

Foreign Affairs Committee

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

Tuesday 28 November 2023

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

Questions 47 - 93

Witnesses

[I](#): Nuradin Dirie, Senior Adviser, European Institute of Peace; Roger Middleton, Managing Director, Sabi Insight; and Dr Nisar Majid, Director (Somalia), Peace & Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform (PeaceRep), London School of Economics.

[II](#): John Deverell CBE, Independent Consultant, First Call Partners, Former Senior Military Officer, and Director of Defence Diplomacy, Ministry of Defence.

[III](#): Professor Stig Jarle Hansen, Norwegian Political Scientist, Historian and Author, and Associate Professor, Norwegian University of Life Sciences; Jonathan Guiffard, Senior Fellow, Defence and Africa, Institut Montaigne; Dr Nicholas Westcott, Professor of Practice, Department of Politics and International Studies, SOAS.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Nuradin Dirie, Roger Middleton and Dr Nisar Majid.

Q47 **Chair:** Welcome to this session of the Foreign Affairs Committee as part of our counter-terrorism inquiry. Today, we will be looking at Somalia, the Sahel and west Africa. We are very fortunate to be joined by three wonderful experts. We are very grateful to you all for taking the time. Could I ask you each to introduce yourselves?

Dr Majid: Good afternoon. I am Nisar Majid. I lead the research programme at the LSE that is focused on Somalia.

Nuradin Dirie: I am Nuradin Dirie. I am a senior adviser at the European Institute of Peace. I have been working in and around Somalia for the last 30 years.

Roger Middleton: Good afternoon. My name is Roger Middleton. I am the managing director of Sabi Insight, a research consultancy focused on Somalia and east Africa.

Q48 **Chair:** We would love to kick off by talking about al-Shabaab. Nuradin, I would be interested in your assessment of what this “Greater Somalia” Islamic state that al-Shabaab talks about in its publications and flashy videos looks like.

Nuradin Dirie: Al-Shabaab is an al-Qaeda affiliate. It has a global agenda. Even though it acts more as a nationalist domestic organisation nowadays, the original allegiance with al-Qaeda still exists. It has foreign elements within it. It wants to create an Islamic state in Somalia and also to be part of the global caliphate state, where it runs the country, and perhaps the world, with its version of sharia.

In terms of how it views Somalia, it does not recognise Somalia’s modern state borders. For al-Shabaab, Somalia is Greater Somalia, including parts of Ethiopia and Kenya. It has shown that it has ambitions beyond Greater Somalia, where it is willing to carry out—and is capable of doing so, as it has demonstrated—operations in east Africa, as far as Tanzania.

Q49 **Chair:** Can we delve into that relationship with al-Qaeda? Al-Shabaab has been in existence for over 20 years now. It operates almost as a pseudo-state in parts of Somalia, collecting taxes and providing security services in return. What is the relationship with al-Qaeda? How much of its funding is it using locally in Somalia? How much of it is to, for example, support al-Qaeda in Afghanistan or beyond?

Roger Middleton: The important thing about that relationship is to remember a couple of things. First, al-Shabaab was in existence and very successful before it pledged its allegiance and was accepted as an affiliate of al-Qaeda. That original position of the organisation is really important as we try to understand how al-Shabaab operates now and how it might operate in the future.



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You are looking at an organisation that is experienced and was founded by people who had been involved in struggles with future members of al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and other parts of the struggles against communism in the late 1980s in Afghanistan in particular, but this is an organisation rooted in Somali history, as well as Somali experiences of political Islam and of trying to create a modern nation state in east Africa from their own unique history.

That means that today the allegiance to al-Qaeda is important ideologically and in terms of the positioning of al-Shabaab, but, in terms of the operation of al-Shabaab—and others may be able to give more detail on this—this is an organisation focused primarily on Somalia. The money that it raises is almost exclusively used inside Somalia for its operations there.

Others may be able to give more detail on this, but external support from al-Qaeda globally is not a massively significant part of its revenue streams. It is an important relationship for al-Shabaab, and there are some exchanges of personnel and knowledge, and those kinds of things, but, in thinking about it in detail, we need to remember that this, first and foremost, is a Somali organisation with global ambitions and ideas.

Nuradin Dirie: Today, al-Shabaab is the most successful al-Qaeda affiliate after the setback in Syria and Iraq. In fact, it is so successful that there has been evidence that it is externally supporting other organisations regionally, but it does not receive money externally.

Q50 **Chair:** Can I push you on who it is supporting regionally?

Nuradin Dirie: It supports organisations in east Africa like the one in Tanzania and the one in Kenya, as well as operations it does in Ethiopia. As Roger said, it has become financially viable by becoming more successful at collecting its revenue from Somalia.

Dr Majid: I would tend to focus more on its national focus. It certainly has the capacity in Ethiopia and Kenya, and has demonstrated that recently. As Roger suggests, its primary focus is national. Its capacity to raise funds is generally from local sources through taxation.

