



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Foreign Affairs Committee

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

Tuesday 14 May 2024

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Watch the meeting

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

Questions 305-359

Witnesses

[I](#): Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, Minister of State for the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia, Commonwealth and United Nations, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, and Stephen Hickey, Director for Middle East and North Africa, FCDO.



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon and Stephen Hickey.

Q305 Chair: Welcome to this hearing of the Foreign Affairs Committee, where we are concluding our inquiry on the Middle East and North Africa. This morning we are very grateful to have Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon and Stephen Hickey with us. We are going to try to cover the whole of the Middle East and North Africa this morning, so there will be quite a bit to get through, but I am delighted that the Foreign Secretary has also confirmed that he is going to come before this Committee in very early June; we look forward to receiving him then.

To kick us off, Minister: do you believe the UK is a force for good in the Middle East and North Africa?

Lord Ahmad: The short answer is yes, and I will tell you why. One of the things I have learned over many years at the Foreign Office, as a joint Minister across DFID and the Foreign Office, and then as a merged Minister in the new Department, is that relationships matter; you need to invest in relationships. I have certainly seen the benefit of that both on a personal and a professional basis, whether it is in terms of responses to humanitarian crises—in recent times, for example, we have seen the Libyan flooding or indeed the Moroccan earthquake—or, of course, with something we are all seized of currently, which is the awful and continuing conflict in the Middle East, from those abhorrent events on 7 October to the current crisis in Gaza. People want the United Kingdom at the table and the intensity of diplomacy I have seen, certainly over the last seven or eight months, is something I have not experienced before in almost seven years at the Foreign Office.

Q306 Chair: You are absolutely right when you make that point about relationships. This Committee—before your time as Minister for the Middle East—has been very critical of what we saw as a deprioritisation of the Middle East and North Africa by the Foreign Office. Both in the integrated review and the integrated review refresh, we saw the tilt to the Indo-Pacific to be a tilt from the Middle East and North Africa. We were particularly concerned that there was no mention of the Palestine-Israel conflict and the situation in Palestine in either document. Has there been a period of reflection on that situation since the appalling atrocities of 7 October, and how it may have damaged our reputation in the region?

Lord Ahmad: Going back to 2021 with the original integrated review, I think there was reference made to the importance of the Middle East. I accept that I am also the Minister for India, South Asia and so on, so I think it was right that we put focus into the Indo-Pacific. We have seen benefits from the strategic dialogue status we have within ASEAN, the CPTPP and others, and, as you know, we are of course pursuing an FTA with India. I think those have leant in—the AUKUS deal was another good example of that. It was right, with some of the challenges we face in the Indo-Pacific, that there was a focus on that.



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I would add, having been a long-standing Minister in the multilateral sphere, that we continue to provide focus on those UN-mandated areas where we are penholders across the Middle East and North Africa. Equally, on the issue of the Middle East peace process, I agree with you; I think the world had also stood back before the tragic, abhorrent events of 7 October. When I took on the brief of the Middle East two years ago, it was one of my singled-out priorities. I think people were probably thinking, "What is Tariq going on about in the Foreign Office?", but to me it is one of those intractable problems and, perhaps with the tragedy that now confronts us, we are seized of this as a priority.

In terms of prioritisation, of course we can reflect on the two documents. I think they are broad ranging, but reference was made to the importance of the rights of Palestinians and the rights of Israelis. I am of a firm belief that until we secure rights, justice and equality for both Palestinians and Israelis, we will continue to return to this issue time and again.

Q307 **Chair:** Forgive me; it was not just within the Foreign Office. I do not think Parliament was in the same place as the Foreign Office and the State Department. We heard Jake Sullivan give an interview only a few days before 7 October saying that the Middle East has never been so peaceful, and yet you have parliamentarians in this place saying, "We are gravely concerned about the situation"—across a multitude of countries. Obviously, I said that we were going to see the Gaza crisis of 2023, although I did not expect it to happen as it did. Why do you think the Foreign Office, institutionally, and the State Department were in a place that was clearly so far from the reality on the ground?

Lord Ahmad: I would not say that they were removed from it. I think we all want peace in the Middle East, and I think we were seeing a period of relative calm compared with previous situations that had arisen. Let's not forget that we have been here before—we have seen the Gaza war break out before—but the severity of where we are now has not been seen in recent times. Nor had we seen the abhorrence of the attacks that we saw on 7 October—the biggest attack on Israel since, arguably, the challenges that it faced in 1973 and 1967.

There is absolutely a refocus on this, and rightly so, but at the same time, I would say that there is a focus on ensuring long-term stability and security from the projects we continue to do in the West Bank and that support. I remember Hamas's takeover in Gaza very well because I was in Israel, about to travel to Gaza on the day that Hamas took over the borders there, and there was a real sense of, "Should I go? Should I not go?" The reason that I did not go into Gaza on that occasion was that Israel then responded with missile attacks.

You talked about the State Department and the Foreign Office. There is one thing I would say when reflecting back on the events, and I am sure we will go on to this. When you look at what happened in Israel—I have been speaking to many Israelis, including commentators, friends and ex-leaders of Israel—one thing is very clear: it was a very rudimentary and basic attack. The worst kind of atrocities were committed by guys on the



back of pick-up trucks with knives and guns. Although there are missiles—and Hamas have that capacity—this was a very crude and indiscriminate attack.

One final point that I would also make in reflections on this is that when I travelled to Israel after the attacks, I met Mansour Abbas, who is leader of the Palestinian Arab party. He was the one who said to me, “Minister, there were at least 26 people who were killed in those attacks at that music festival who were Muslim, and there were a great number who were killed who were Christian.” We should not lose sight of the fact that Israel is actually 22% Christian Arab and Muslim. That is an important point that I have certainly made to Israeli leaders: as we move forward, to try to establish justice, security and stability, it is not just about the Palestinian territories; it is also about green line Israel.

Chair: I am sure we will come back to that shortly.

Q308 **Fabian Hamilton:** The last time I went to Gaza, our passports were inspected not only by the Israeli and Palestinian Authority guards, but by Hamas before we were allowed admission.

Can I move us on to Iran’s influence in the MENA region? I wondered whether you had seen any evolution in the relationship between the Iranian regime itself and its proxies and affiliates since the 7 October attacks.

Lord Ahmad: One thing we have been clear about is Iran’s growing influence across proxies. I would say, from what I have seen particularly in the crisis since 7 October, in the command and control structure, it is not that Hamas, Hezbollah, the Houthis or anyone else are waiting for a green light from Tehran.

There is a clear link with the supply of weapons, and the United Kingdom along with others has been engaged in curbing that supply of weapons from Iran. Again, that is not state; it is often smugglers who are bringing those, as they did for the Houthis. There is a clear link, however, because those groups are supplied from somewhere. That supply also, when it comes to armament, particularly as we have seen with the Houthis in Yemen, comes from Iran. The malign influence of Iran is very clear.

Iran also presents a challenge to us in terms of cyber-challenges, which we have seen quite clearly. Frankly speaking, right here in the UK, including in our Parliament and elsewhere, we also have seen the challenges directly of Iran’s much more assertive way of acting through attacks directly on UK soil. It is therefore right that, over the last few years, there are close to about 400 sanctions on various entities and individuals that we have imposed on Iran.

We were, of course, also committed to the JCPOA—and remained committed when the Americans walked away—and with good reason. I have put it on record that it was far from a perfect treaty; it ignored ballistic missiles, for example, which were not included. But in our view, it was a way of trying to at least ensure that Iran did not develop its nuclear



capacity and capabilities. What is very clear through its non-co-operation with Mr Grossi and other members of the IAEA is that Iran has developed its capacity and enrichment.

Therefore, we have to be very clear about the threat that Iran poses, not just through proxies, as we have seen particularly in the Middle East, but directly through its actions. The strength of what we do now in the Middle East in terms of security and stability, not just for Israel and the Palestinians, but more broadly for the wider Gulf, is an important part of how we move forward in challenging Iran in the region.

Q309 Fabian Hamilton: Yet we have not proscribed the IRGC. What are the arguments in favour of and against proscription?

Lord Ahmad: As we examined, it is very easy—all of you are well experienced in this—to say, “Oh yes, something is a tool.” The Foreign Secretary David Cameron summed it up well when he was talking about the issues, which perhaps we will come on to. He had quite extensive engagement with the Iranian Foreign Minister when Iran launched its attack on Israel. One of the things that we had the capacity to do, which the Americans did not, was literally pick up the phone directly, challenge the Iranian Foreign Minister and land those points. That comes back to a point that the Chair raised about the strength of British diplomacy being our ability to talk to our foes when it really matters in a direct way.

As you will be aware, when it comes to the IRGC, in all, we have sanctioned the IRGC in its entirety and we have put a number of sanctions on particular individuals. The difference with the IRGC specifically is that you all recognise it as a particular arm of the state. Across the Home Office and the Foreign Office, there is an agreement that, on balance, what we have done so far is the right approach, which allows us to have that leverage directly on the Iranian regime in terms of our direct engagement with them.

