HOUSE OF COMMONS

Foreign Affairs Committee

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

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Alicia Kearns (Chair); Fabian Hamilton; Brendan O'Hara; Andrew Rosindell; Bob Seely; Henry Smith; Royston Smith; Graham Stringer.

Questions 126 - 200

Witnesses

I: Sir Alex Younger KCMG, former Chief, Secret Intelligence Service (MI6).

II: Professor Ali Ansari, Professor of Iranian History, and Director, Institute for Iranian Studies, University of St Andrews.

Examination of witness

Witness: Sir Alex Younger.

Q126 **Chair:** Welcome to this hearing of the Foreign Affairs Committee as part of our counter-terrorism inquiry. We are delighted today to have Sir Alex Younger with us for an hour. Sir Alex, could you kindly introduce yourself?

Sir Alex Younger: I am Alex Younger, and I was chief of SIS, during which time I was director for counter-terrorism for a reasonably significant period.

Q127 **Chair:** Thank you ever so much. To kick us off, it would be really helpful if you could give us the benefit of your overview of how the threats to our country have evolved since 9/11 to where we are today.

Sir Alex Younger: Thank you for inviting me. I will just say at the outset that I am here as a private citizen.

Q128 **Chair:** Although with parliamentary privilege, which we always encourage people to make the most of.

Sir Alex Younger: What does that mean?

Q129 **Chair:** It means that you cannot be sued for anything that you say here.

Sir Alex Younger: That is excellent news. Can I take it with me? Clearly, I cannot go close to anything privileged.

Chair: We will not ask you to.

Sir Alex Younger: Then there is just something in my head about the ISC recognising the role that it also has to play in all of this, and I do not want to unwittingly cut across boundaries.

Q130 **Chair:** You can have no concerns about that.

Sir Alex Younger: Specifically, when I was in office dealing with the ISC, the boundary was very much around historic issues and not current operational issues, so I need to make sure that I respect that without building up complexity.

As for the threat, that is a very large question. Perhaps I will start by talking about the groups, if you do not mind, and then go backwards. At the moment, we are benefiting from a lot of the action that took place to disrupt Daesh from 2016. While the threat environment is currently deteriorating again, it is still significantly lower than it was at what I regard, at least until now, to have been the high point, which was around 2016. For reasons that I will perhaps go into later, I think those gains have reached their maximum now and the situation is intensifying.

Over time, what I saw was the advent of highly organised transnational terrorism, which crashed on to all of our stages in 2001 but had been

cooking for some time before. The early part of the threat for us was about the external threat generated by terrorist organisations overseas. During my career, it developed in two important ways. First, it became evident that that domestic threat was significantly modified and sometimes intensified by domestic conditions. It was about the interplay between the external threat and internal aspects of the same thing. That has continued to the point that it is now in a much more disaggregated and localised form. It is no less dangerous for that, but very different to what we were dealing with in 2001.

The other is the way in which technology has altered all of this—made it more pervasive, reduced boundaries and enriched all our lives, but also increased the way in which we can be threatened. Relative to what we began with, it is quite a centralised, directed threat from, essentially, a failed space to now being much more disaggregated and technologically enabled. In terms of intensity, it is not as bad as it has been in recent times, but is currently probably beginning to get worse again.

Q131 **Chair:** That is really helpful. In terms of the way in which we have approached counter-terrorism as a country, have we done enough to focus on the causes that drive and enable, or have we spent a lot more time focusing on the combating and defeating?

Sir Alex Younger: That is a really important point. You will be familiar with the concept of the four Ps, the CONTEST strategy and all of that. It is good that we take a holistic approach to terrorism. I come from the "pursue" end of that spectrum, but I want to be super clear that, ultimately, that is not the solution to this problem. There is not a military solution to terrorism. The "pursue" constituency, of which I was a part, has a role in suppressing the effects of this and buying time but, fundamentally, it is about addressing the deeper causes of what is going on here.

Clearly, I have been part of it for a long time. It is incredibly important for us to have a response in the way the public would expect in order to be able to deal with the stuff at the "pursue" end. The reason why I like the CONTEST strategy is that it attempts to look at this problem much more holistically.

Q132 **Chair:** Just to pick you up on your point, you said that the situation is deteriorating particularly at the moment. Why in particular is that?

Sir Alex Younger: That is really about Daesh/ISIS. It is a lesson to us all. Al-Qaeda started to look like it was on the back foot. In the ashes of that came a new threat reconstituted in the shape of ISIS, which was frightening, because it had evolved to meet some of the problems that previous terrorist groups had faced. In a sense, it was a modernised version of what we had been dealing with.

Its creation of a caliphate in Syria was uniquely dangerous because it was a big propaganda victory and also allowed it to pull in people from all

over the world, who then subsequently went out and constituted the connectivity that it was very adept at using for malign purposes.

It was effective for a number of reasons, but one of them was that, as an inadvertent consequence of western policy, detention camps in Iraq held both seasoned al-Qaeda in Iraq terrorists and members of the Ba'ath party who were trained security and counterintelligence professionals. Often trained by the Soviet Union, or Russia later, they brought real deep state expertise on security issues. The situations in the camps served to cement those relationships and deepen degrees of radicalisation, and produced ISIS, to which, initially, we did not have a good answer.

As I say, that threat was ultimately met through the coalition action in Syria. The caliphate was removed, and not before time. It was a brutal and appalling organisation, and a terrifying prospect. The issue is to look at Syria now and recognise that that story is not finished. Particularly in the camps, where a large number of the people who were active in these terrorist organisations are interned, you run the risk of history repeating itself and these detention camps being incubators of radicalisation. Given that the Kurds struggle, because their resources are limited, to keep these places under control, I am not at all sanguine about the threats posed down the line of those camps and their frankly unsustainable conditions.

Then, of course, Daesh itself has been dispersed out of Syria. That is a good thing. The non-existence of the caliphate, I should make clear, is an absolute net win for all of us, but we should recognise that that dispersal carries with it risks. We see significant influence building in the Sahel, for instance. That does not yet amount to a threat to the UK homeland, but it is very much a threat to our interests overseas and to the stability of those countries in which we are all interested.

In ISIS-Khorasan Province, or ISKP, we have seen a specifically virulent reconstitution manifest in, among other things, the Moscow attack. It has been able to exploit territory, particularly in Tajikistan, to organise in a way that allows it to project external attacks, which is something closer to the terrorist threat that we faced in the past and something that should worry us all.

Q133 **Chair:** Royston wants to take you later to Iraq and north-east Syria, but you are saying that, as you look forward, the four areas where you see the greatest risk are those camps, Daesh being dispersed, the Sahel, and ISIS-Khorasan.

Sir Alex Younger: Yes. I would not want to dismiss al-Qaeda as an issue. Its senior leadership retains some space for manoeuvre in Iran. That is a matter of public record in the UN report, and that has to be a concern. Maybe we could talk in more detail about the situation in Afghanistan, where, frankly, it is mixed.

There clearly is a bit of licence there. Al-Zawahiri's presence in Kabul illustrates that that is true. Equally, the Taliban understand the lessons of history, which are that, if they allow Afghanistan to become a launch pad again, maybe they will have a big problem. A policy issue for us is to work out how to maximalise that concern in their heads.

Q134 **Henry Smith:** Broadly speaking, what would you say have been the successes and the failures of multilateral counter-terrorism efforts? What lessons can we learn from those in terms of addressing counter-terrorism in the future?

Sir Alex Younger: The most important principle is the most important lesson. Terrorism is not, ultimately, about the action, appalling and horrifying though that is. We saw it in 9/11. We saw it in 7/7. We saw it on 7 October. It is about the reaction. The point of terrorism is to make us more like terrorists. That is what is going on here. That is the point.

To the extent that we have resisted that, I count our campaign as a success. Of course, the proximate mission of the "pursue" community is to stop bombs going off, and that really matters, but the strategic objective is to do that in a way that preserves the distinction between us and our terrorist adversaries. That has broadly happened.

By the way, you may disagree with me, and I would love a conversation about it. This is a quintessentially political issue, but we have, fundamentally, kept our shape as societies in the face of a very deliberate provocation. To have done that in the context of international partnership, to your question, is particularly important.

Second only to the ability to hold on to our values in the fight against terrorists is our ability to constitute partnerships. It is a networked threat. What we learned very early on in the run-up to 9/11 is that a beggar-your-neighbour approach to terrorism does not help anybody. It has to be done by like-minded countries—and, in fact, less like-minded countries—together in a way that prosecutes our objectives and sustains the distinction between us and the terrorist, but also recognises the enormous diversity of political conditions that exist.

