that we also need the Russians and the Chinese. I am not disagreeing with that, but it is also true that the American sanctions on Iran were surprisingly successful the last time they were significantly imposed. Would you agree with that?

Sir Mark Lyall Grant: Which latest round of sanctions?

Q177 **Bob Seely:** The sanctions, when they were imposed in the past on Iran, were surprisingly effective.

Sir Mark Lyall Grant: Absolutely—at bringing them to the negotiating table.

Q178 **Bob Seely:** And that was minus—forget about Russia and forget about China there. Those were effectively US-controlled sanctions on access to international markets—all markets. That worked really well, didn't it?

Sir Mark Lyall Grant: It did work well, but it was because it was agreed by the international community and the Russian and the Chinese were part of that. I am not aware of any sanctions, since President Trump pulled out of the JCPOA, that have been effective on Iran.

Bob Seely: Okay. Thank you.

Chair: I am going to take us to the region and then I am going to come back to the UK. Please, Ranil.

Q179 **Mr Jayawardena:** We have talked a little bit in passing about some parts of the region. In terms of the negotiations in the past and all the parties involved in the past, we have discussed Russia and China. What about the Arab states themselves? What role could they play, not only in the region with one of their neighbours, who is a problem to them, but in ongoing British policy towards Iran?

Sir Mark Lyall Grant: I agree with Baroness Ashton on this, that Saudi Arabia is an important player in this respect. What is striking in the region over the last 15 to 20 years is the lack of Arab agency. The three most important countries in the region are now Israel, Turkey and Iran—none of them Arab states. The traditional Arab powers in the region, whether that is Egypt, Syria or Saudi Arabia, have all had their problems and have not played any sort of leadership role for the last 15 years; not since the Arab spring anyway. When you look at the fact that Russia and China have also become much more involved from outside, you are suddenly finding that the Arabs have got very little agency over the future of the region.

They have not helped themselves with the split they had with Qatar in the Gulf Co-operation Council. Now that that has been solved and now that Saudi Arabia is beginning to stick its head above the parapet a little bit in a leadership role, there is an opportunity maybe to bring the Arab leaders back into play. Although there is this reconciliation of sorts—a rapprochement anyway—between Saudi Arabia and Iran, Saudi Arabia would be horrified at the prospect of an Iranian nuclear bomb and, of course, would put a great deal of pressure on Pakistan to acquire the technology necessary to have one of their own in response. They can play a role, particularly now they have a channel to Iran, in helping that not to happen.

Q180 **Mr Jayawardena:** Even states such as Qatar, as you mention, have had regular problems with a near neighbour. They share those challenges even though there was the blockade in the GCC. Given that this is a shared problem and given that, as you say, Saudi could play an important role here, how could Britain do more to encourage that? How could Britain do more to make sure that our policy and theirs are more aligned, given that the risks are in some part the same?

Sir Mark Lyall Grant: We have the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary—I think the Foreign Secretary may be going again to the region—absolutely not just going to Israel or the West Bank, but going to the region to try and deploy the influence we have. We have quite a lot of influence with the Gulf states and with some of the other regional players

to try to encourage them to respond to the many crises that are happening across the region. If you look at Saudi Arabia, although they are the architects of a recent truce with the Houthis, it is striking that they are not publicly condemning British and American strikes against the Houthis because they know it is not in their interests for the Houthis to be blocking shipping in the Red Sea.

It is not in China's interest for that to happen, either. I think there is a role for China to rein in the Houthis in that respect. So there are things that Britain can do because we do have influence in the region. There has been a sort of tilt towards the Gulf region in particular in recent security and defence reviews. We can now mobilise some of the credit and influence that we have to help manage the Iranian problem.

Q181 **Mr Jayawardena:** On that final point, you said "mobilise". Is there something that we need to do, through the Royal Navy or otherwise, to provide our friends in the region with greater certainty that they can play a more active role? Are there those sorts of—I don't want to use the word "incentives"; it is not an incentive—guarantees that we need to supply? Is that what you think would move the dial here, or is it something else?

Sir Mark Lyall Grant: I am talking more of diplomatic engagement rather than security guarantees. We do have strong security bilateral relationships with many of the countries in the region, but I would not want to overhype those because, compared with the American interest in the region, it is relatively small. None the less, as I say, we have some influence in places where the Americans do not always have as much influence, and I think we can deploy that.

Q182 **Chair:** Cathy, is there anything you want to add?