Q310 Fabian Hamilton: You mentioned earlier the engagement over the JCPOA and Iran’s nuclear enrichment programme. Apart from that, what sort of issues do you think that the UK can engage with Iran on, given that we have that diplomatic connection and the ability to do so? Also, should we focus on engaging with the representatives, such as they are, of the Iranian people—the protest movement over Mahsa Amini—rather than the regime? Are we doing that at all? Is there any way of doing that, because clearly these are organisations that are suppressed by the state?

Lord Ahmad: When I use the term engagement, it is to actually land these issues, which are pretty hard-edged in terms of diplomacy, when it comes to the situation, first and foremost, that we are currently talking about: the situation in the Middle East, the use of Iran and its proxies and what it does, and the ability to land diplomatic and hard-edged messages as we did after the attack on Israel. But taking your point, the attack on Mahsa Amini was heart-wrenching and gut-churning for all of us. It was not isolated, of course. I recall around that time that there was also—you may remember, Fabian—there was a young Olympian Iranian.



Fabian Hamilton: Yes, I do.

Lord Ahmad: I am a parent of three children and it brings a tear to your eye. Here was someone who had brought glory to the Iranian nation and he was given a death sentence over, from what I recall, the burning of a hut. So yes, I think it allows us, in multilateral fora, to land these messages extremely strongly.

We led, along with the Americans, Iran's expulsion from the CSW after Mahsa Amini. Why should they be represented on an organisation in the multilateral fora that represent the rights of women when they can do that to someone? Frankly, and excuse my language, but who the hell is the Iranian regime to tell a woman how to dress? Get out of their wardrobes. I speak as a Muslim, if I may, for a moment. Islam says "Lā 'ikrāha fi d-dīn" in Arabic, which means "There is no compulsion in religion". These mullahs in Iran, in Tehran, need to be very clear that it is a woman's choice to dress how she wants, whether she wears a hijab, a niqab or not. It is about time the Iranian regime recognised that.

Iran has a very rich culture. I remember years ago, as a young child travelling through Tehran, the richness of its food, its culture, its music and its poetry. I think there is real recognition through civil society engagement that we have and through groups that we have that we are not trying to engage in or call for a regime change. The regime itself needs to recognise that its first responsibility is the security and welfare of its citizens.

That allows us again to land those very hard messages, not just to Iran directly but to those who support Iran. We want to see a progressive, inclusive Iran playing its part in Middle East stability and security, and we will continue to land those messages, both through its allies in the region but most importantly directly, when it comes to issues of security.

Fabian Hamilton: You speak for all of us in saying that. Indeed, my late mother's many, many friends were Jews from Iran who had left and come to the UK.

Q311 **Chair:** Before we move on, Minister, for a long time I have had concerns about how the way we deal with Iran is so compartmentalised. We have the part of the Foreign Office that is dealing with the femicide and a different part dealing with nuclear ambitions. Then we have the Home Office dealing with transnational pressure and we have proxies with their support for al-Qaeda. How are we making sure that we have a comprehensive response on Iran? Again, when I look for international leadership on this issue, it seems to be lacking when so many of the core issues we see with the Middle East go back to Iran in some way. How are we dealing with the fact that, yes, although with peace in the Middle East and securing a state for Palestine we take a lot of the wind out of Iran's sails, actually the problem with the Iranian regime and its threshold for chaos is still too great? What are we doing to tackle that threshold and make sure that we do not compartmentalise the issues?



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Lord Ahmad: I will ask Stephen in a moment to come in on how we work across Government. Of course, we have a very close relationship with other Departments, such as the Home Office, which we have already referenced in part, and the Ministry of Defence, in terms of our capabilities.

On how we have tried to look at their malign influence, more recently, for example, I referred earlier to the supply routes from Iran for weapons that are coming through. The United Kingdom operates with other key partners on that. But we have also started extending, as we did in the MOD last year, by calling in some of the other key ambassadors from the Gulf states—other key partners—to actually realise, full on, what kind of weapons and what kind of things are being seized in terms of that smuggling. It is right that we bring that to the attention of other key partners. That cannot be achieved if we do not have that strength of co-ordination, both with our international partners and in close working between particularly the FCDO and the MOD. With your permission, I will let Stephen talk.

Stephen Hickey: First, I completely agree with you that the FCDO needs to work very closely and in a collaborative way with other Whitehall Departments, given the threat and the complexity of the threat that Iran poses.

How the Foreign Office works on Iran has completely transformed over the last 10 years. I used to work in the Iranian section back in 2006; now that I have returned, 18 years later, many things are very different—for example, in how we work in a more integrated fashion. First, we have a cross-HMG unit based in the Foreign Office that includes people on secondment from other Government Departments. Secondly, I am struck by the fact that the NSC regularly convenes to bring various Ministers together on Iran, as does NSCO, and there are regular JIC discussions. That infrastructure has helped us to take a more collaborative and a more comprehensive approach to Iran, taking in the varied nature of the threat that Iran poses.

Chair: Perhaps I can urge the Government to do more to engage parliamentarians on Iran. This is a very pressing concern for us, and from the outside. Also, we have to recognise that cross-Whitehall units may sit within the Foreign Office, but sometimes they themselves become siloed from their home Departments—I speak from personal experience.

Q312 **Bob Seely:** I want to follow up that point. I get to see Government from the outside, but I am struck that although there is a lot of talk about cross-Department co-operation and the integration of Government Departments, it does not always function as well as it could. We see it most of all with China policy, but I feel there are also problems with Russia and Iran, despite your claim that it is joined up.

Lord Ahmad: I have spent most of my life in public service, and I have been a member of the Government for 14 years now. I agree that sometimes it is frustrating when you need dynamism and real agility in



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decision making. There have been moments in my ministerial career when I have groaned, “Oh, we’ve got to go on write-around,” but I think there has been improvement. At ministerial level, having focused Cabinet committees that bring together the different strands of Government, working at the top when key decisions need to be taken, is a good way forward, I think.

Equally—returning to the Chair’s point about briefings with parliamentarians—when you are living it, it is easy to accept that that is just the way it is, and forget that perhaps others do not know. That is the reality, and I think we do need to improve when it comes to pointed briefings on what we are doing. An example from recent experience, to draw a comparison with Ukraine, we briefed out to the nth degree on every element of Government policy. We used to ask parliamentarians do we want a defence focus? Do we need a military focus, a community focus, a civil society focus on a particular issue—in this case, Ukraine? We were then able to provide quite pointed briefings. Clearly, we can improve in that direction.

Q313 **Bob Seely:** What else would you do, Minister?

Lord Ahmad: I have just alluded to one element. I think we can have quite specific and much more periodic briefings when analysis is done, assessments are made and once the decisions are public. Sometimes it is appropriate to do so publicly, but there could be private briefings with, for example, the Foreign Affairs Committee and the International Development Committee. Only yesterday, I was speaking to a team about atrocity prevention, and that was exactly the question being discussed. When we do a review, say once a quarter, that is the time to call in the FAC or the IDC or members of those Committees, as well as the House of Lords International Relations and Defence Committee, to give quite specific briefings, so that there can be better context. I have been before your Committee before talking about Afghanistan. One lesson learned from that was about the ability to pick up a phone and provide context for key Members of both Houses, so that the debates in both Houses are better informed. We need to improve on that.

Q314 **Chair:** Have we been able to achieve the UK’s objectives when it comes to the Gaza crisis, and if not, why not?

Lord Ahmad: Here we are, seven months on, and you know that this has not just been on my agenda, but dominating every facet of my life. I have never engaged so intensively on an issue. This matters. It matters to the 1,200 innocent lives lost in Israel in those abhorrent terror attacks, and it matters to the tens of thousands of people—a third of them women and children—who have been killed in Gaza. The short answer is that the conflict continues, and our No. 1 objective is to bring that conflict to a close. Being candid with you, I think we need to do even more in that respect, because that objective has not been achieved. The conflict continues.



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Specific to your question, have things improved on the humanitarian side? Let's go back to 6 October. Gaza was very much on the brink then. The reports I was reading from visits were that there was a really desperate situation in Gaza, and that was when hospitals were functioning, people were going to work and livelihoods were continuing. Let's not forget the intellectual base, too: the educational base of Gaza was very high—a lot of people went to school. What they did not have was employment opportunities. I remember visiting Israel after the new Government was formed. I was the first Minister in, literally a few days later, and I talked to their trade and industry Minister, Minister Barkat. I said, "Forget for a moment about Israel-Palestine. You've got to provide a horizon of hope to young people in Gaza." He is a technology expert, and I said to him, "Now is the time to use your technology expertise to provide. Give scholarships to 1,000 young students." We did a lot of incubation of businesses in Israel and Palestine, and looked at how they could be utilised, because you have got to have that prosperity outlook.

Let me fast-forward to where we are today. We have a desperate situation. The WFP has made it very clear that Gaza is on the brink of famine. We have seen some relief coming in through Rafah, but let us also be clear that—many of you will have visited the borders—Rafah was a pedestrian crossing; it had a single lane. We pressed on Kerem Shalom because that had six lanes ;it was state of the art.