There have been mistakes and difficulties. It is really tough, and I have worked very much at that interface, but it has, by and large, been successful. As I say, a good example of that would be in Syria.

Q135 **Henry Smith:** In terms of that multilateral networking to counter terrorism, how can this country best leverage its influence to make a positive difference?

Sir Alex Younger: We have a lot to bring to that conversation, not entirely for positive reasons. We have a very long experience of terrorism. As a child, I was brought up with that threat. We all were. We learned some lessons then about it and its intrinsically political nature, about the need to address it within a law-bound and, essentially, civilian

infrastructure, and about the need not to become more like our opponents.

Crucially, we learned some very hard lessons about teamwork and partnership, and developed very little tolerance for bureaucratic infighting in the face of a threat like this. I dare say we also built some capabilities. Even at the beginning, that meant that we were in a position to be helpful in communities. As an outward-facing, highly connected, open economy, and an increasingly diverse society, we had massive skin in the game from the beginning. To be clear, we have plenty to learn from our partners, but we have been able to play a positive role in all of that, and that continues to be true.

Q136 **Henry Smith:** If I could move on to what some of the drivers of terrorist activity may be, you talked about the prison camps in Syria. Is it more a consequence of specific events and locations such as Gaza or Afghanistan, or more broadly a difficult political or economic situation in a given territory or area? Is it, as I suspect it may be, a combination of both?

Sir Alex Younger: That is a very important question that gets to the heart of the danger of generalising about the process of radicalisation and how this threat is generated. You cannot pretend that the international environment, our foreign policy or the way in which the west is perceived are not significant drivers of all of this. Of course they are. Daesh in particular is extremely adept at propagating the single narrative of Muslim victimisation, which it does in increasingly creative ways.

There is plenty going on in the world that can be used to reinforce that message. These things really matter, and we all need to be very thoughtful about them. My experience is that the process of radicalisation is far more complicated than that. Indeed, I should put up my hand and say that I am not an expert on that process, and you may want to talk to other people, but I would identify two other significant components beyond the general situation.

The key one of those is the role that individuals, particularly charismatic individuals, play. When I have looked at different parts of the world and the threat that is coming out of them, it has seemed odd that terrorist organisations that are apparently very entrenched in a particular part of the world are not generating the same level of threat as others that are in an apparently weaker position.

It always comes down to individuals, their capacity to influence, the networks that they have and, specifically, the downstream connectivity that they enjoy. The role of individuals in intensifying, focusing and exacerbating this is absolutely key. When you look at decisions taken by people who are being radicalised or are in danger of radicalisation, the role of individuals is really important.

The other key issue is, essentially, the domestic conditions and the environment where these messages are landing. It is about your experience specifically relating to identity, as much as economics: who you think you are and what it is like to live in a community where you have perhaps recently arrived in the UK or are a second-generation member of it. These are identity issues that all of us are prey to but are often intensified by particular circumstances.

That all comes together when you look at why people make these decisions and the threat of that ending in violent radicalisation. Apologies for a rather long answer, but what I am trying to steer us away from is a generalised idea that it is all about X or Y.

Q137 **Henry Smith:** In terms of where this country, along with our partners, should be deploying our assets and resources, is that in geographical locations around the world or more in areas such as countering misinformation, disinformation and cybersecurity?

Sir Alex Younger: The CONTEST strategy sets out to be holistic and needs to be so, and so you are going to fail if you attempt to segment this. You can prioritise within that, but to neglect any one of the strands puts us in a weak position. I am talking particularly about the radicalisation aspects, because I return to what I said earlier, which is that the "pursue" community is about giving space and time. It does not represent a fundamental solution. Terrorism is so pernicious, and is such a threat to our social fabric and our political contract, that it is really important to get in front of these attacks. That is what the public expects, and so that has to be a significant priority.

There you face a bit of a challenge, which is that the obvious thing to do, given that we are being paid by the British taxpayer, is to prioritise according to the threat to the UK. That makes obvious sense. We are not a large country. We do not have unlimited resources. Then you get to this teamwork issue, and we also need to be prepared to play a more active role in underpinning the common effort. I entirely acknowledge that it is a very hard balance to strike.

Q138 **Bob Seely:** While I do not think that this is being covered in this session, because we are talking about proxies with Dr Ali Ansari next, you are talking about terrorism purely in terms of non-state actors. Twenty years ago, from the mid-90s through to maybe the early teens of this century—or, in fact, later than that, because of ISIS—the effort on terrorism was purely focused on non-state actors. To what extent now is it still only non-state actors? To what extent are you now seeing, in the behaviour of Russia using organised crime, or that of Iran, which we are going to come on to, a link between terrorism and the state, whether it is using non-state actors, just doing it itself or working through organised crime groups? To what extent does this complicate the picture?

Sir Alex Younger: Your question illustrates that it is dangerous to draw really rigid boundaries. First of all, we are in the time of the hybrid. We

are being attacked across the spectrum of boundaries. Our distinctions between peace and war, or domestic and international—a lot of these things are, by the way, what we write our law along—are being undermined by opponents who very happily move across these issues.

In the case of Russia, the Gerasimov doctrine and all of that, you have a facility to manoeuvre against key national security priorities regardless of where you are on the spectrum of conflict, peace or war, and using any capability that will advance those interests. In there, to put it politely, you have subversion, which can quickly become political violence of the type that we are talking about.

You have to look at this in some ways as part of the hybrid. Do you see states actively galvanising terrorist groups to carry out their bidding? In the case of rogue states, that does happen. Where do you draw the line? That is the whole point. It is really difficult to do.

My instinct would be to come at this from a capability perspective. There are activities that are quite distinctive in this space and that are recognisable, whether they are done by a state or non-state actor. They are, generally speaking, susceptible to the same forms of countering. That means that it is appropriate for people dealing with counter-terrorism to also look at state-backed stuff.

Where that runs out is that, if there is a state behind it, you are dealing with something ultimately very different. It seems to me that all of the instruments of statecraft are assembled in a different way. I imagine that that would lead to a conversation, for instance, about Iran and the IRGC in the UK, and whether they should be proscribed, etc. All of these do take on a different character if you have the state behind them.

Q139 **Bob Seely:** Do you think that they should be proscribed?

Sir Alex Younger: It is a live issue. I can see the arguments on both sides. My personal view is that, if you have a terrorist organisation that is virtually synonymous with the state, you have to, ultimately, somehow deal with that state. That needs to be a guiding principle that you use, even if your aim has to be to cut down the influence of these actors as assertively as you can.

Q140 **Fabian Hamilton:** How seriously should the UK take the threat of terror groups developing advanced technology to carry out attacks, for example autonomous weapons systems and delivery vehicles guided by artificial intelligence? Is this a serious threat?

Sir Alex Younger: Yes, of course. We should not be sanguine about this. When you look at the advent of artificial intelligence, although I do not want to go into any particular detail, it seems to me that that is lowering the barriers to entry for all sorts of potentially malign techniques, even if, at the same time, it is enhancing all sorts of positive things. That is going on, so you should not be sanguine about it.

Ever since 9/11, terrorist groups have been obsessed by something that begins to match the strategic scale of that attack, which was profoundly paradigm changing and shocking. It just went beyond anything that anyone had seen before. They are desperate to achieve that, which means that they have always been quite interested in what we would call weapons of mass destruction of one type or another.

Thank goodness, though, that that has so far proved as difficult for them to do as any other non-state actor. At the end of it, I would say that, by and large, the people who are trying to do this are the same as the people who are trying to do all the other aspects of terrorism, so the strategy remains the same.

Q141 **Fabian Hamilton:** Thank you for that answer, but how do you assess the capability today of terror groups carrying out attacks using chemical or biological weapons?

Sir Alex Younger: I do not know about today. I do not have access to current intelligence. My view of this was that these are what you would describe as low-probability, high-impact events. Clearly, it is difficult for them to do, but, if they succeed, it is a disaster. We probably need to focus on this very hard, even if I suspect the instances are pretty rare.

Q142 **Fabian Hamilton:** In that case, that begs the question: how do we defend ourselves against them?

Sir Alex Younger: We defend in the way that we defend ourselves already, which is by investigating terrorist networks and seeking to disrupt them.

Q143 **Fabian Hamilton:** Is there any defence against the increasing use of technology and artificial intelligence?