Baroness Ashton: I just have a couple of points on things that have been said. The first is on the sanctions question. There was an underpinning of UN Security Council sanctions that included China and Russia, and then there was an overlay of United States sanctions, joined by the EU. The role of Russia and China in that was that although they did not agree with the overlay, they did not do anything to undermine it. They just complained about it a lot. That meant that we had a really strong sanctions package at that point, which led us to be able to move forward towards the JCPOA.

On the region, we should not forget Turkey. I am very glad Sir Mark mentioned Turkey, because when we began the negotiations proper with Iran, certainly in my time, Turkey was a really important player in that. They had a strong relationship with Iran. They certainly did not want to see a nuclear-armed Iran, either.

Finally, to reinforce what Sir Mark has said, Iran knows in a sense that there are things it can do to make us all well aware of its capability to get to creating the circumstances where it could build a bomb. It has to still build it, remember. It has been playing a game for some years now of ratcheting up very carefully so that it does not do something that will trigger the military response, which in the end would be the way that we would respond to it. So I think what Sir Mark is alluding to is that we are

still in that area—it is grey and we are not sure—where we are beginning to think that maybe Iran is going to ratchet up and stop. The reason it might stop is not so much to do with us, but to do with what is going on in the region and what is happening there.

My final point, if I may, is that one reason we cannot deal with Iran on some of these questions of the Houthis and Hezbollah and its support for Hamas is that the whole point of the JCPOA was to get rid of that boulder from the doorway that would enable us to focus and concentrate on trying to stop Iran's role in the region. Instead, we are back talking about its capacity to get a nuclear weapon again, and that is one of the great tragedies of what happened on the JCPOA.

Q183 **Chair:** Mike, a very short question from me, because I feel that we cannot miss it, and then Royston wants to come back to you, Sir Mark. Mike, on Iran and Pakistan in the last few weeks, can you unpack for us very briefly what happened there and what we need to learn from it?

Mike Singh: Sure. I stress that I think this is quite separate from the rest of the turmoil that we have seen in the Middle East, except maybe in so far as Iran was sort of feeling a need to demonstrate its will or the fact that it is not deterred from striking out when it is targeted. Of course, Iran was responding to a terrorist attack that had taken place inside Iran, which targeted a commemoration ceremony for Qasem Soleimani. I think, though, that Iran overstretched in striking Pakistan. It seemed as though Pakistan was determined to send a message to Iran that it could not strike, even against militants in Pakistani territory, without a Pakistani response to the violation of Pakistan's sovereignty. It ultimately gets to the long-running issue of this quite lawless border region on both sides of the Iran-Pakistan border—the Balochistan region of both countries. That is a topic on which Iran and Pakistan have co-operated at times in the past and at other times have been at odds over, although rarely trading blows, as we have seen recently. I think there was some signalling by both sides; I do not anticipate that it will go any further, really, and both sides have signalled their desire to de-escalate, because neither side really has an interest in pursuing conflict with one another. This is not a conflict between the two Governments as much as it is signalling on both sides about determination, will and sovereignty.

In response to one of the previous questions, I was asked whether an Iranian nuclear weapon is an inevitability; I think some of what we are seeing from the region is treating an Iranian nuclear weapon as an inevitability. The policies of Saudi Arabia, the UAE and so forth are based in a sense on the view that Iran will get its weapon and is an incipient nuclear weapon state, and that the Arab states now need to adjust their policy accordingly. That leads them towards both rapprochement with Iran and trying to strengthen their own security arrangements, both internally in the region and—for example, in Saudi Arabia's case, and a little concerningly from our view—in perhaps pursuing their own nuclear weapons capability in the future.

Q184 **Royston Smith:** In the last panel, we heard about the amount of

weaponry that the Houthis have. Of course, the Saudis spent years trying to deal with that threat. The US and UK are now engaged in active strikes on the Houthis. Is that likely to be in the UK's regional interests in the long term?

Sir Mark Lyall Grant: Certainly. I think it is—I think it has been the right response. Arguably the actions by the Houthis to interdict commercial shipping through the Gulf has a greater direct impact on the UK than the Israel-Gaza conflict. It affects us economically in a very direct way, and it threatens the international world order and freedom of navigation in a very direct way. It is therefore right to respond robustly to defend both our own ships and international shipping more generally. I do not think that that risks a wider escalation. I do not think that it will stop the Houthis carrying out further attacks, because they are quite resilient and have quite a lot of military capability. However, that military capability is certainly being degraded by these strikes, and I do not think that Iran will want the Houthis to escalate beyond what they are doing at the moment. That does not mean that Iran is not happy with what is happening or that they will tell them to stop, which would be the ideal, or that it will stop supporting them, but I do not think that Iran is showing any signs of wanting this to escalate further.