Currently the Israeli operations in Rafah—which, thankfully, as I speak, although things move very dynamically, have not been with the intensity we saw in Khan Yunis or Gaza City—have stopped the Rafah crossing. The Rafah crossing was where fuel was getting in. Fuel is needed for hospitals. There is a belt of hospitals in the southern part of Rafah, including the European Hospital, which is really down to its last tank of fuel. In short, while we have seen some improvements, with certain routes opening up, the fact is that the 500 trucks came from UN sources. And that is not some grand target; it is the lowest possible threshold to avert famine. Our ambition needs to be higher.

Again on the humanitarian point, although we have been plugging away—and we are right to do so—in wanting the fighting to stop and aid to go in, and although we have been working with partners from the maritime to the airdrops, it is the land routes that make the difference. Yes, we welcome the opening of the Erez crossing, but as you all know and perhaps have followed, it was shocking to see that trucks going in from Jordan through Erez were again attacked in Israel. I think we need not just to call these things out, but to be focused on how we can really make this work.

I have one final point, if I may. I have met repeatedly—perhaps we will come to this—with hostage families. I am not saying I have met all of them, but I can say to you, Chair, and to members of the Committee, that of all those I have met, not one person after that initial shock has said to me, "Tariq, Minister, what is happening in Gaza—the loss of life, the tragic killing of so many children—is something that we endorse." They want an



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end to it. They want their loved ones to be returned, even those who are deceased, so that they can get closure. We have got to make sure that we get the fighting stopped and more aid in, but I say again: the 500 trucks are a minimum threshold to avert famine across Gaza.

Q315 Chair: Thank you, Minister. We are going to take you back; Brendan and I both want to go into the humanitarian aid situation more, but let us turn briefly to the hostages. Obviously one of the greatest cruelties is the absolute silence for the families of those being held hostage. They do not know if their loved ones are alive. What proof-of-life evidence do we have for all hostages, but particularly those with links to the UK? What are we doing, frankly, to demand that those who have influence over Hamas—be it Qatar, Egypt or Turkey—who may be playing productive roles elsewhere within the process, give us proof of life for all those families who are sat there in desperate agony, not knowing if their loved ones are alive or dead, or if their hope is misplaced?

Lord Ahmad: You are right: we need to ensure that this suffering comes to an end. I have sat with the hostage families; I have also sat with Palestinian people who have fled Gaza and whose families have people who have been killed. It is tragic beyond belief. There is a human element. I come back to what I said right at the start: we need to ensure that, first, we are giving that support—that they know there is accessibility. In that regard, I have sat in meetings with the Prime Minister and with the Foreign Secretary, and, directly, and we have been engaging consistently. We have also ensured that the hostage families have face time with those doing negotiations. I talked earlier about relationships and diplomacy. Without going into too much detail, the United Kingdom has helped to provide that bridge, so hostage families have been able to meet, and understand what negotiators—

Q316 Chair: Forgive me, but why haven't we received proof of life?

Lord Ahmad: I think the challenge is also that those who are holding the hostages are a terrorist organisation. They leverage this in a way that causes greater grief—the maximum level of grief—and we have seen that, and are looking into it, with the tragic case of Mr. Popplewell. This is how Hamas—a terrorist organisation—exploit the suffering of people.

I assure you, Chair, and indeed the Committee, not just that we are making our best endeavours, but that we are landing these pretty direct messages with those who have influence. You know where I stand, and I have talked to you about this before as well: I do think that Qatar continue to play an important role but, equally, you mentioned Turkey, and they also have an important role.

Hamas have an option here. Fighting to the nth degree will not achieve their aims. They could take an easy option: they can put down their arms, come to the negotiation table and release the hostages, and then we have the leverage to be able to try to make that horizon for peace into a reality. However, at the moment, of course we demand proof of life—it needs to



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happen—but the people holding the hostages have a different value criteria to the one that you and I would deploy.

Q317 Bob Seely: You mentioned Turkey. What is Turkey's role? In this context, do you find Erdoğan useful, or does he continue to be quite challenging to deal with sometimes?

Lord Ahmad: The starting point on that is that Turkey have a diplomatic relation with Israel; I think that is sometimes lost in the noise. I do think they have an important influence, as we saw recently with the Hamas leadership meeting in Turkey.

What I can say to you is that I am in very frequent contact—as is the Foreign Secretary, but particularly myself—with the Foreign Minister of Turkey, and Turkey are playing a specific role. I talked about messages being landed and—articulating what I have just said—they are landing messages to Hamas to stop the war now, put down the weapons and bring about the release of hostages so we can have a pathway to resolve this crisis. So, yes, in short, Turkey, have an important role; they are a big player across Europe and Asia, they are a bridging player and they have influence over the Hamas leadership.

Q318 Bob Seely: Is that because of the Muslim Brotherhood dynamic, or is this separate to that?

Lord Ahmad: I do not think it should be defined in terms of another organisation or religious issues alone. Of course, they have entertained and invited the Hamas leadership to Turkey, but they have done it with the intent of not suddenly saying, “We are going to supply you with a whole load of arms.” On the contrary, they have done it to try and bring a resolution to this conflict. However, I do agree with you: Turkey has not been talked about in the same way as Qatar, perhaps, on the hostage issues, and I think that, on not just the hostages, but the medium and long-term resolution, Turkey will have an important role.

Q319 Brendan O'Hara: Minister, can I take you to something you talked about earlier—food and the famine in Gaza. On 6 May, the United Nations said there is a “full-blown famine” in northern Gaza. Does the UK Government accept that there is a famine in Gaza?

Lord Ahmad: If you are referring to the WFP reports that came out, that is why we have pressed on the issue of the Erez crossing. I think we are on the brink of famine. I will ask Stephen to come in, but I have not yet seen a specific report. But whether we are on the brink or we are in famine, the fact is that there is malnutrition—evidence of that is very clear. The facilities in hospitals are dire, and people are dying because of a lack of medicine, support and basic amenities. We need to ensure that action happens; we should not wait for famine to occur—we need to act, and act now.

Q320 Brendan O'Hara: Why, in your opinion or the opinion of the UK Government, is there a famine in Gaza?



Lord Ahmad: The straight answer to that is very much because of the restrictions which are imposed on aid getting in through the borders.

Q321 **Brendan O'Hara:** Do you, then, believe that Israel is using starvation as a weapon of war?

Lord Ahmad: We make those assessments constantly. Over the weekend, the Foreign Secretary clearly said that there is no clean bill of health for Israel in any shape or form. Constant reviews take place of the way in which Israel is prosecuting this war. On the situation in Gaza, Israel needs to recognise that it, as the occupying power, has direct responsibilities under the Geneva convention, and it needs to ensure that the food, the medicines, the support and the humanitarian aid that are needed get in now.

Q322 **Brendan O'Hara:** I would not disagree with any of that, but to go back to my question, do you or the UK Government believe that Israel is weaponising food, in terms of its delivery to Gaza? Is it using starvation as a weapon of war?

Lord Ahmad: That is not the judgment that the UK Government have reached. However, we have clearly said that Gaza is on the brink of famine, and that food and medicines need to get in.

To take a step back, we hold Israel responsible in the way that we do—quite directly—because Israel as a state has signed up to those conventions. I agree with you, Brendan, that it has obligations. You are asking for a specific analysis. That forms part and parcel of the assessments that we make. Of course, we are seized of the reports that are coming through. I proactively mentioned the WFP report. If you are asking about the UK Government's assessment overall, I have not seen an assessment saying that the determination that you described has been made. However, the reality on the ground is clear: people are in need of food, medicine and humanitarian aid, and we need to ensure that we implore Israel to do all it can, given its responsibilities as an established state on the world stage, with obligations under the Geneva convention as an occupying power, to fulfil them. It should be held accountable for those.

Q323 **Brendan O'Hara:** Given that, how else would you explain children dying of hunger and malnutrition in a part of the world where food is plentiful, just 44 miles from Tel Aviv, when the Israeli Government are responsible for the flow of that food, if food is not being used as a weapon of war?

Lord Ahmad: Clearly, aid, food and medicines are not getting through in Gaza right now. That is why the UK Government, with other partners, including those in the near vicinity, have been focused on that. You asked me a specific question on the determination, and I said that the UK Government have not made that assessment.

Q324 **Brendan O'Hara:** You accept that aid and food are not getting through. Surely any determination has to say that the people who the food has to come through are responsible for its not getting to where it needs to be.



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Surely there is a legal responsibility on them, as the occupying power, to ensure that the food gets through, and if they do not do that, they are indeed weaponising food.

Lord Ahmad: What I am saying is that those assessments are made constantly and consistently. Our relationship with Israel means that we can land those messages quite directly with them. You asked a specific question about the assessment made. I understand that. When we look at the situation on the ground, I could stand here and say that we have got so much aid in through air drops, but compared with what needs to happen—proportionally—it is clearly not enough. The last report that I read—the WFP report—said that there was a real risk of famine, particularly in northern Gaza. That is why we pressurised Israel to get the Erez crossing open. We managed to get aid in the form of flour through Ashdod. It was going through the Erez crossing, but it was attacked. We have made the point directly to the Israelis that those who attack the convoys should be held accountable.