Sir Alex Younger: That is a broader question about the way in which technology and its uses are proliferating. For instance, there are a lot of ways in which some cyber tools have proliferated, including those sold on by commercial companies in a way that we should all regret. You are right that we should be very thoughtful as we look at the ways in which we are regulating these technologies to ensure that we have examined the risks of that, while being mindful of the extent to which it is extremely hard to control the spread of ideas and technology.

Q144 **Fabian Hamilton:** I was just going to ask whether, once those ideas and technologies are out there, there is any state or organisation that can possibly control them.

Sir Alex Younger: Certainly a safer way to deal with this is to look at people who are terrorists and what they are doing.

Q145 **Chair:** In terms of terrorist groups, we are seeing these capabilities and expertise. Are we seeing more terrorist groups buying them in from organised groups rather than bringing them in house themselves?

Sir Alex Younger: I do not know the answer to that. To be honest, they seem, to my mind, to have struggled to generate this sort of expertise. I go back to individuals. It is all about accidents. If it so happens that an individual who has this expertise is radicalised, we have a problem. That is how it is.

Chair: It is easy to find them in the modern day.

Q146 **Graham Stringer:** How might our foreign policy impact on the threat of terrorism to us? Possibly more importantly, how do you go about assessing both the threat and, previously, the potential threat?

Sir Alex Younger: There are two sides to this. There is the extent to which things that we do are seen as heightening the radicalisation risk. It goes back to my previous answer that it is quite complicated to track cause and event in this space. I do not know how you would go about designing a foreign policy with a priority to avoid radicalisation. I just think that that is a highly generalised objective.

To my mind, the bit where foreign policy really has traction is on the teamwork side. It is how you create a constellation of state effort that is what is necessary to deal with a networked threat, where laws, norms and cultures are very different in different countries, and where we, as I said at the beginning, must preserve the distinction between us and terrorists. Our values must drive everything that we do. We need to find a way of co-operating in other countries that does not forfeit that, but does create effective teamwork. That is very much a diplomatic task.

Q147 **Graham Stringer:** There has been time to assess some action from your time in SIS, the invasion of Iraq for instance. It certainly seems to me that that led to the creation of ISIS and the caliphate. Was that avoidable? If you had to draw up a balance sheet, that was a very big negative. You may not be able to answer this, but, more recently, is what is happening in Gaza at the moment increasing the threat of terrorism? I know that you are not in position at the moment, but you may have a view.

Sir Alex Younger: On Iraq, what you say is true. It is ironic, because part of the premise was based on the idea that Saddam Hussein represented an ally to terrorists while the opposite was true. AQI and then Daesh would not exist had it not been for that war. On Gaza, I do not know. I am not privileged to the data. It is clearly a highly emotive issue that strikes at the core of the things that many people care about. As to what is happening on the ground, I am afraid that I just do not know.

Q148 **Graham Stringer:** I did not write down the quote, but I think you said that there is, effectively, no military solution to terrorism. Can you expand on that? If there are actors out there—and there are—who want to set up a caliphate and have deep religious views and conviction, if you do not defeat them militarily, you are most unlikely to defeat them ideologically, are you not?

Sir Alex Younger: It is a very good point. As I say those things, I am bound also to recognise that it was a military operation in Syria that got rid of the caliphate, which was a huge accelerator of the threat that we face. The way that I would seek to square that circle is to say that the military defeat of the caliphate was a necessary but not sufficient condition for the holistic defeat of the threat, as the rest of my answer illustrated. Terrorism is ultimately not about the action but about the reaction.

I do not think that this was the case in Syria, but, if the military action itself is of such a nature that it profoundly deepens the problem and creates more people willing to take arms than existed before, you have not succeeded. I do not believe that that was the case in Syria, but there is something about the conduct of campaigns, ensuring that they are consonant with our values and the difference between us and our opponents that remains important.

It is also important to remember that many terrorist organisations have, essentially, political objectives, although not all. Arguably, Daesh does not, in fact, but many do. A lot of this is about the politics of getting people who are currently neutral to believe themselves to be victims and alienated from their Governments. It seems to me that a response to all of that goes well beyond the scope of a military operation.

Q149 **Chair:** Can I just pick up on the point that you make about the way in which things are prosecuted? It does seem to me strange that, 20 years on from the Iraq war, people have, as they discuss conflicts around the world, still failed to recognise that the way in which you prosecute something can make you more or less safe. To your point, it can end up radicalising far more people than were radicalised before. What would it take for that to be recognised more within multiple institutions around the world?

Sir Alex Younger: I cannot pretend to know the answer to that, but there are some pretty good sources of evidence. I would deduce, with huge regret, one in which I was directly involved, which is Afghanistan. We applied a military solution to, essentially, a political problem and, therefore, did not succeed. We should have the honesty to say that and talk about it.

Chair: Bob is going to take you back to Afghanistan in a bit.

Sir Alex Younger: I am very keen that an adherence to our values is not mistaken for weakness. We should be prepared to use all of our capabilities, within defined boundaries, to defend our people from harm. It is just that I want to do this in a way that is strategically effective, which is about acting within a political context, understanding that context and communicating it.

Q150 **Royston Smith:** Thank you, Sir Alex, for being with us today. Can I take you to north-east Syria, not literally, and British nationals who are still

detained there? As I understand, some have been repatriated, but the majority are still detained. What are the risks to the UK in leaving them there? Similarly, what are the risks to the UK, both reputationally and from a security point of view, in repatriating them to the UK?

Sir Alex Younger: I am glad that you asked the question like that, because I do not know what the right answer is. There are factors on both sides, as you describe. I should say that the biggest risk of all is not around British families. The biggest risk is that there are thousands of men in those camps whose radicalisation will deepen by the day, who are in each other's company day in, day out, and who, as time goes on, will likely become more of a threat, not less.

I hope that this Committee will be able to conclude and say that this has not gone away just because there is other stuff going on in the world. Fundamentally, at its most basic, there are thousands of young men who are becoming more angry, not less, as a result of what is going on, and where we do not have a longer-term solution.

On the plight of British nationals, if I can divide it up, when it comes to children, and particularly orphans, it is really clear that they should be back here. Do you want children to grow up in that environment? It seems to me that the obvious risk is that they too will be radicalised and the problem will be worse.

When it comes to family members more broadly, I am not going to generalise. It is a very small number of people. This is where the structure of your question comes in, because there are strong factors that push you in both directions. When looking at this, there would be concerns about the threat that they would still represent and, to that extent, it is a hard call for them to come back here.

On the other hand, you want to think about the political, reputational and human aspects of all of this on the other side of the ledger. It is a very small number of people, though, and so, when you are looking at this, this needs to come down to the conditions of specific individuals. I would hope that all of those factors are taken into account when we look at this.

Q151 **Royston Smith:** Do we know how other countries have handled it? If their approach is different to ours, is there a danger to our reputation as an international counter-terrorism partner?

Sir Alex Younger: The whole issue of deprivation is incredibly controversial.

Q152 **Royston Smith:** You talked earlier about the various groups that would still be considered a threat and those that might not. I am thinking about, at least in the last few weeks, and certainly yesterday or the day before, attacks in Yemen perpetrated by al-Qaeda. It was considered to be pretty much a spent force there as well, and now it seems to be carrying out several attacks. With the presence of al-Qaeda in Yemen, is there a chance or a likelihood that that could become not just a breeding ground,

but a training ground, and the next Afghanistan, if we are not careful?

Sir Alex Younger: Yes. It is a very good example. When I was in office, al-Qaeda in Yemen was a really serious problem, which bucked the trend in many ways. You heard that al-Qaeda was generally on the way down, but the Yemen franchise was anything but. If you had asked me then what I was most worried about, I would have said it was them. They generated a lot of really worrying threats. I do not think that much has changed, if you are talking about the ingredients for that.

The people have changed, by the way, and the individuals were a big part of the problem at that time, but you can get different individuals. You have to worry about the situation in Yemen. As humans, first of all, we should both worry about and be highly ashamed of the appalling humanitarian catastrophe that is unfolding in Yemen, which is, essentially, the product of decades of infighting, a good proportion of which is propagated by outsiders. Of course, it is a very fissiparous community of itself, but the international community should fundamentally be ashamed of the scale of the humanitarian crisis that is either happening or threatening to happen in Yemen.

It is politically a fundamentally contested space and all sorts of people are seeking to exploit that. It is a good example of what I was saying earlier. You could take a "pursue" approach to dealing with terrorists in Yemen, and seek to identify them and prevent their activities, but that is not going to solve the problem. The only thing that can solve the problem and the antics of the Houthis is some form of political progress in Yemen.