Q185 **Royston Smith:** Do you think that, as a result of our actions, UK citizens are at any more risk either at home or abroad?

Sir Mark Lyall Grant: Arguably in the region, but I do not think in the UK. The Houthis are not active, as it were, in the UK, in the same way that you could argue the IRGC and the Iranians and people are, so I do not think that there is a significant additional risk to UK nationals. There is obviously the regional dynamic, and that is something that we will have to watch, because there are accusations of double-speak, and no doubt we will hear some of that from some of the G20 partners. However, as long as we have a measured and proportionate response and put it very clearly in terms of defending international shipping, which is in the interests of everyone, including Russia and China, there is no reason why that should be damaging. As I mentioned before, it is striking that Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries have not publicly criticised those actions. Also, the fact that the Houthis have no friends in the region was demonstrated at the United Nations, where even Russia and China were prepared to allow resolution 2722, which actively condemned in the strongest terms possible what the Houthis were doing. They do not have many international friends.

Q186 **Fabian Hamilton:** This question is really addressed to Mr Singh but I would like to know what the other witnesses think. We have heard a lot about Iran being an incipient nuclear armed state. Doesn't this have profound implications for the non-proliferation treaty? Bob just had an exchange about this: if Iran imminently becomes a nuclear armed state, which should alarm everybody, will that not destroy the whole basis of the non-proliferation treaty, because, as Sir Mark said earlier, many of the neighbouring Arab states may well then want to develop their own weapons, especially Saudi Arabia, off the back of Pakistan? What is your

view on that?

Mike Singh: In a word, yes. I would say that the global non-proliferation regime is in tatters and not just because of this issue—but certainly this issue is a strong contributor to that state of affairs, because Iran would be following North Korea as a new state acquiring nuclear weapons, presumably without significant safeguards. We have seen a reduction in Iranian co-operation with the IAEA as it has gotten closer to nuclear weapons status.

We have seen Saudi Arabia express an interest in nuclear weapons if Iran gets them, and that would again raise questions about a sort of cascade of nuclear proliferation if Iran were to cross a threshold, or even, frankly, if it simply remains at the threshold that it's at, because, as I said, other states will have to treat it, in a sense, as a de facto nuclear weapon state.

When you add that to the collapse of basically every arms control treaty that existed between the United States and Russia, we are in a very difficult position when it comes to the global non-proliferation regime. We need to think more seriously not only about how we prevent states like Iran from crossing that threshold but about what our policy will be towards allies who then want nuclear weapons of their own. That is something that we have waffled about in the United States between Administrations.

There is another question: is arms control between the nuclear armed states themselves going to be possible going forward? I realise that is a bit beyond the remit of the Committee, but these are reinforcing issues.

Sir Mark Lyall Grant: Arguably—well, not arguably; it is a fact that the non-proliferation treaty is already greatly weakened. I mean, Israel has nuclear weapons; they are not party to the NPT. India and Pakistan have nuclear weapons; they are not party to the NPT. And no doubt Iran would pull out of the NPT if it declared its nuclear power—

Q187 **Fabian Hamilton:** I am sorry to interrupt you, but the difference is that Israel, Pakistan and India were never part of the NPT, whereas Iran has been a signatory for many years—

Sir Mark Lyall Grant: I am not in any way downplaying the significance of the NPT. What I am saying is that the NPT is not a watertight treaty already. There were originally five nuclear powers; there are now eight—and of course you've got nine, because you've got North Korea as well.

In that sense, it is already a heavily damaged treaty, but none the less of course this would give further damage to it, not because of the treaty's structure but because of the impact on Saudi Arabia. Iran might say, "We're doing this in response to Israel", in the same way that India and Pakistan said it was because of each other, but of course Saudi Arabia would see it as a potential threat to themselves.

Baroness Ashton: I think the NPT is, in some senses, bigger than even Iran. Iran is a signatory. It was on the basis of the NPT that the UN imposed the original sanctions. It was also on the basis of the NPT that we

were able to do all the negotiations, and I spent far too many hours debating elements of the NPT with the Iranians, including their capacity to have any kind of programme, because of what the NPT says about co-operation between signatories and the ability to have the civil programme, and so on.

The NPT provides a framework for negotiations and I would be very reluctant to say that because Iran has behaved as it has, the whole thing is over and dead. I think that you always have to keep the instruments that work in part, and try to add to and build on them. Without question, other signatories may well have not taken actions that they could have taken because they were part of the NPT.