Brendan, you asked about a specific determination and I have been clear about that. However, whatever happens from hereon in, we will keep the issue under strict scrutiny to ensure that Israel fulfils its obligations. People say that Hamas are doing this, and of course there are distribution issues. The distribution channels in Gaza are really challenged at the moment. However, the difference between Hamas and Israel is that Israel is a state. It is a partner and ally of the UK and I assure you that we use every diplomatic lever directly and bluntly with Israel to ensure that it recognises its obligations.

Q325 **Chair:** Just briefly on that, Minister, humanitarian aid organisations tell me that not a single aid delivery has gone through the Rafah crossing—which obviously was the primary delivery route—since 6 May. That also means that there have been no medical evacuations of Gazans through that route, and no aid workers have gone out through that crossing. Separately, Kerem Shalom, in the immediate vicinity, is currently being bombed, so there is a high impact on the ability to get aid in. Is it true that no aid has got in through the Rafah crossing since 6 May?

Lord Ahmad: Stephen may correct me but, as of the last report last night, there was no opening, and that is why I said the crucial point about Rafah is that it is mainly where fuel was crossing. To give some real life insight, one thing I was exploring yesterday with Mark Bryson-Richardson, our ambassador, whom I engage with practically every other day—he is in Israel as I speak—was to make the point that either Rafah must be open or Kerem Shalom must have the capability and capacity to provide fuel. Returning to the points that Brendan alluded to, fuel is needed to run the hospitals, and if the hospitals don't get fuel, the very issues that we just talked about will be further exacerbated. People are very much seized of those points, but the fact is, to answer directly, that Rafah remains closed. Stephen, it has not opened since, has it?

Stephen Hickey: That is correct, Minister. No aid has flowed through the Rafah crossing in recent days, and it is an urgent priority that the crossing



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is open again, that Kerem Shalom is open again, and that in addition to those two crossings more aid can enter Gaza through other crossings, such as Erez and, in the north, Ashdod. We are working on that, and, as the Minister said, our humanitarian envoy Mark Bryson-Richardson is in Israel today raising this. The Foreign Secretary spoke to Foreign Minister Katz yesterday and to Ron Dermer. We are pressing this very hard.

Q326 Bob Seely: To follow up on that point, from the diplomatic cables and reports that you get from our embassy in Israel, what are our diplomats telling you about how much Israel takes into account issues of proportionality when it comes to targeting? Following Brendan's point, to what extent are the deaths of civilians due to either a sense of negligence or to an attempt at proportionality in trying to target Hamas terrorists in a very crowded space in which there are many other human beings?

Lord Ahmad: The current live situation, if we take Rafah, is that the diplomatic pressure being exerted by ourselves and, in particular, by the United States, has resulted in a more restrained operation compared with what we saw in Gaza City and Khan Younis. Does Israel have the capacity and capability to comply with the obligations? Yes, we believe it does. It has one of the most advanced militaries in the world.

On the issue of the prosecution of the war, as I said, that is looked at intensely and regularly by us in making our own assessments. Also, on the issue of proportionality, Israel has direct obligations through the conventions that it has to adhere to. You asked about what is coming through from our missions on the ground, and our own assessment is very clear: currently—this could change very quickly—the operation in Rafah has not been of the same scale and intensity as what happened in Gaza City or Khan Younis.

However, there is no plan. Israel has not shown us a credible plan of one evacuation. Again, on the principles, humanitarianism is an important principle. People from Rafah are being sent to Al-Mawasi; around 400,000 have now been moved. They get a leaflet in the morning saying that they must move by the afternoon; it is a pretty stark choice. If nothing else, we have seen resilience in terms of the way the Palestinians are moved from one place to another. We consistently remind Israel of its obligations to the very principles that you have just mentioned, and Stephen alluded to that in mentioning recent calls that the Foreign Secretary has had.

Q327 Brendan O'Hara: Minister, you and your fellow Ministers often talk about Israel's capacity and capability to adhere to international humanitarian law. I have the capacity and the capability to do many things; it doesn't mean I always do them. Given what you have just said about the Rafah crossing being closed and no aid coming in since the 6th, talking about the famine that is either there or on the brink, can you honestly say that Israel's activities demonstrate a commitment to respecting international humanitarian law?

Lord Ahmad: I think Israel's obligations to international humanitarian law are very clear for them to see. We have an assessment procedure—I am



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sure you will respect this, Brendan—that we go through, and through those assessment procedures I very clearly give my perspectives as the Minister for the Middle East on how I perceive this on the information that is given. An overall assessment is made, and a determination is made after that of the British Government's position. That has happened before; it happens on a revolving basis.

It is very clear to me: I think the challenges are intense and immense on IHL, and from what we have already discussed, I think it is very clear what my thinking is. I think Israel is really leaving many of its partners, including ourselves, pretty challenged on where we are currently on the issue of IHL and how they are fulfilling their obligations. But I would add quite clearly that there is an established process, which the Foreign Secretary has talked about repeatedly, which he ultimately opines on from the information he receives, and those assessments happen.

This isn't a case of saying there is a green light to Israel. Israel has obligations. We are allies of Israel and, as a constructive friend to Israel, we land these points very directly to them. But at the same time, we make these assessments consistently. In all the points you have made, there has been nothing I have disagreed with, and I said those should blend into what happens from hereon in, and future decisions that are made will be based on some of these assessments and some of the points that we have been discussing. And these happen very regularly, which allows us to make a determination, but I am not going to pre-empt a determination or the process.

Q328 Brendan O'Hara: I hear what you are saying and, as I said earlier, I don't disagree with what you are saying, but the actions of the UK Government just don't chime. The Foreign Secretary, as you alluded to earlier, on Sunday said that Israel does not have a "clean bill of health" when it comes to its military operations in Gaza. Just yesterday, US Secretary of State Blinken said, "given the totality of the damage that's been done... to children, to women, to men", it was "reasonable to assess" that in certain circumstances Israel acted in a way that was not consistent "with... international humanitarian law." He was talking there about the munitions that have not been sent from the United States. Given their concerns, given the Foreign Secretary's admission about not having a "clean bill of health", why are we continuing to license arms exports to Israel?

Lord Ahmad: On that final point, you would have heard the Foreign Secretary consistently say yes, with our arms exports there is a process involved. He is very much sticking to that process, because this is something that we deploy in all conflicts, with any shipments. There are no state shipments of arms to Israel, as you know, and while our position is different from that of the US, I agree with you that there has to be that principle that applies. Whether it is 1% or 90%, the principle should be, is there a contravention? As I have alluded to, I think that assessment is made in a robust way. It is something that is fed through from the advice that we see, including myself. I see that; I give my very clear opinion on that view; and that then gets taken up through the other assessments



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that the Foreign Secretary makes, and he will make a decision on that. I think he also said very clearly over the weekend that this is something that is done on an evolving, and quite a dynamic basis, and he will certainly be looking at advice, and I am sure that some of the points that you have just raised are points that he will reflect on as he considers that advice.

Fabian Hamilton: We used to have a system called the Committees on Arms Exports Controls. The Government stopped that some time ago—I think last year.

Chair: Forgive me, but that wasn't the Government; it was a decision by the Select Committees.

Q329 **Fabian Hamilton:** My apologies. Would you agree that such a Committee, allowing parliamentarians to scrutinise these export licences, would now be very appropriate, in terms of what is happening in Israel?

Lord Ahmad: It is always good to listen and learn from experience, and I am happy to take this back to the FCDO to discuss it with the Foreign Secretary as well. I am sure you will agree, Fabian, that we do have a robust regime that looks at issues, which has been tested previously in other cases of arms supplies that we have provided. I also reflect on the fact that if things, systems and structures can be improved, we need to see how they can be. I cannot comment directly on whether that is something we would deploy, but I will certainly take that away.

Q330 **Fabian Hamilton:** I fully appreciate that, but the point is that parliamentarians should be involved in those decisions, and those decisions should be accountable to parliamentarians, through whatever structure or system possible. It may need to evolve.

Lord Ahmad: To share with you, without going into too much detail, what we do internally. The assessments that the Foreign Secretary will ultimately make are informed by different types of advice from different parts of Government, which will make assessments on adherence—coming back to IHL—and on exports and assessments made by our colleagues in the MOD. Then there is advice that is given to the Foreign Secretary.

In terms of parliamentary assessments, there have been occasions when there has been information that the Executive have that is not necessarily there, because of the sensitivity of it, which is across the piece. As I said, there are always ways to look at structures and seeing how we can reflect on those structures. I don't know if Stephen has something on that.

Q331 **Chair:** Forgive me, but the Foreign Secretary has written to us on this. We are aware that ultimately the decision sits with the Department for Business and Trade, not with the Foreign Office. Cameron provides advice, DBT makes a decision, and there will be a hearing by the DBT Committee specifically on this shortly.

Briefly, it has been five months now since Medical Aid for Palestinians was bombed, when in the so-called continuing safe zone of Al-Mawasi, despite having been de-conflicted by the IDF a month earlier. We were very lucky



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that British doctors were not killed. It was luck, not anything else.

We obviously also had the bombing of World Central Kitchen, where three British former soldiers were killed. We have had no answer yet as to how that happened, when both were de-conflicted with the IDF. What is the answer the British Government have received on how British nationals were almost killed and then were killed?