Q153 **Royston Smith:** There are so many disparate groups in Yemen, though. If you were talking about the caliphate in Syria, for example, you knew pretty much who you were dealing with. In Yemen, it is very difficult to know who you are dealing with. The southern groups, even, are not united against the northern groups, the Houthis and al-Qaeda, so it is a complicated picture.

Sir Alex Younger: It absolutely is. Yemen is a byword for complexity. The UN process was making a reasonable degree of progress. The negotiations between Saudi Arabia and Yemen had progressed before 7 October. There were signs to be optimistic about. First of all, we should put all of our efforts as a country into supporting those diplomatic efforts. Then, of course, we have external interference, which is still rife.

Chair: Bob, I know that you wanted to cover Afghanistan. Sir Alex very interestingly commented that it was one of the conflicts where we approached a military effort to defeat what was, essentially, a terrorist problem. Bob, I know that you wanted to go into that more.

Q154 **Bob Seely:** Can we talk about the future of the Taliban? I know that we have talked around the issue. Are they still a terrorist threat, given the point that you were making a little earlier about the Taliban perhaps understanding the limits of their behaviour and not wanting to attract an air or land campaign against them?

Sir Alex Younger: I have spent a lot of my career dealing with the Taliban. Theirs is a brutal medievalist regime. If you have the misfortune to be born female in Afghanistan, their attitudes condemn you, as things stand, to a marginalised life. There is not a good prospect of a future of any sort for Afghanistan under Taliban rule, so can we just be really clear about all of those things?

Bob Seely: I am not saying that you are saying that they are morally acceptable.

Sir Alex Younger: In terms of the extent to which they continue to constitute an external threat, first of all, the Pakistanis, ironically, would definitely consider that to be the case. Bearing in mind the extent to which Pakistan played a pretty ambiguous role when the coalition was in Afghanistan, you now see the Pakistani Taliban quite active in attacks across the Durand line into Pakistan, which is an increasing problem for Pakistan, ironically.

In terms of Daesh, the Taliban and Daesh hate each other and there is a vicious battle going on, to the point that, while Daesh enjoys some freedom of manoeuvre in Afghanistan, it is definitely not a permissive environment from Daesh's perspective. That is quite useful.

Al-Qaeda is, as I have already referenced, quite interesting. On the face of it, the Taliban and al-Qaeda have a degree of theological sympathy for one another. It is clear that, to some extent, the senior leadership is still afforded some space. It is also clear that there is something in the Taliban calculation that recognises that, if al-Qaeda is allowed to run free, problems will follow, which is, of course, the lesson of history.

A challenge that I would have for the international community, which is, of course, hopelessly divided on how to deal with Afghanistan—that is Afghanistan's fate—is to think about how we arrange incentives for the Taliban so as not to allow the situation that we saw in 2001 to reconstitute. That is my challenge.

Q155 **Bob Seely:** I have two questions on the back of that. Judging by everything that you have said, I am presuming that you think that we should have negotiated earlier with the Taliban and accepted that, morality aside, they had power and influence, including when we had a sizable British deployment there, and that that was a mistake.

Sir Alex Younger: I would not want to be associated with the term "morality aside". The moral course of action was to work to ensure that the external threat was limited to the absolute minimum and that, in some way, Afghanistan had a sustainable future.

Q156 **Bob Seely:** That is fair enough, but I am talking about back then. Should we have tried to split the Taliban into irreconcilable and reconcilable elements when they were out of power and when we had more political force?

Sir Alex Younger: We are agreeing with each other. A side effect of, essentially, the militarised policy that we had would be to drive those two halves together, when, in practice, it should have been completely different. You had a Pashtun nationalist organisation and an international terrorist organisation, which we were pushing together. It was my view, and always has been, that we needed to find ways of segmenting that. A failure to do that was a lost opportunity.

Q157 **Bob Seely:** With both of those in mind, there is an important debate around ensuring how military action is part of a co-ordinated political strategy. I am assuming that you are saying that there is too much focus on the military as a problem solver in Iraq and Afghanistan. Is the assumption now that we are thinking too little about military force to maybe compensate for those periods earlier in the century when we relied too heavily on it to solve what were, effectively, political problems?

Sir Alex Younger: The key thing for me is to apply military force, which is a legitimate thing to do in a political context, and to recognise that it is simpler to look at this through a military lens. In the caliphate example we discussed earlier, it did turn out to be a success in a military context. I entirely get that.

Q158 **Bob Seely:** Looking back on it, did the lack of military experience that our politicians had in the 1990s and early 2000s perhaps mean that they saw military force as a panacea that could solve societal ills and political goals?

Sir Alex Younger: That was implicit in the decision to invade Iraq.

Q159 **Graham Stringer:** We have been focusing mainly on Islamist terrorism, but there are other groups that leave their moorings in democracies, or were never moored in the first place. When you were in office, how did you assess the threats of narco-terrorism, eco-terrorism, or right-wing and left-wing terrorism? In your mind, is there a hierarchy of threats from those groups, and are there any that I have missed out?

Sir Alex Younger: My view is that it is important to define terrorism as a technique rather than separating it out by author, because there are dangers in that. That is an intrinsically political judgment. As officials, it is incumbent on us to look at this all as the same.

The reason why terrorism warrants the priority that is generally given by states like the UK is not that it is an existential threat. It is a pernicious threat to the social fabric of our societies and threatens to undermine the contract that exists between our citizens in a way that is fundamentally damaging.

I am asked a lot about the balance, for instance, between right-wing terrorism and Islamist terrorism. They are different. We have already talked about the way that, traditionally, Islamist terrorist groups organise. Right-wing groups do not appear to do that. In terms of the

threat that they pose to our social fabric, it seems to me just as dangerous, if not more so, frankly.

The key point for me, though, is that they operate in completely different ways, so it is not about doing less of this one and more of this one. They are just different things.

Q160 **Graham Stringer:** I can see that, but there is a big "but", is there not? The results of Islamists or eco-terrorists setting off a bomb may well be exactly the same, but, because their motivation and mode of operation is different, how you respond to it will be different. What I was trying to get at was whether you can assess the different level of threats that those groups pose. The consequences of what they do will be the same, but their motivation, how they operate and how we deal with them will be different.

Sir Alex Younger: It is just hard to do. Terrorism is an asymmetric activity. It is a tactical action that has a strategic effect. I do not even want to use my imagination when I think about some of the directions that this sort of stuff can go in. It is really hard to describe one as intrinsically more threatening than another, even if I accept—and I am sure that this drives your question—that we do have to prioritise. I entirely understand that, but it is really difficult.

Q161 **Graham Stringer:** I do not want to pursue the matter too far but, if there are a large number of Islamists and a small number of eco-terrorists—if there are any—that determines what sorts of resources you put into it. Really, I am asking for your assessment of that.

Sir Alex Younger: I am sorry. I misunderstood you. That is entirely legitimate. We have to be sensible. We have only X amount of stuff, so we need to use the data that we have to try to drive that. I am talking more about just making sure that our imaginations remain intact. The past is only to a certain extent a reliable guide to the future. You have to take a data-driven, sensible approach to that.

Q162 **Graham Stringer:** Can you give us any insight into the quantification of those threats?

Sir Alex Younger: Again, from my past, a lot of thought went into that.

Q163 **Bob Seely:** Just to follow up on that, logic would assume that you are talking about meeting capacity. In the way that you have answered these questions, it does not matter so much where the threat comes from. You have to find the challenge to that threat in order to pacify it and, if you can solve bigger-term problems, that is great.

Logic then assumes that, if we are talking about the era of hybrid conflict, the greatest danger is going to be terrorist groups that are plugged into states. Do you recognise that as a new trend? Are you saying that that is not really a trend because you can say that the KGB was doing that back in the 1960s with Palestinian and Middle East terrorism—it is the Russians

who claim to have invented aeroplane hostage-taking—or is this recognisably new or an evolution?

Sir Alex Younger: Regrettably, I absolutely do not think that it is new at all. It is absolutely as you describe. The new feature will be the role that technology plays in propagating that more intensively.

Q164 **Chair:** If there was one change or overhaul that you could make to our foreign policy posture or the way that we do foreign policy that would fundamentally make us safer, what would that be?

Sir Alex Younger: I hesitate to busk on that. To go to one of the opening questions, we do play a very positive role. We have adapted, and we have learned and internalised some difficult lessons. We need to accept that this is never going to be perfect. It just is not. I would like us to be able to understand the need to keep on adapting. As I have already said, a lodestar here needs to be our ability to maintain the difference between us and terrorists, and that should be non-negotiable.