In the context of Iran, it's a terrible thing to happen if this goes forward. In other ways, we should be looking at keeping the treaty and reinforcing it, not ripping it up.

Q188 **Chair:** I need to wrap this session up in the next six minutes. Sir Mark, we have spent a lot of time talking about Iran and that region but, as you are the former National Security Adviser, we obviously cannot let you go without asking you for your advice on what we should do at home to make sure that we are safe. MI5 made that extraordinary decision to be very clear about what Iran has been doing on our shores, and there was a documentary last night that showed IRGC generals Zooming with national student groups across the UK. What more would you urge the Government to do? What reviews would you call for to make sure that we are protecting ourselves against an Iran that is increasingly willing to export its terrorism to UK shores?

Sir Mark Lyall Grant: This is an area where sanctions certainly can play a role. The Government has sanctioned individuals from the IRGC and has sanctioned the IRGC as a whole, and they can continue to do that. Of course, the theoretical next step would be to proscribe the IRGC, as a whole, as a terrorist organisation. One would have to think very carefully before doing that, because you would essentially be proscribing an organ of the state, and that would immediately break all diplomatic relations between the UK and Iran. If there is a way of sanctioning more individuals without pushing it to that final step, then I think that should be done.

The IRGC are not by any means the most active at threatening our interests in this country; there are a number of bodies, and I think that it is right that the intelligence agencies offer advice on a regular basis to provide an update on where the threats are coming from. We have just moved on Hizb ut-Tahrir—many years too late, in my view. There are other countries that are spreading hatred and extremism in this country, and of course they need to be looked at and monitored. Any Iranian organisations fall into that category, but the difference between the IRGC and those other groups is that they are organs of the state, and therefore one has to be careful when doing that.

Q189 **Chair:** Forgive me: the US did proscribe the IRGC—some might say that that was very much led from the President's office—and they still

managed to exercise influence. They are still important. They may not have an embassy on the ground any more—

Sir Mark Lyall Grant: They do not have diplomatic relations with Iran. There is no embassy on the ground, and there hasn't been for 30 years or more.

Q190 **Chair:** They are still the player that we are talking about most when it comes to what happens with Iran, although I recognise that, as diplomats, you always want to have an embassy and people on the ground.

The same conversation has been had in the past about Afghanistan. Iran is a terrorist state. If we look at what we want to do to stabilise the Middle East, all roads come back to Iran in some way, shape or form—although there is a lot of work that we need to do more broadly on things like two-state solutions.

Is the reality not that Iran is a terrorist state, and the IRGC is a terrorist organisation, and that we shouldn't allow them to be protected, in the same way that we wouldn't allow organised crime groups that are co-opted by Government to be protected just because they were co-opted? I mean, you could look at Serbia, where some organised crime groups are serving the state—they are elements and organs of the state—but that wouldn't stop us from sanctioning them.

The Americans are still important. Surely we need to get over our obsession with having an embassy on the ground, when it is not necessarily delivering meaningful outcomes.

Sir Mark Lyall Grant: I 100% accept that that is a legitimate policy discussion to have, but you need to weigh up the cons as well as the pros. One of the questions is how effective sanctioning the IRGC would be. Would that achieve something additional to sanctioning individual members of the IRGC, banning them from what they are doing in the UK? Would it add to that? Would it make much difference? You then need to put that against the downsides, which would completely disrupt your relations. It is not just about the embassy on the ground, although that is important in protecting British nationals, dual nationals and consular activities—you cannot do all that sort of stuff directly if you do not have an embassy on the ground—but also about the whole panoply of the relationship between the two countries.

Yes, that is a legitimate discussion to have. As of today, I am not sure that I would advise taking that step.

Q191 **Chair:** Cathy, I will give you the last word. It feels that you have something unspoken to say, so please do that. I will then wrap the session up.

Baroness Ashton: We should not underestimate the threat. We should not underestimate that this will potentially get worse. We should not fail to have thought-through worst-case scenarios as well as best-case scenarios.

In the midst of all that, however, it is really important that we still have opportunities to talk not to the Iranian regime, but to people who live and work in Iran. One of the reasons I am always in favour of having something on the ground is not necessarily about talking to the state—because they don't much want to talk to you. In my experience, there are opportunities to talk to the people who live there to make those connections. It is for the people that you want to do things, as well.

So let us be clear-eyed, realistic and as tough as we need to be. But let us also use what we have—the soft power bits—to good effect.

Chair: Wise words. With that, I thank you all so much, particularly given how difficult it has been for some of you to be with us. We are very grateful. Our inquiry will continue next week, looking at Libya and Yemen. Thank you all ever so much.