Lord Ahmad: First, you are right. Although we have got some assessments made by the Israelis themselves on the tragic killing of the World Central Kitchen team, we are still awaiting more answers. We are looking, for example, at independent assessments we can make. Australia has deployed someone we are talking to, because there were Poles and Australians involved with that.

The issue is clear in both instances. Thankfully, with Medical Aid for Palestinians there were no fatalities in that incident, but it was very close. I met Melanie Ward directly and we raised it. I know the Foreign Secretary raised it directly with the Israeli leadership, including the Prime Minister, as he did on World Central Kitchen. We need answers on that. You cannot, with all the challenges and issues we have been talking about—. These individuals and organisations are carrying out vital work.

As part of the standards, Israel is a country that obligates, has signed up to adhering to the standards, that needs to ensure the de-confliction. The whole point of de-confliction—and it is a key priority, I know, for the Foreign Secretary and myself in emphasising this to Israel—is to ensure that, notwithstanding the politics of it, that agencies and workers can go around.

I was listening this morning, as I was coming in, to a report, as yet with no attribution, about another UN worker who has been killed. We need to ensure that de-confliction does mean that. I don't hold out hope with Hamas, but where we do hold out hope and have direct engagement is with Israel, to ensure that they fulfil their obligations.

Q332 **Brendan O'Hara:** On that, has the UK yet determined whether British-licensed arms exports were involved in those attacks?

Lord Ahmad: More advice will be coming through to the Foreign Secretary, including on that particular incident involving World Central Kitchen. I know that will be going to him shortly.

Q333 **Brendan O'Hara:** Has that question been asked? Has an investigation been launched into whether UK-licensed arms exports were involved in the MAP and World Central Kitchen attacks?

Lord Ahmad: What is clear with that particular incident is that we want to ensure that these points are covered off in the advice given to the Foreign Secretary. The Chair summarised very neatly what happens on arms licences, and we are following that procedure when it comes to the World Central Kitchen incident.

Q334 **Brendan O'Hara:** Okay, but can I be absolutely clear? Are you seeking to



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determine whether UK-licensed arms exports were involved in either of those attacks, and will we have an answer in due course? Will we find out?

Lord Ahmad: As I said, what I can share with you right now is that full advice on what happened will be coming, based on the issue of de-confliction and the incident itself. I believe it will be comprehensive, but in terms of the exact detail, I have not seen it, so I cannot comment further.

Chair: Perhaps the Foreign Secretary could look at that advice before he comes before us at the start of June. I am sure the Foreign Office have it within them to get that advice to him in time, given that it has been five months since one of those incidents. We will then raise the issue with him.

Q335 **Graham Stringer:** Hamas have an explicit policy of genocide— of destroying Israel and killing Jews; that is their policy. Prime Minister Netanyahu has said that he does not believe in the two-state solution. Most other interested international parties, including the UK, do believe in the two-state solution. In that situation, what tactics and strategy do you have for getting on a pathway to the two-state solution?

Lord Ahmad: The starting point on that, Graham, must be that you have to believe in the right of the other to exist. If one does not believe in that, it becomes very hard as negotiating partners. In terms of what has happened, I would go further: Hamas do not believe in the destruction or killing of just Jews; they believe, in the ideology that they follow, which is a perverse ideology, that anyone who may claim to follow the same faith they claim to follow, which is so removed, is also a legitimate target. So when we are dealing with Hamas, we are very clear, and that is why we proscribe them.

In terms of what needs to happen, Hamas cannot be, as we have clearly said, in power in Gaza. There are partners for peace. Is there work happening in this respect? Absolutely. I talked right at the start about the intensity of diplomacy. There are plans being floated, including with the US and our Arab partners. We are party to some of these discussions. But the starting point has to be about doing things in a phased way. First and foremost, the fighting must stop. I have had exchanges with Brendan, Fabian and others, and rightly so, on the issue of humanitarian support and getting the hostages out. That has to be a prerequisite to getting things restarted. The third element is looking at the whole issue of reconstruction. The fourth element, as we have said repeatedly—this is our stated position—is that we need an irreversible pathway to ensuring that we get a two-state solution.

To my absolute core, I believe that this is the moment to seize the opportunity to ask what structures need to be put in place. One discussion we have internationally with each of our partners as we sit around tables is about what, if you are the United Kingdom, Qatar or Saudi Arabia, you are bringing. What equity are you bringing in terms of achieving that objective? That is where our focus has been. But it is about that doing



things in that structured way, because all this becomes pretty immaterial until we have this first important step, which is to stop the fighting.

Q336 Graham Stringer: Can you expand on the Arab states? It was speculated—it is probably true—that one reason for the 7 October attack was the détente happening between Saudi Arabia and other Arab states on the one hand and Israel on the other, which did not suit the Iranians or Hamas. October the 7th and Israel's response have put an end to that détente, certainly for a period. What is your assessment of the attitude of the involved Arab states to a move towards a two-state solution?

Lord Ahmad: First, we have seen movement. One glimmer of hope in this abhorrent tragedy that we are currently facing is that we are in a different position. We have two Arab states—Jordan and Egypt—that have peace treaties with Israel. We have two Gulf states—the UAE and Bahrain—and, with the Arab states, Morocco, which have also signed the Abraham Accords. That is, if you like, the first chapter. The final chapter will be the two-state solution. Notwithstanding the current situation, we have not seen a curtailing or cutting-off of diplomatic solutions, so I think there is a recognition by those countries that they need to remain steadfast.

You are right that, before 7 October, there were discussions about normalisation with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Obviously, that is an important priority—indeed, it is a stated priority of the Israeli Prime Minister.

One thing is clear, and the Saudis themselves have been explicit about this: for normalisation to happen, it is important that there is an irreversible pathway to a two-state solution. That is an integral part of the discussions that we are having and that they are having with us. Those messages are obviously being landed in Israel.

You are also right, Graham, to say that Mr Netanyahu and his Government do not believe in the two-state solution. However, it was not so long ago—it seems a long distance away, but it was in 2021—when the then Israeli Prime Minister talked about the two-state solution. I think that was the first time since 2017. There is that fourth pillar, if I can put it that way, and a lot of work is being done in that respect, but to move forward, that first stage has to happen.

Q337 Graham Stringer: One of the issues that exercises people in this country and that makes a pathway towards peace and a two-state solution more difficult is not just the conflict in Gaza, but the long period when Palestinians in the West Bank have been attacked and killed by Israelis. What is your assessment of that situation? Does the Foreign Office believe that it is getting worse and that it is having a negative effect on any eventual solution to the problem?

Lord Ahmad: The short answer is yes—categorically. We have seen some of the biggest announcements of land seizures in the West Bank. The consistent position of successive Governments has always been that settlements in the occupied territories are impediments to the peace process. Many of us have visited—I have been there as well. The



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intimidation used by extremist settlers is vented not just against Palestinians but often against visiting international dignitaries. I have experienced that myself.

Earlier, I alluded to the time in office. I have not known a time previously when we sanctioned individuals. We have now done it on two occasions. This month, we also sanctioned extremist organisations linked to settler violence. We have also directly landed the message of accountability with the Israelis. In some ways, I agree with you: yes, there is an impediment and we have seen an increase in announcements of settlements and land grabs in the West Bank.

We have rightly been talking about Gaza, but 300 or 400 people have been killed in the West Bank, and detentions and incursions have increased there. Through the subsequent operations, the PA has become increasingly ineffective and settlers seem more emboldened. Some of the activity that has taken place is appalling. Settlers have also been affected; a young 14-year-old was killed. The tragedy engulfs all communities. In the West Bank, we have, tragically, seen an increase in settler activity and violence. As I said, the UK has acted directly by imposing sanctions on them for the first time.

Q338 Graham Stringer: In answer to Brendan's question, you pointed out the role that Israel has as an occupying power to protect people. It is obviously a difficult thing to do when fighting a terrorist organisation. When I have talked to some of the concerned, mainly Muslim groups in my constituency, I have been asked whether Palestinians have the right to defend themselves. Hamas is a proscribed terrorist organisation. Where is the balance between Israel's responsibility as an occupying power to protect people and the right of Palestinians to protect themselves? Can you help me through that political and legal minefield?

Lord Ahmad: It is a question I have been asked repeatedly as well. What needs to happen is very, very clear. We need to focus on the governance of the Palestinians—the "who". We are certainly focused on that with the Palestinian Authority, so you have a responsible authority—a responsible Palestinian governance structure—which we saw after the Oslo accords were signed 30-odd years ago. When we invested, for example, in the Palestinian Authority security forces, some of those issues of security and governance were being directly addressed.

But that has declined massively. We have seen Hamas's control of Gaza, and I am speculating purely here—always dangerous for a Minister, although I am sure most of you would agree with me—but I do not think that there would be any Palestinian in Gaza right now celebrating what Hamas has put on them. Yes, it was difficult beforehand, but now we see the pure devastation that has taken place: no livelihoods, no nothing.