Partnership is absolutely fundamental to making this work, and I put that to you as a community. These are fundamentally political decisions that have to be taken about how to enable the broadest possible partnership and the legal underpinnings that make that possible.

It is increasingly a technological issue. I note that, as the threat has dispersed and become more complicated and amorphous, our capacity to share and analyse data jointly is fundamental, which is often at the most contentious end of the legal and political debate. Again, I throw that challenge to you as politicians to make sure that we have an enabling framework to allow these technologies, which we invented, to fundamentally be on our side.

Q165 **Chair:** We were quite critical following the publishing of the integrated review and its refresh. We felt, as a Committee, that counter-terrorism had been downgraded to this focus on interstate warfare. Do you think that that was unfair? Are we now moving more towards getting the balance right, given what has happened over the last two years?

Sir Alex Younger: The problem is that, just because something has got worse, it does not mean that something else has got better. There is no natural stabiliser in geopolitics. It could just be that everything is getting worse. I hesitate to say that, because I am sure that there are lots of aspects of life that are getting better. The reality is that, just because you have a resurgent state threat, it does not mean that the non-state threat has gone away. We have touched on the extent to which they are reinforcing, which they sometimes are and sometimes are not.

To your question, you would definitely want to get away from a zero-sum dynamic between the two. At the same time, to govern is to choose. You have a certain amount of stuff. You have a resurgent state threat. That was the significant feature at the end of my career. Subsequently, since I left, I am confident that it has become even more difficult. You have to

choose. You could criticise the Government for downgrading terrorism if you wanted to, but you would have to have an idea about where the resources were going to come from to upgrade it again, because, ultimately, you have to prioritise.

Q166 **Bob Seely:** On that point, do you accept or deny that we lowered state threats as a priority from 1997 through to about 2014, which was the era of the threat of global terrorism from non-state actors? Do you think that we reduced our focus on state threats far too much?

Sir Alex Younger: I would go a bit further than that. I would say that we did not focus enough on geopolitical competition in that time. It was a sense somehow that we had won that argument, which proved to be wrong. It goes a lot further than state and non-state actors.

Q167 **Chair:** I have two final questions. When we look at Iranian terrorism, particularly in the Middle East and north Africa, although it also extends far beyond that, what are the most effective things that we should be doing to try to mitigate the worst excesses or to reduce the threat to the UK that emanates from the destabilising activities of the Iranian state?

Sir Alex Younger: We have to go the full-court press here. What is being done to us, not just by Iran but by Russia and other states, is the hybrid. They have taken every aspect of state power—proxies, subversion and cyber—bent all that into a single strategic purpose, without regard to law or values, and deployed it across the spectrum. We are not going to do that, and I have talked about the need for us to retain our distinct ethical, moral and legal character, but we have something to learn about the teamwork aspects of this and the rigour of prioritising it against key strategic objectives.

My observation is that, if you are pressured or attacked in one way, you do not necessarily respond in kind. You put together the full panoply of the things that make you strong. It is going to sound like a truism, but you must have a whole of Government and cross-alliance response. There is very little that is going to succeed in isolation; it is teamwork again.

Q168 **Chair:** That is what democracies are inherently bad at doing.

Is there anything that we have not given you the opportunity to say or something that you want to put on record that, when we review what our approach to counter-terrorism is, we should keep in mind?

Sir Alex Younger: I think that I have ranted enough. Thank you.

Chair: I think it has actually been an exercise in restraint. With that, thank you ever so much, Sir Alex. I am going to suspend the briefing here shortly.

Witness: Professor Ali Ansari.

Q169 **Chair:** Welcome back to this hearing of the Foreign Affairs Committee focused on counter-terrorism. Professor Ali Ansari, we are delighted to have you. We would be grateful if you could kindly introduce yourself.

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

Chair: In this session we will be particularly looking at terrorist state threats emanating from the Iranian regime, but also transnational repression as a form of terrorism.

Q170 **Henry Smith:** Professor, thank you very much for being with us again today. How would you say the IRGC identifies, develops and funds terror groups in the region?

Professor Ansari: If I could step back a little bit, the use of terror for political control is a fairly central plank of the Iranian regime's means of retaining control with its own population. What it does at home tends to then spread abroad, certainly within the region, and of late it has decided to go a bit further afield. It does it through a variety of means, some more obvious, some less obvious. Some of it is obviously financing and supply. With some of the organisations in the Middle East itself, there are quite direct links to supply of arms and finance.

One of the more interesting, if troubling, aspects is the ideological expansion and the ideological education, so to speak, that they get engaged with. I do not know if I could say they do it at a professional level, but they do it at a pretty serious level. It is one of the areas that we are probably less prepared and less able to contend with, partly because the idea that one would engage in propaganda or ideological indoctrination is something that they have been able to maximise, using the gaps—not the weaknesses, but the available space—in liberal society to access those areas that we do not necessarily confront.

There are a variety of levels. Those at the top tier are the Shias they would see in the region and elsewhere, whom they bribe themselves. They then see the next level as the Muslim population in general. Then above that they go to generally the world's oppressed. It is basically anyone who really wants to tie in and has a buy-in to the regime and its ideas. That is the way it deals with things. That is the way it operates, in a sense, to try to build a network of proxies of one sort or another.

Q171 **Henry Smith:** Looking at those proxies, what do they give back to Iran in terms of the IRGC's geopolitical and global ambitions?

Professor Ansari: One of the first things they do is to validate them, really. I noticed that Ayatollah Khamenei has recently made a very generous endorsement of the various campus demonstrations that are going on in the United States to say how well they are following his lead, effectively.

What it does is to say things to dissidents and other critics within Iran. You have to bear in mind that, as I pointed out last time I was here, the Iranian regime was struggling to get a pro-Palestinian demonstration out in Iran. If they can then portray it and say, "Look what is going on abroad. They are all listening to us and they are all following our lead," it undermines some of the more dissident opinion within Iran itself, in a sense.

One of them is validation. Secondly, obviously, it is just an extension of influence and, in a broader understanding of the term, soft power reach. They are using our own weaknesses, if we want to use that word, against us.

Q172 **Henry Smith:** When it comes to the proscription of the IRGC, this country has not proscribed it; the US has, as have others. How is Iran exploiting that? What are the weaknesses that that creates, or is there a strength in one of the Five Eyes not proscribing the IRGC, in order to maintain some links? We heard earlier that the IRGC is almost coterminous with the Iranian regime. The Iranian regime represents a country, and we need to have relations with that country. What is your take on that?

Professor Ansari: My take on it follows on from what we think proscription will do; what it will allow us to do that we cannot do already; whether we think, as has been discussed at a previous meeting, it will add to powers that we do not already have; and, at the same time, whether the security services are asking for those powers. I do not know if they are.

I do not know how effective it will be for Britain to unilaterally proscribe the IRGC. If it was done with European partners or with a broader coalition it would probably send a very strong signal. That would probably be more effective.

In some ways I am quite ambivalent on this debate of whether we should or we should not. I see the argument and I have heard the argument. As I understand it, we have sufficient powers at the moment to challenge some of the stuff that is going on in this country. We should be using those powers. I said this last time, but my fear is that proscription, like with any sanction, is one of those policies that we do and then we think, "We have done it and that will do," basically, whereas we need a much more proactive and engaged posture against the IRGC, its proxies and its activities.

Simply proscribing is not the solution, if I can put it that way. I am open to the suggestion, obviously, if we think that proscription will give us the extra powers that we need. My understanding is that it does not substantially add to the powers that we already have.

Q173 **Henry Smith:** In terms of using those powers that we do have, whether the IRGC is proscribed or not, what multilateral efforts do you think that

the UK should be considering with its Middle East and broader allies around the world to try to counter Iranian state-sponsored terrorism?

Professor Ansari: We are doing something, obviously. As the security services have alerted us, there are things going on that they have managed to obstruct. We certainly need to be much clearer in terms of our partnerships and our objectives in the Middle East, what we want to do and how we want to confront the Iranians on the various things that they are doing.

This is something that I have tried to raise before. In a sense, it is getting to the nub of the problem before it becomes a problem. Before they start doing things that are fairly unsavoury, we need to start challenging, pushing back and confronting, in a way, the ideology and the toxicity that comes along with the ideology. I fear that part of the problem at the moment is that we are not as confident as we maybe should be in confronting and pushing back on that. We see some of this, obviously, in what is going on in the United Kingdom at the moment.

Q174 **Bob Seely:** In your view, saying "ban the IRGC" is a "something must be done-ism" that politicians reach for when they want to make some progress or say something must be done.

Professor Ansari: Yes.