Coming back to your central point, what we have said—this perhaps relates to what Brendan was pressing me on and to what Bob alluded to—is that Israel has the capacity to be able to go in in a much more measured and structured way against those who are perpetrators of the



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violence, aggression and terrorism. That is what needs to be implored when we have those engagements with them. Yes, we will make judgment calls on their prosecution of the war.

On the issue of Palestinian rights, the Palestinians are also reflective of different communities. There are Muslim and Christian communities that constitute the Palestinians, so when we talk about the rights of Palestinians, we need to ensure governance that protects the rights of all communities. If I was being very focused on the future, I would say that one hopes that maybe there will come a time when we will have a future state of Palestine that is inclusive—I use that word deliberately—of Jews who will be settled in Palestine.

When we go back in history, across the world Jewish communities were also represented, as we have heard from Fabian, in other parts of the Islamic world. We need to seize that again. I am not being too crystal ball-gazing, but we have got to accept that the human capacity to get over this incredible human challenge right now is in the hands of ourselves, in part, but also directly those who are there.

I fully accept the principle that you have alluded to, and the real strength of feeling there, that the Palestinians themselves do not have anyone protecting them. That is what we are seeking to create now, but we need an empowered Palestinian governance structure to make that happen. There's a new Prime Minister in place with Mohammad Mustafa; let's see whether that provides that kind of security and governance structure.

Q339 Graham Stringer: This is my last question. The last time you were before the Committee, I asked you how you thought the Foreign Office and Government policy could help locally with relations between the Jewish community and the Muslim community. Over the last six months, both communities have become more frightened and more angry—almost in equal measure, it seems, from the meetings I have with them. What more can you as a Minister and the Government do to help foster better relations when those communities are so angry?

Lord Ahmad: First, the security and safety of all communities is something we pride ourselves on, irrespective of politics, and whether you are in Scotland or elsewhere the UK. If we lose that, we lose what we are as a country, and I think we have achieved a lot. That message of reassurance is very clear.

Notwithstanding the challenges we find, people still have the ability— notwithstanding security concerns in synagogues, mosques and so on—to go about their daily lives in relative security. We have got to take the oxygen away from the extremists on both sides, and not allow division to be the prevailing narrative. Doing that requires investment in local communities.

Perhaps there is also a role—I stand ready to do this—around how we brief out to some of the communities. On Friday, members of the Jewish community were in my office representing Jewish leaders, and talking



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about the rising tide of antisemitism and how it is impacting British communities. I myself, being Muslim, have been engaging extensively with Muslim communities. It has not been easy.

On a personal note, I have never known a time like it. With the intensity of the attacks, which I totally understand, we need to ensure that it is Government's responsibility to navigate this path. But I think we need like-minded community leaders from all sides to come forward with practical suggestions. Our respective roles are also important, as is how we communicate this better.

Everyone is seized of it, I can assure you—at every community meeting I go to, every time I go for a prayer at a mosque with my children, every time I say my salaam as I finish the prayer. I used to get that anyway: everyone offering me an opinion on every facet of foreign policy—and believe you me, right now, I get pretty strong opinions.

I do not have the direct answer but we cannot lose sight of what we have. We need those community groups. I said that to the Jewish leaders as well. I said, "Work with the Muslim leaders. Come back with practical things that work. Do not be deterred, with what we have achieved today."

Q340 Chair: We are going to move on, Minister, but I lodge my concern that the situation seems to be escalating outside the West Bank—the points you made to Graham. In the last two weeks there have been attacks on three convoys from Jordan, the arson attack on UNRWA, and more attacks on aid convoys overnight. It is important that the need for restraint is clearly expressed to the Israeli Government.

Lord Ahmad: It is. We have called it out publicly. I have personally put out statements on that.

Q341 Fabian Hamilton: Can I widen the discussion slightly? How important, for regional stability, are some of the strong men around the region—the long-term survivors? I am thinking, obviously, of President Erdoğan in Turkey; Netanyahu, famously the longest-serving prime minister in Israel; and Sisi, in Egypt, who is not quite as long-serving but nonetheless a fairly strong man. I am also thinking, of course, of the monarchies: particularly King Abdullah of Jordan and King Mohammed VI of Morocco.

How important are they and how might things change if they were no longer there? What are we doing to support those leaders that we think are doing a good job—like the Kings of Morocco and Jordan, who are so important to the peace processes?

Lord Ahmad: I agree. Taking Morocco first, as the Minister responsible, we have had an extensive level of engagement. Foreign Minister Bourita and I talk very regularly. Whilst Morocco is removed from the issues that we have just been talking about, it has an important role.

Coming back to one of the things Brendan focused on—getting in humanitarian aid—Ashdod, as you will know, is full of Moroccans, or people of Moroccan heritage. Yes, we help to facilitate: we had the



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structures and because of our relationship with Morocco, we were able to share those. We did see that Moroccan aid was some of the first aid to get through because of the relationship between His Majesty and the Israeli Government. We have been helping to strengthen that.

The short answer, in Morocco's case, is: absolutely. We have seen them play an important role in the Abraham Accords. They have stood firm on this particular issue and our relationship with them is strong. To digress for a moment, when the earthquakes hit, our relationship meant that we were the ones who helped facilitate UN access into Morocco.

I always found King Abdullah to be extremely inspiring in his messages, to which Graham just alluded, about coexistence. Indeed, he was one of the first people I met when the current crisis broke out. His famous Amman message is very powerful and needs to resonate more than ever. That is why my most recent engagement with Jordan was an inward-bound visit with their Investment Minister. We were very clear about the role we must play and the requirements for stability for investment within Jordan. But Jordan, as we all know, is very dependent on, and is arguably most impacted by, what is happening in Israel and Palestine. That, again, is an important relationship.

You mentioned President Erdoğan in answering Bob earlier. I think Turkey has an important role. President Erdoğan recognises the strength of Israel, again quite bilaterally. The strength of our bilateral relations lends into providing that influence. I think Turkey will play a continuing role, not just in the current crisis but, going forward, more widely.

In the last few months, both the Foreign Secretary and I have had two meetings with the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, at which Stephen was also present. The Crown Prince has a clear vision of where he wants to go. Saudi Arabia is a key component in the situation.

Regarding other countries, I am a great fan of the Bahrainis. I think they have made some great progress. We have not touched on human rights—which is often a challenging issue in the Middle East—and the progress we have made with Bahrainis. We must use the lens of that country, as it stands today, to make the progress we want to see on issues. These—

Chair: Forgive me, Minister, but Dan does want to bring you back to that topic in detail, so I am going to cut you short.

Lord Ahmad: Okay, I will wait for that, but I would make that point.

Fabian Hamilton: I agree with you about Bahrain.

Q342 **Bob Seely:** What would you say are the main threats to the UK and its interests in the Middle East and North Africa region, and where do you think they are they most likely to materialise? Terrorism, extremism, population explosion, population migration, climate change—what are the things generally in the region that concern you the most?



Lord Ahmad: We see in events in the Middle East that security is an immense challenge. We have already alluded to the threat of malign actors and their influence through proxies. The prosperity agenda is very important, which is why we have been pursuing it more widely through our GCC FTA; I hope we will be able to make real progress on that. We also need to recognise the strength of foreign direct investment into the UK. Yesterday, I did two events for the 200th anniversary of our relations with Bahrain and the 125th of our relations with Kuwait. As you know, Kuwait is one of the largest sovereign investors in the UK.

To address real dangers, we need to be harnessing the issues around AI and cyber, and how we work with key countries with our own capabilities and capacity. Regional security is important to them, as we have seen in the agreements they have signed—again using Bahrain as my example—and the discussions the Saudis are having with the US. We need to develop that sort of cohesive and security plan for them as well.

The people-to-people links are also in a more progressive mode. I think the recent electronic visa schemes we have introduced have also helped.

Q343 **Bob Seely:** Do you think the security and extremism debate that dominates the media, because it is very often accompanied by violence, is overstated when it comes to your work in the region?

Lord Ahmad: What we have seen is that all it takes is a trigger to spark something that becomes a major issue. We have talked about malign actors, specifically Iran, and how the ability to spark something through proxies is very real. What happens there has a direct impact. People often talk about the impact on the Arab street or the streets of the Middle East, but it has resonance across the world.

Q344 **Bob Seely:** What do you think are the primary drivers changing life in the Middle East? Obviously, there is a great deal of difference between North Africa, the misery in Gaza, and the Gulf states. What drivers are you keeping an eye on?

Lord Ahmad: I will ask Stephen to come in on this, but I think it is across the piece. I have alluded to the prosperity agenda and enhanced trade with many of these countries.

Working together on issues such as human rights is personally important to me, and we have seen progress in that respect. Climate is also important—let's not forget that after our COP we had COPs in Egypt and the UAE on how we strengthen climate partnership. The Saudis have a very ambitious programme of turning a large part of their desert into a solar park. These are existential challenges on which we need to work with the region.

Then there are the people-to-people links. We have not touched on education. On a lighter note, when I was in Algeria, I signed an agreement on primary school education in that country which is now delivered in English—we now have that happening in tertiary education as well—and few weeks later, President Macron was there with six Ministers. The soft



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power we have through our universities and in the education sphere also adds to our influence. Stephen, do you want to add anything?