Q175 **Bob Seely:** When you say we need to be more engaged, I take it that that means being engaged in challenging them throughout Europe or helping to challenge them throughout the Middle East. I hope I am not branching out on somebody else's question, but what does that actually mean in practice?

Professor Ansari: We have to enhance our capabilities, for a start. I was interested to see that GCHQ is advertising for a Persian language specialist who can engage in a lot of this material, translate and help the security services and the intelligence services with their work on Iran. We need a lot more Persian language speakers and a lot more people who understand the language and cultural hinterland of what they are dealing with. That is one thing.

We need to enhance our capabilities to be able to challenge these things and then be able to push back with a response. What I mean by "a response" is to engage, in a sense, with the argument, the conversation or however else you want to describe it against the propaganda and other aspects that are coming out.

I have to say, as an academic in this country who works on Iran, that I find it interesting, but also quite irritating, that the press bends over backwards to give a platform to various voices from Iran to come and chat on the radio and other things and to give their views. They very rarely make it very clear what these voices are, where they are coming from and what the political leanings are. For a non-specialist listening in to a radio programme, for instance, they might think that this is a very

balanced and impartial view that has been coming from Tehran, when it actually is not. Most of us who work on the country will know exactly who this person is and where they are coming from.

These things, in a very basic way, need to be challenged. To be perfectly honest, we do not get a platform on Tehran radio to go around explaining our views. I am all in favour of it, by the way, but it needs to be couched in a somewhat more challenging format than it sometimes is.

Q176 **Chair:** Are these voices from Iran or are you essentially talking about useful idiots within the UK? Again, you have parliamentary privilege.

Professor Ansari: Heaven forbid that we have useful idiots. No, these are voices from Iran, to be perfectly honest. They are varied, but you are dealing with an authoritarian state. Given that someone could get on Radio 4 or whatever and rabbit on, and they might think this is the voice of reason or an impartial voice, it needs to be properly couched. People need to understand and, if need be, it needs to be challenged.

There was one individual who got on the radio recently and said that there were no hijab laws in Iran and women were entitled to wear whatever they wanted. Within a week, of course, the morality police were out on the streets again. It was not challenged.

Chair: You would be unsurprised to hear that, at the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the Iranian delegation often like to talk about how they are experts in countering terrorism and making the world a safer place. No one intervenes or challenges them; everybody just sits there in silence while they deliver their very particular tone of giving speeches.

Q177 **Fabian Hamilton:** This is quite relevant to what we have just been discussing, Ali. Why do you think Iran has faced relatively limited pushback in the development of its proxy network over the years? We are not challenging those proxies. We are not saying, "You are just the tools of the Iranian state."

Professor Ansari: Part of the reason is the consequences of western policy in the region. I do not want to labour this, but obviously the Iraq war and its consequences have had consequences. They have had consequences in the sense that they have effectively opened up Afghanistan and Iraq to Iranian penetration, quite naturally in some ways. If I was sitting in Tehran and the opportunity arose to extend my influence into areas I thought were my traditional near-abroad, then I would do so.

The further consequence of that is, of course, western fatigue. What we have witnessed from at least 2011, or maybe 2013, is a general western approach of, "We need to get the hell out of here as quickly as possible. Let us not get involved." You see that in one way or another, and that fatigue has expressed itself in a number of ways.

Another side of it—I will say this because I have been here at different Committees actually arguing different things—is that, when we started the whole radicalisation programmes and there was all sorts of money going into universities to promote the study of different forms of radicalisation, one thing that a number of us struggled to get across was that Arabic was not the only language that we should be learning. I sat in a Committee meeting—I cannot remember how long ago it was; it is a sign of my age, really—where we were asking, "Why aren't we doing Persian and other languages?" It just was not considered important enough.

To go back to the earlier question, capability takes time to develop. You are not going to train a language specialist or cultural specialist in a year. It is going to take several years to get that. If you have not done that 15 years ago, you do not have that expertise now. You may try to find that expertise, and sometimes they try to find people from the diaspora and other places, but there are other problems associated with that. If they are dual nationals or whatever, it is not going to be as easy to get security clearance and that sort of thing.

Q178 **Fabian Hamilton:** Do you think that the development of its proxy network is actually a key shortcoming in the West's counter-terrorism policy? In other words, could the development of Iran's proxy networks have been prevented in any way by the West?

Professor Ansari: To start from the beginning, when we first went into Iraq I remember I had gone to Iran in 2003 and talked to people in Iran. It was quite clear that the Iranians were taking advantage, in many ways, of the weaknesses that were developing in terms of the occupation.

At that stage, there was a tacit view among the coalition of the willing that the Iranian charity networks that were being developed in Iraq might not be a bad thing, because at least it was enhancing a degree of stability. It something that we do not have to deal with. The Iranians were making the fairly legitimate claim, "We have pilgrimage requirements and we want to get to Najaf and Karbala", so those things were extended.

Now, when the Khatami Administration went and the Ahmadinejad Administration came in—the hardliners—those networks were switched. They stopped being religious pilgrimage networks and they started being overtaken by the IRGC. By that stage, the Iranians had fairly cleverly taken advantage of that gap and that weakness. In a sense, they took advantage of the west looking the other way to establish their foothold and then, when things got more difficult, they started to expand that network and to put pressure on the west. The rise in IEDs and all this sort of thing started to increase from late 2004, and it became quite serious afterwards.

The problem at the beginning was that, certainly on a regional level, we did not do enough to anticipate what was happening and what was going

on on the ground, partly because of our own shortcomings and capacity to do things. On other levels, yes, there is more that we could have done, but it requires a degree of political will. It does require a level of political and public buy-in, because you have to engage in a much more direct way. It is certainly something that could have been engaged with more fulsomely.

Q179 **Chair:** On that point, Professor Ansari, we did not have the partners on the ground to counter it. I agree with you about political will and that we could have done more investment, but in some of Iran's neighbours—Iraq being a prime example, unfortunately—Iranian influence goes to the very top of the country, whether it be PMFs on the ground or within the Government itself. Could we have realistically done more to push back these proxies when it was not just Iraq, but other countries that were either unwilling or unable to, due to their lack of resilience or capability in the system?

Professor Ansari: That is the point: it goes to the heart of the way that the whole occupation was handled.

Q180 **Chair:** I am also talking post-occupation.

Professor Ansari: If you are talking post-occupation, you are quite right. There was a coalition of the willing, and there were many people who did not want to participate in that and many people who did not want to help. My point is that it does become more difficult. I do not want to underestimate the fact that it is all about choices. People need to make choices about where they are going to focus.

Let me give you a very, very simple example. If you are looking from a historical perspective, it would have been much better strategically—and I do not want to relitigate the past too much—rather than leave Afghanistan not even half-finished and then divert everything into Iraq, to have got Afghanistan settled first. That is where your investment and your energy should have been spent, but such is life. This is the direction of travel we went to. It opened opportunities and these opportunities, unsurprisingly, were seized by those who have no sympathy for us. That is just a fact of life.

When historians look back on the period from 2001 after 9/11, there will undoubtedly be some choice words to be said about the way it was handled. It goes back to this fact about language expertise. I remember, when the Americans were going into Iraq, the Arabic speakers were a fraction of the number of people they sent in there.

Chair: Just to flag, we are on the start of Opposition wind-ups, but I am hoping that means we still have at least 20 minutes.

Professor Ansari: Oh, is that what you were looking at?

Chair: Yes, sorry, that is what we were all looking at.

Q181 **Royston Smith:** Can I continue along the lines of Iranian proxies?

Should the UK have a uniform strategy for dealing with those, or should it be a bespoke strategy for each of them? How might that be?

Professor Ansari: In principle I am always in favour of bespoke strategies. There will be commonalities among a number of them, which you can deal with and generalise over, but you have to be better than they are at the games they play, if you will. Because there are many different proxy groups around, you should be able to find ways to make distinctions and sow difference among them.

Of course, that requires more effort, more intelligence, more time and all these things. Again, I am acutely aware that I am sitting here. I do not want to sit here as an ivory tower academic saying, "We should be doing all these things", because obviously these things are hard. That is my ideal. That is the way you need it. You need to have a detailed map of these various groups—which I am sure there is—and how you deal with them. For those who are more strongly aligned with Iran or less aligned with Iran, there are divisions and distinctions that can be made between them and differences that can be brought in. It has happened in the past, but that is the way it needs to be handled.

Q182 **Royston Smith:** If we have a sustained strategy on Iranian proxies, and we name them as that and go after them as Iranian proxies, do we run the risk of inflaming the situation and making it worse? Iran has broken cover in its latest actions with Israel. Calling the Houthis "the Houthis" or Hezbollah "Hezbollah" is fine, but does calling them Iranian proxies and particularly going after them run the risk of inflaming the situation between us and Iran?

Professor Ansari: I do not think so. It all depends on how you calibrate the response and how targeted it is. One of the problems we have had is that, of late, we have tended to turn the other cheek rather too much. It is only recently that we have started to hit back. The problem is that, because we leave it so long to hit back, we often have to hit back much harder than we might have had to.

I do not think it does. In many ways, the Iranians claim them anyway, so it does not really matter. It is not like they are hiding behind it. You have to bear in mind—and this comes back to this notion of having the expertise to deal with it—that the messaging they have domestically and the messaging they have abroad are quite different.

Looking at the recent missile launches and whatever, if you looked at the messaging in Iran it was very jingoistic and gung-ho. They had videos of Israelis fleeing the country, settlers moving back to America and all this sort of thing. It is only abroad that they played this very moderate and cool hand, and basically protested that matters were concluded as the missiles were en route, which, as one colleague said, was about as bold an attempt at de-escalation as anyone had ever seen. They were not wasting their time on this.

In my view, the Iranian regime, even now it has put its head above the parapet, is very keen to get its head back under the parapet very quickly. I do not think the missile launch and other things put it in as good a light as it pretended they had. There is a view—but others will have a better idea—that its arsenal may not be quite as sophisticated as it has claimed it to be. A lot of its missiles did not fire at all.

There was a great comment, actually, by the Supreme Leader, who basically did a new take on, "It is not the winning; it is the taking part." He basically said, "It does not matter that we did not hit anything; it is the fact that we did it," which might have reassured some of his commanders and stuff, but it sounded a little bit like a spin too far, and an explanation and a spin for failure. In that light, I do not think it will inflame anything. You need to set out red lines that are very clear, so that they know what those red lines are and do not cross them.

The problem with the politics of the Middle East and of Iran is that Iran, as has been said, has a very non-state element to its whole operation. We can look at the Iranian state as emblematic of this: in a way, it is a non-state actor in how it operates. It does not operate as a normal state, in that sense, and it does so partly as a defensive posture and partly as a means of extending its power.

The key to its opaqueness, if I can put it that way, is for us to be extra clear as to what is and what is not permissible. You have to stick by it, by the way. That is the key. I do not think it will inflame things at all. It will clarify things, if I can put it that way.

Q183 **Royston Smith:** In a different way, then, is there any chance that pushing back on the proxies will help? Someone said—I do not know who—that the Iranians will fight the Israelis to the last Palestinian. Is there going to be a point where Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Hamas and Hezbollah get exhausted, when they look back and think, "Actually, we are doing all the dirty work and now we are being pushed back on by western forces or western intelligence"? At what point do they say, "Enough is enough"?

Professor Ansari: That is a very good point, because one reason the Iranians did break cover was precisely because a lot of their proxies were complaining that they were not doing anything. Of course, it will take some time to make an assessment of what the reaction is, but it seems to me that the reaction in the Arab world has been less than flattering. They sort of said, "Well, you have done something, but you have not actually done as much as you say you have done," so there will come a time.

You have to bear in mind—this is the fundamental aspect, which I always like to return to—that the Iranian regime is doing things without the support of the vast majority of its own population. It is not just that it has frustrations among its allies, which it will, but it has frustrations and very serious grievances among its own people.

The other thing I would raise is also among its more orthodox allies, like the Syrians and the Russians. There are suggestions—I will not go further than that—that the attack on the IRGC commanders in Damascus may have been facilitated by leaks from within Syria, so Syrian informers who had basically revealed the intelligence of where these people were, why and how.

Q184 **Bob Seely:** Why would that be?

Professor Ansari: Because they may want to get rid of them. We are speculating here. I do not know, but one of the question marks that came up over that attack was how the Israelis knew precisely where those eight commanders were going to be at that particular time so that they could make such a precision attack. We have not spent enough time looking at that aspect of it. It is what caused the major shock in the Iranian system. A lot of their intelligence and their security is not very good, whether it is through incompetence, western penetration or whatever.

An argument that has come out is that one of the sources of the information for this came from within Syria. We know, for instance, that neither the Russians nor the Syrians are necessarily enthusiastic about the Iranians setting up shop in Syria and staying there for a very long time.

Q185 **Chair:** Can I pick up on something you said to Royston about permissiveness and how, essentially, Iran's threshold for chaos is too high? We spend a lot of our time talking about what its mid-term or short-term strategy is, but are we clear as the UK—and also, I guess, those countries we are aligned with—as to what our expectations are of Iran, what our policies are on Iran and what our strategies are on Iran? Are the Iranians spending just as much time trying to judge and check what our position is, perhaps because we are not expressing that clearly enough to them?

Professor Ansari: A very short answer to that question in some ways is no. We do not have a very clear idea of our direction of travel with Iran at the moment. In some ways, we can indulge ourselves a bit, because the Iranians will think that we do have a major strategy vis-à-vis them and will try to fathom it out. They will think it is deeply sophisticated, as you know, and much more sophisticated than we would, in a sense, be comfortable with. I do think they are trying to work things out, but in their own mind they have already worked it out, if I can put it that way. They still think that Britain is effectively running the show, in quite a dramatic way. Yes, there is still work to be done from our perspective.

Q186 **Bob Seely:** I have a couple of points, but I would like to just follow up on what Alicia was saying. If we had the FCDO here, the FCDO would say, "Of course we have some great plans and it is all terribly comprehensive." You do not buy that.

Professor Ansari: I think there are plans. My issue and my criticism is this. Although there has been a lot of rethinking, if by a strategy we mean a long-term goal and perspective, with serious thinking about a means to get there, no, I do not buy that.

Q187 **Bob Seely:** When it comes to dealing with proxies and dealing with Iran, should we assume that a lot of this is going to be working through our allies, giving technical and other support to the Saudis, for example, rather than trying to do things ourselves, but embedding ourselves more with our partners in the Middle East?

Professor Ansari: Needs must. That is a reality that we are going to have to work with. Obviously, there are other people, not just the Saudis.

Q188 **Bob Seely:** Yes, it is Gulfies, Saudis, whoever.

Professor Ansari: Yes, the realities of British hard power are such. We are much better on soft power, and we need to be able to leverage that. If you look historically, Britain has always worked better with allies, anyway. It is the way we work.

Q189 **Bob Seely:** I have one final question. As an academic, looking at this academic study of strategic culture, when you are talking about Iran and the regime being a non-state actor, I would interpret that as proof that the IRGC and the mullahs were effectively reliving through their founding culture and not adapting to being a fully state culture, because they almost feel happy behaving like some non-state actors or terrorists, while having the forces or the backing of a state to do it.

Professor Ansari: That is absolutely right. That is exactly how it operates. What we find is a very informal system of networks, particularly personal networks. If I go back and look at my own work on this, which has been a study of the way in which the Islamic Republic institutionally has sought to develop, over the last 20 years they have dismantled that. They have gone back to essentially what you could describe as their revolutionary roots. It is not just their revolutionary roots; it is just the way that they have operated as a polity or an organisation.

They inherited the Pahlavi state. They inherited the state of the Shah, which was a powerful state in many ways. Over the last 45 years they have basically extracted down the wealth and the capability of that state. It still operates to some extent, but the way they operate is on a very informal basis. Your point there is spot on. In the west, we fundamentally need to understand that.

When you talk to people in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, they say it themselves: the Minister of Foreign Affairs is not the most senior official. He is far from the most senior official in foreign affairs. He is just there to keep us happy. He goes on these tours and whatever, but the real power brokers are either in the Supreme Leader's office or in the IRGC. These are the people who are actually running the show.

You can tell this when they send the Minister of Foreign Affairs to a European capital, but they sent Qasem Soleimani—when he was alive, obviously—to Moscow. The point is that the main business is being done along another axis.

Q190 **Brendan O'Hara:** I have two questions and I will run them together. In relation to the crisis in Gaza, how concerned should the UK be about increased Iranian activity here in the UK in response? How might that manifest itself? Also, has this crisis or will this crisis have an impact on levels of radicalisation here in the UK?

Professor Ansari: They are definitely taking advantage of it. There is no doubt that they are taking advantage of the fractures in society over Gaza. It is an opening for them, and it will certainly facilitate or enable radicalisation, which they will exploit. I do not think there is any doubt that that is a very serious possibility, or probably a probability. People are clearly aware of this—it is such a gaping wound, in some ways—and the Iranians are exploiting these social fractures.