Stephen Hickey: *indicated dissent.*

Q345 **Bob Seely:** I don't want to sound cynical; it is great that you are talking about messages landing and wonderful that we have all these connections, but do you accept that a result is not a message landing, but getting people to change behaviour?

In some of the examples you have given about messages landing, whether it is with the Palestinians, the Israelis or the Iranians, I do not necessarily see progress after the message has landed. Giving a message is great, but are we using all our power—soft and hard power, as well as smart power, however you want to define that—to get our way, have our voice heard and get our influence out there?

Lord Ahmad: The short answer is yes, but I also agree that the real delivery is through the action on the ground. Taking certain countries in the region as an example, we have seen reforms. Taking Bahrain as a working example, our investments over several years have resulted in alternative sentencing and moratoriums on the death penalty. Those are priorities in UK foreign policy, but they are helping to deliver. Why? I come back to the point: because of the practical investments that we have made through people and technical support and through sharing insights and experiences. Yes, we are getting delivery.

Israel, Palestine, Iran and so on do resonate. I feel strongly that what the UK thinks matters diplomatically. That is why we are seeing, one hopes, progress in certain countries—the fact that Iran did not pursue further escalation was an important part of the extensive engagement in intense diplomacy conducted by the Foreign Secretary.

The situation is not perfect, and yes—I totally agree—the real fruits of that labour come from action on the ground. But do we see results from our diplomacy? I would answer yes.

[Royston Smith took the Chair]

Q346 **Dan Carden:** Good morning, Lord Ahmad. You were just talking to Fabian about some of the progress made in Bahrain. I wanted to ask a little more about our influence on the issue of human rights. Perhaps I could let you finish those points.

Lord Ahmad: Many of these countries are Muslim, so it becomes slightly personal. Human rights were at the core of my upbringing, my thinking and my faith learning, so it really riles me that we do not see this in practical terms across many of these countries. But what we have seen in Bahrain through a constructive level of engagement—I am not saying all the objectives have been achieved—has been progress on many different areas. I have already told Bob about alternative sentencing and juvenile justice, and we have seen progress on human rights overall, including women's rights.



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When I got appointed as Minister in 2017, I did not think that I would be invited to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia on a human rights mission—I was not MENA Minister at that time. But I was. Some 39% of people employed in Saudi Arabia, including at senior levels, are now women. We have seen a difference on gender representation in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and across other countries. Qatar is a good example, and we have also done a great deal of work on UAE. There is a real progress and opening up.

I come back to a key point in all this. Human rights are probably the most challenging part of my portfolio, notwithstanding our discussions just now on Israel-Palestine. But you must start where that country is today. If you look back at our own history—the suffragette movement; it was 1928 when women in totality got rights—and you share it, the substance of the conversation becomes very different in terms of the results that Bob was alluding to. Yes, we are doing some really good work in collaboration with key countries on this very agenda.

Q347 Dan Carden: In terms of balancing the need and role of states in the region that are providing stability and important leadership and are key allies to the UK, how do you tackle individual human rights abuses that you see reported?

Lord Ahmad: First and foremost, it is a vast subject but you can break it down into issues that arise from consular cases, which can take up time. As a rule, the first thing is to offer direct access to a Minister on certain cases, and that has certainly happened with me. That provides a horizon of hope for the family concerned on any issue that has arisen and a constructive understanding on how to resolve the issue. Sometimes the issue comes from a lack of understanding of culture, insights or local practices, and it can be almost accidental; this is specific to consular.

On broader issues of human rights, we have to see where the best equity is in terms of making progress on this issue. Take the example of human rights and women's rights. We talked about the tragic case of Mahsa Amini. As I have said in the House of Lords at the Dispatch Box, the first person to accept Islam was a woman.

The Prophet of Islam was working for her: she proposed to him. So, let us have a discussion with that part of the world and about equality; but let us do it in that context. That cannot then be challenged. If I am wrong, tell me, because these are facts. I think that is a way of bridging gaps: that you have a working understanding of the situation you are dealing with and where you will get the best return on how you invest. But do it in a way of partnership working, of constructive engagements.

In all these places, but in the MENA region particularly, relationships, the investment, matter more than anything. I am sure that you have found that in your travels. Those relationships you nurture matter, because sometimes, on some of the most challenging issues, I have been able to resolve things by picking up the phone to X and they say, "Okay, Tariq, I have got you; we are able to do that." That investment in relationship is going to be key, going forward.



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Q348 **Dan Carden:** One example this week is that the BBC is reporting serious human rights abuses in Saudi Arabia, in the building of its new city, to clear land. It is a project being delivered by Western companies as well. Is that something you will be taking up?

Lord Ahmad: In all of these, we have what I call constructive human rights dialogue. I alluded earlier to my going to Saudi. In October or November 2023, we had Dr Hala here, who is head of the Saudi Human Rights Commission. She visited the UK and met with judges, women's groups and civil society as well. That was our way of demonstrably showing how we can be constructive and how they engage.

On the questions you raise on human rights across the piece, whether it is Saudi or any other country, we will raise these. But we also need to balance it: this is not about headlining everything. The best way to unravel human rights issues, whether it is consular issues, specific cases or, indeed, broader issues, is through constructive diplomatic engagement, but sometimes done in a very private way as well. You get more return. Sometimes there are atrocious issues that happen, as we have seen in Iran, and that needs a collective effort of countries such as ourselves to actually call those out.

Q349 **Dan Carden:** Finally, taking a step back from the specific issues, do you think that, in the multipolar world that everybody talks about, which we live in now, there is more consciousness in countries that are autocracies, led by Russia, China, of being against democratic, liberal values? How do you see the dispute between the two?

Lord Ahmad: We have to be very clear about this. Of course there is a challenge. We have seen how Russia has acted. It is less talked about, but the influence of the Wagner Group was very clear in key parts of Africa, where we saw a growing influence. That was interesting. It was not just about a mercenary group; they provided an economic dividend as well. We have to be clear on that.

On China, we have always said we have what I believe to be a mature relationship. That means that we cannot tackle climate change unless China gets on board. At the same time, we have been at the forefront of calling out the appalling situation of the Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang. Equally, their influence over certain partners around the world is also clear. I alluded earlier to the prosperity horizon, the economic dividend we bring. That maybe speaks to Bob's point, too: we can make these cases, land these messages, but there has to be a return. That is why, when I talked of certain relationships, in particular with the MENA region, it is also how we look at that trading relationship, of benefit; and how we provide a real prosperity agenda, because that is what other players do.

Chair: Minister, thanks for coming before us today. As you mentioned earlier, we have a strong relationship with Morocco. Many countries now have acknowledged and accepted Morocco's claim to sovereignty of the Western Sahara, but the UK still has not. Some of the excuses, if that is the right word, that we give are to do with the issue of the Falklands and



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how that would look if we were to accept that Morocco's claim to sovereignty was a just and legitimate one. Recently a professor of international law, Mark Weller, did a report in which he says there is no legal equivalence between the claim of Morocco to the Western Sahara and, perhaps, Argentina's claim to the Falklands. If that is the case and the Foreign Office accepted that, would it make a difference to the way in which the UK looks at Morocco's claim to Western Sahara?

Lord Ahmad: First of all, with Morocco, and for that matter Algeria, we have strong relationships with both. I would describe them as not just strong, but very friendly, and I think that lends to a resolution on the whole question of Western Sahara. I do firmly believe that the UK has an important and diplomatic role to play.

I have not read the report you mentioned, but I know that it will make its way to my desk. I want to read it properly in order to give you a more comprehensive result, but to me it is an important contribution, so let's read it, assess it and see what it says. When it comes back to a totally different situation, such as when we were talking about Iran, I believe the fact that we have kept a more nuanced and balanced position means that we have progressed well in our relations with both countries, but equally we are very much behind Staffan de Mistura's efforts. I am regularly in touch with Staffan de Mistura, the UN envoy, on this issue to see how we can act, and again it comes back to our convening power and being discreetly in support of his efforts to bring the two sides together. It must be resolved.

When we look at many of the disputes and conflicts around the world, speaking personally, I honestly believe that this is one where we can move forward in a positive and constructive way. In short, I think there is a big role for the UK to play in convening and working within the framework of the UN. I am speaking quite directly to Staffan de Mistura on this particular issue.

Q350 **Chair:** Can I ask you, then, about our role as penholder in both Libya and Yemen? Do you think that we are doing enough in both those countries when we have a stalemate in Libya and worse in Yemen?

Lord Ahmad: On Libya, I would go back to when I first entered Parliament. I remember being on the Back Benches, and it was about getting a better understanding of why Libya happened when the whole removal of Gaddafi happened. The most important thing about Libya was its tribal influences; there were 35 or 36 tribes. I am sure that Fabian will have good oversight of this as well, but they were the ones determining how Libya moved forward. It is tragic when you see that 39% of oil resources in Africa are in Libya, so it is not what I would call in need of humanitarian aid. It needs development and structured support, and again I come back to that phrase "prosperity agenda", but we need this intervention on the two warring sides. Yes, we are penholders, but even as recently as Abdoulaye Bathily there was a bit of a fallout. He is no longer in position, so the UN envoy has been removed.