Q191 **Brendan O'Hara:** In terms of how that would manifest itself, how would the Iranian regime manage to embed itself or get into those fractures, and how would we recognise it?

Professor Ansari: One of the easiest ways to recognise it has been some of the flags that people are carrying in the streets. It is not a secret. They carry Hezbollah or IRGC flags, or they have pictures of Khamenei. I have to say that I am quite staggered that this sort of stuff goes around in London and other places. Obviously it is a minority, but the fact is that it is there. You can see certain effects.

One of the great driving doctrines of the Islamic Revolution—I do not want to say Iran; I want to say the Islamic Revolution—is that the Israeli state is a cancer on the Middle East and has to be eliminated. It sees this as an opportunity to get this message across to disaffected and unhappy people in the west, who are reacting, obviously, to the terrible situation in Gaza. In some ways it is much more explicit in the United States, as you see on campuses. That is why it is no surprise that Khamenei will get up and endorse the student demonstrations and others, saying, "Look, they are finally rising up against their oppressor and listening to what I have said."

I also found, much to my horror, I have to say, that there are some citizens of the United States—it has not happened here yet, as far as I know—who are being taught Iranian chants in Persian: "Death to America. Death to Israel." The inanity of it is that even the people chanting it do not know what they are chanting, but they are saying it. The person doing it is a Press TV employee, so the link is very direct and clear.

Q192 **Chair:** On Press TV, just for clarity on the record, it continues to be a banned TV station in the UK. Is it your view that it is still the primary

formation for the delivery of weaponised information against our state and others that exists for the Iranian regime?

Professor Ansari: I do not think it is the primary one, but it is certainly a major one. When it was operating here it was pumping out pretty ridiculous stuff. You can still access stuff online.

Q193 **Chair:** It is important that nobody, particularly people elected to this place, would endorse or support Press TV in any way.

Professor Ansari: It does not make any sense to me at all that anyone in Parliament should be in any way affiliated with it.

Q194 **Royston Smith:** Professor, you talked about flags being flown in London, but we have IRGC operatives carrying out their business in London. Is the UK sufficiently aware of what they are up to? What can they do to push back on it?

Professor Ansari: You said you have IRGC—

Royston Smith: They are carrying out surveillance and much more nefarious things than that.

Professor Ansari: I do not think I would be as competent, really, or authoritative to say whether we know. My assumption would be that we would be aware—certainly the security services—and we would keep a tab on these things. I would certainly hope so, as an academic working on Iran, I have to say. I am speaking in a very personal capacity, but I would like to see more pushback against this sort of behaviour and activity. As I said, I cannot comment on whether we know. I assume that the security services would be aware.

Q195 **Royston Smith:** Last time you were with us, you mentioned some of the Islamic centres that were funded directly by Iran. You said then as well that you did not think that we were pushing back enough on it.

Professor Ansari: Certainly, the Islamic centres are an issue that seems to drag on and on. We are not doing enough, really, to push back on them at all. As I said, the Islamic centre in Maida Vale very openly endorses a lot of Iranian propaganda and even IRGC propaganda.

Chair: It was put under investigation by the Charity Commission. The whole board has resigned from it, so we are seeing some progress with some of the sites.

Royston Smith: It is very slow.

Chair: It is not state-directed.

Professor Ansari: It is the Charity Commission.

Q196 **Royston Smith:** If we are aware of their activities or hear anecdotally of their activities, as well as the more obvious activities that we see, we can, as you said, assume that, where we know, the security services and

others know. How would you see them pushing back on it? In an ideal world, if you were in charge, how would you see that?

Professor Ansari: I am on the board of a number of charities. If I am a charity, even a religious charity, what is the function of that religious charity? A religious charity should have fairly strict parameters about what it can and cannot do, and these should not seep into politics. They certainly should not seep into the radical politics that we are seeing.

You will be better placed than I am on this in terms of what the legal framework is, but, as I mentioned on a previous occasion, many years ago I had an Iranian student who had been to a particular Islamic centre, not in London, as it happens, and he had listened to one of the clerics preaching. They were obviously preaching in Persian. He came back to me and said, "Do you have any idea what this guy is saying?" I said I had never been. It was not something I was familiar with.

What this person was preaching was pretty horrendous. Even the Iranian students were coming back and saying, "Oh my god. It is not something we would be very happy with." He was saying infidels should be eliminated and this, that and the other. This was a good 10 to 15 years ago, and people were saying to me, "He is there to preach to his flock and there are religious waivers for this sort of thing." Clearly, one of the problems we have is that in Iran the religious and the political are not so distinct. They see them as flowing into each other.

The Islamic centre in Glasgow is another one that is pretty active in surveillance. We know what these religious centres do. While they act under the rubric of a religious charity, their activities are what I and any sensible person would deem political. Those political activities have to cease. You cannot have an Islamic centre going around surveilling what it considers to be dissident Iranians in London.

Q197 **Royston Smith:** During the pandemic, apart from the fact that the NHS did a great job looking after people, it became a focus—almost something that people could concentrate on. We see what is happening in Gaza. It is the most horrific thing. We acknowledge and understand that. People are out on the streets protesting for the Palestinians and against the Israelis. There is a bigger picture. With all this disinformation, pushback and infiltration into the system, is there an element of our media and others just being a bit ignorant to it, so they fall into the same trap of saying, "This is all about Israel-Gaza and not about the bigger picture"? Therefore, if we see some Hezbollah flags or some IRGC flags, no one really cares too much about that.

Professor Ansari: Yes. Heaven forbid that the press should have a lighthouse attitude to news. You are absolutely right on that. They will focus on a particular topic, that will be the narrative, and that is what will take. That is what interests many people in this country, but they do not see the bigger picture.

The bigger picture is here, and it depends how you want to frame it. You can frame it on 7 October. You can frame it further back, more recently or whatever, but one of the salient features of the political situation in the Middle East and Iran is that Iran fundamentally does not agree with the existence of the state of Israel and is actively seeking measures to get rid of it. It is not just ignoring it.

When we ask, "What are the solutions? How do we get out of this morass?", people say, "We need to sit down, have a dialogue and discuss peace." How can you discuss peace with a partner that does not even acknowledge your right to exist? That has to be acknowledged.

Royston Smith: Yes, and it is not, mostly.

Professor Ansari: It is not. People do not.

Q198 **Royston Smith:** I heard that interview on Radio 4 about the hijab with the person they had on there.

Professor Ansari: The Netanyahu Government certainly have a lot to answer for, but the Iranians very effectively exploit the justifiable emotion and trauma of people seeing what is going on in Gaza. There is absolutely no doubt about that. What they are not talking about is their own role in perhaps undermining the peace processes we had over many years and in basically fomenting problems. That needs to be flagged up.

There is a sense among certain observers in the analytical community, think-tanks and others, as well as among journalists, that Iran in some ways is—I do not want to say "a victim"—a bit-part actor in all this, without seeing it as a much more central player. Again, I should emphasise—and let me be very clear—that I am talking about the regime. Most people in Iran are not remotely interested. This is the farce, actually.

Q199 **Chair:** I have two very quick final questions. First, what would the response of Iran be if Saudi Arabia was to get nuclear power capabilities and go on a nuclear journey? Secondly, talk us through the Iranian thinking on all things BRICS. Is it just an easy alliance and more international recognition for Iran from countries it would not normally engage with, like Brazil and India? What is it trying to get out of BRICS?

Professor Ansari: Do you mean if Saudi Arabia got nuclear power or nuclear weapons?

Chair: Both.

Professor Ansari: It is on a spectrum.

Q200 **Chair:** In my head I imagine Iran seeing them as on a spectrum, even though they should technically be seen as separate.

Professor Ansari: Undoubtedly, if the Saudis were to pursue weaponisation of any sort, it would only prompt the Iranians to go further. It would completely also undermine our own position, by the

way, in arguing for Iran not to become a weapons state. The Iranians would feel that they had been validated in their pursuit if the Saudis went for it.

The BRICS thing is interesting. Like a lot of these things, there is a lot of flannel and fanfare when it happens, but very little actually then happens. As far as I can see, nothing has really come of it. It is a bit like the Chinese-Iranian relationship. Almost nothing has come of it, but they make a lot of noise about it. If the BRICS economies were all transparent, investment-led, well-managed and well-governed economies, I would take this seriously, but there are some quite extraordinary basket cases in that network and it is not something that we need to be too worried about.

Chair: On that basket case, we shall conclude there. Thank you ever so much.