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There are some plans on the table, including the ones presented by the Egyptians, who I have been in discussion with, and those need to be harnessed. Because of what is happening in MENA and the focus on Israel-Palestine, the focus has changed, but I would not say that says a conflict can be resolved in the same way as Western Sahara. However, it needs that political impetus from the two sides to come together and those who have influence over them, and we are focused on that.

The UN often says, "What is the UN doing?" The UN is only as good as its members—I think we need to recognise that—and therefore it is an onus on both. It is for the UN to recognise which country has equity, and that brings me on to Yemen, which you mentioned. Prior to 7 October, some good progress was being made. Talking of UK diplomacy, it was our diplomacy that bridged the gap between the United Nations and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the work it was doing with the Houthis to bring the two sides together. We have been investing in Libya; when the Derna flooding happened, we stepped up and were there, working with OCHA and other UN agencies. It is the same with the Houthis. Prior to the situation in Yemen, with the engagement that the Saudis were having with the Houthis, we were facilitating our development support through that channel.

Recently, when I was in Riyadh for a meeting around the World Economic Forum, where we were meeting with all the Foreign Ministers, I purposely met with the Saudis, a UN envoy and the Americans to see how we could take the momentum that we had until the end of last year and bring it to the fore again. The Houthis issue is a big issue, but we are engaging extensively with the Government of Yemen. This week David and I are hosting the new Yemeni Prime Minister here in London. Again, we have been engaging on Libya. During Derna, I had a chat and an extensive conversation—it was a direct discussion over the phone, not in person—with the Libyan President. I have also met the Vice-President and their former Foreign Minister. I would say again that the issue in Yemen—we have seen a slight reduction in recent weeks in what was happening in the Red sea. That has come through pressure and our Operation Prosperity, with other countries including Bahrain, who were formerly part of that, and which has also helped send a message.

With Yemen, I again use the word, grasping the equities a country has. The Saudis have a role to play. They are the bridge with the Houthis. We are behind that particular effort, but we were the ones who brought the UN effectively into that, and we are dealing with all parties in that respect.

Q351 Chair: But are all parties on the same page? If we look at the road map to peace, what happens in the event that the PLC signs up to that deal with the Houthis and the Saudis and the Emiratis and the rest? Who is going to guarantee their security in the event that a deal is done?

Even though a deal is done at Government level, it is the same as in this country—that doesn't mean that everyone will agree with it. We only have to look at Brexit. The solution can be quite divisive, even though it becomes the Government's position. How would we guarantee security



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for Yemen in the event that the road map makes its progress and the peace deal is signed, after the coalition forces currently there leave—Saudis, Emiratis and other forces? What happens then?

Lord Ahmad: I think there have to be regional guarantors, and that is why the Saudi role is extremely important. They are invested in it, not just in terms of their current operations; they are also investing in new facilities on the ground in Yemen, in terms of operations, in building hospitals and so on. So I think, while we are supporting them directly, through diplomatic efforts as well as through development support, they will be the real guarantors of peace and security, and bridge the gap between the Houthi and the Government of Yemen, with whom we have a relationship—but it is a positive one, and while the UK won't be the lead player, we will certainly have a role to play.

Q352 **Bob Seely:** How do you see the UK's role developing in the Levant countries over the next decade?

Lord Ahmad: Across the piece, when we look at the whole region, I come back to the fundamentals of what I have said before: we need to invest in regional structures, regional partners, those countries that have influence across the region, and use our equities appropriately.

The world is changing. It is much more dynamic. It is much more global. We need to recognise our role and our influence. We can't resolve every issue. We can't resolve every crisis, but we do have a role to play.

Q353 **Bob Seely:** Let's look at each of Lebanon, Syria and Jordan, briefly. Lebanon: it is in a terrible condition as a country. It is heavily influenced by Hezbollah. How do we deal with a country like that? What does our relationship with Lebanon consist of right now?

Lord Ahmad: In terms of recent engagement, both the Foreign Secretary and I went to Lebanon. We have had a footprint there, as you will know, since about 2009, in terms of supporting the Lebanese army in the North with Syria.

We went to the various areas. We had a very constructive meeting with Prime Minister Mikati and also with General Aoun, the leader of the Lebanese army.

Some progress is being made, firstly, on the South with Hezbollah. You will know where the Litani divide is. There are 13 points that were in discussion. I believe seven have been addressed, so they have been resolved. There are six outstanding issues on the border that need to be resolved.

There is practical help in terms of support that we are giving to the Lebanese directly.

Q354 **Bob Seely:** On the Lebanese army front, is it a force that could ever stand up to Hezbollah? To what extent can it actually continue to develop as a coherent military force that is the dominant military force in that country, over and above Hezbollah?



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Lord Ahmad: Sometimes you judge an organisation by the principal. We met the principal, in General Aoun. He is a very dynamic general. He had some very clear ideas. When he asked for British support, he didn't ask for arms and weapons; he asked for uniforms. That was because there are 5,000 or 6,000 people ready to be recruited into the Lebanese army. As I said, good progress is being made by UNIFIL and some of the operations there, and there is progress on the security issues in the South. He also had a clear plan on how they fill those Hezbollah positions and get Hezbollah to move North of the Litani. Of course, Hezbollah, as we know, is a recognised political party within Lebanon.

So I am not saying it is all big hope, but we are doing some practical things and we have a role there.

Q355 **Bob Seely:** Turning briefly to Syria, how on earth do we deal with a regime like Assad's, which is probably one of the largest funders and suppliers of illicit drugs in the Middle East, if not the world, and given its appalling slaughter of its own people in the Syrian civil war?

Lord Ahmad: First of all, we do not have diplomatic relations. You are right about the illicit trade. When you go to the borders of Jordan and see the impact of captagon, it is eye-watering, both in terms of the scale and the shocking nature of the billions it makes for the Assad regime. Again, it is demonstrable that he does not care about his own people.

In terms of the conundrum around what Syria is, we have accountability mechanisms. I talked earlier about having to assess where we have best equity. At the moment, the best equity we have is in lending support to the Jordanians in terms of their challenge, and in the sanctions we have at our disposal against Bashar al-Assad.

The other thing we are watching very closely, and you will have seen it, is the welcome back to the Arab League. That is not a unified, warm, all-embracing welcome; it is very different for each country. To be honest, I am not sure where that is headed.

We also have a lot of challenges on the ground. We touched briefly on extremism, and let us not forget that Daesh is still very much there and present.

Q356 **Bob Seely:** Finally, on Jordan, we have very deep and fond ties with the Jordanians on lots of different levels. How stable is Jordan at the moment? Where is our relationship with that country going? And what thing that we are doing is most valuable to us but also to the Jordanians?

Lord Ahmad: I think the relationship is very strong. We have stood with Jordan. Our co-operation on Gaza has been exemplary, and Prince Rashid, who leads their humanitarian effort, has been a constant partner in that respect. As you know, we did a lot of air drops together. So that is No. 1.

On a bilateral basis, as I alluded to earlier, we are looking at their investment climate, and we recently had an inward visit from their investment Minister. I am hoping to go out in the next two weeks to look



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at the issue of Israel-Palestine, but also quite specifically at our bilateral relationship.

King Abdullah has been a frequent visitor to the UK. We are also in the midst of planning a visit by the Crown Prince here as well. And education would be the final point.

Q357 Bob Seely: You are confident the Jordanian royal air force will continue to shoot down any missiles that fly over their country from the Red sea and Iran.

Lord Ahmad: The defence of their airspace is theirs. Every country has a right to protect its airspace, and I am sure they will continue to do so.

Chair: Sorry, Bob, I will have to move on. The Minister only has a couple more minutes, and he has already given us a bit longer. We have a very small question from Dan, and then I think we will wrap up.

Q358 Dan Carden: Minister, what is your view of Israel's decision to ban al-Jazeera and of media freedom in Israel at this point?

Lord Ahmad: I have a very straight answer on that: we are strong supporters of media freedom, and I think it was the wrong decision to make.

Chair: There is a last question from Graham.

Q359 Graham Stringer: This is slightly off the area we have been talking about, but the UN is part of your responsibilities. Is there likely to be a vote on the UN's proposals for a pandemic agreement this week? What is the UK's position on that? It would transfer a lot of responsibility for decisions during an epidemic or a pandemic to the World Health Organisation and away from the UK Government.

Lord Ahmad: I need to get the full detail of that, but one thing I will say, speaking from experience, is that we showed leadership when it came to the pandemic and the World Health Organisation. In terms of the parameters for working with any organisation, we need to ensure that we have influence over its governance, its direction and its policy, and that we have a role to play. Co-operation around the pandemic established new relationships, and our relationship with India was of great benefit to many millions. But, if I may, I will come back to you on the specifics.

Graham Stringer: That would be great. I am sorry to spring that on you. If you could write to the Committee and myself, I would be grateful.

Chair: Lord Ahmad—Tariq—Stephen and the team, thank you for your indulgence and for running over. We have covered as much as we could, but there is a lot more we could have covered. We are very grateful to you. With that, we will end the session.