I would also, if I may, slightly reframe the question. It is important to think about al-Shabaab in terms of its opposite, the Government, and the political context within which it exists. A great degree of its strength is very much a function of the weaknesses, the fragility and the more upward accountability of the internationally supported federal Government and federal arrangement. It is not really possible to talk about al-Shabaab without talking about the Government and the context within which it exists.

Q51 **Brendan O'Hara:** First of all, before I go on to how embedded it is in society, is the revenue purely internal? Where does it get revenue from? Is it just from taxation in the areas that it controls, or does it have any



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other sources of income?

Dr Majid: It is primarily from local sources. It is from checkpoints. It is from the ability to tax in areas that it controls. It is also well known for its extraterritorial capacity. In Government areas and at ports and airports, it is able to extort money from different sources. I cannot say whether there may be some finances that come from outside, but most people would accept that the vast majority of its funds are generated locally. It is also important to recognise that, because that is one of the reasons why it has been resilient. It has local arrangements and deals with different constituencies, different clans and different forms of representation.

That is, again, why I stress the point that the Government system is, arguably, more accountable and looks more to raise money and to gain resources from the external environment, including from us. That is an important way to see them differently. One is more locally embedded and more accountable, and makes more deals with local populations as part of its political bargains and arrangements, and the other is more externally focused, as a lot of the literature would suggest.

Q52 Brendan O'Hara: Is the embeddedness that it has within its communities a result of coercion or by mutual agreement with the communities in which it operates?

Dr Majid: It varies. It has different relations with different communities. Some may be outright coercion. In others, there will be deals that are made. Its relations will vary across the country, depending on history, on leverage, on the relative power of other groups, and on the grievances that exist in different places.

Nuradin Dirie: The basis of it is coercion, and then it builds on that. Communities, even when making deals with al-Shabaab, know the capacity for retribution that it has. As Dr Majid suggested, it is because of the weakness of the Government and because they cannot get protection from them that they are almost coerced into having relations or deals with al-Shabaab in isolated areas that al-Shabaab controls or surrounds.

The basis of it is coercion. Al-Shabaab has not really won the narrative or been able to convince the majority of the Somali public to agree with its version of an Islamic state. The evidence to prove that is that, every time a small town or district is liberated by AMISOM or by federal Government forces, it turns against al-Shabaab.

Dr Majid: One has to think about al-Shabaab as not just a so-called terror organisation, but one that provides a political order in different places, as well as a form of justice and an ability to enforce it, as was alluded to at the beginning of the conversation, and an efficient taxation system. It is narrow just to think of it as a coercive, militant organisation.

Q53 Brendan O'Hara: I wanted to ask about al-Shabaab's capability of governing Somalia. If it has this political infrastructure—an



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Administration, a tax system and a policing system—how capable would it be of taking over the whole of Somalia and governing it as what we now recognise as Somalia?

Nuradin Dirie: It is important to recognise that al-Shabaab is not present in the majority of Somalia. There are areas in the north that constitute about 50% of Somalia—Puntland and Somaliland—where it has never been. Apart from small pockets, it has never controlled any part of Somaliland or Puntland.

Q54 **Brendan O'Hara:** Given the structures that it has, would it have the capability to do it?

Nuradin Dirie: I do not think so. I do not think that it can take over the whole country. If AMISOM leaves tomorrow, Puntland, Somaliland and Galmudug, which is about 60% of Somalia, will still survive and be able to defend themselves. With direct strategic support to other areas of Somalia, they will be able to stave it off. It takes a small amount of capacity to cause havoc and disrupt, but I do not think that it will be able to take all of Somalia.

Q55 **Chair:** In terms of its not having secured a significant foothold within Somaliland or Puntland, is that not also because some of the leadership choose to leave their families in Somaliland and, therefore, there is a benefit to them in not causing chaos within Somaliland? Although they are only small buckets, they are their families and they choose to leave them protected.

Nuradin Dirie: I do not think that that is the main reason. If that is the case, it is a very limited number of individuals who do that. The reason why it is not in Somaliland or Puntland is that the people of Somaliland and Puntland do not want it—period.

Dr Majid: I agree with Nuradin. You definitely have to treat northern parts of Somalia and Somaliland separately. They have a more established form of political order. If we are talking about its ability to take over the country, we need to go back to 2006, when the Islamic Courts Union took over a large part of the country. It was considered an indigenous movement, and the attack on the Islamic Courts Union by Ethiopia, backed by the US, fragmented it and led to al-Shabaab.

It is a difficult question. It is an opportunistic group. It has important means of centralised control and, therefore, in theory, could take over, but it would be limited to southern parts of the country. That is a large share of the population of the country, but you would not expect it to then move into Puntland or Somaliland.

I would not use the word "chaos" to describe the way in which it operates. In fact, we might say the opposite. If we take southern Somalia in general, the areas that are under its control are perhaps more ordered than other areas held by different groups.



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Nuradin Dirie: The only slight exception to that is that the Islamic Courts Union and al-Shabaab are not the same thing. There is a subtle difference. The Islamic Courts Union was a nationalist movement. Its core aim was to kick the Ethiopians out of Somalia. The reason why it succeeded in capturing a lot of areas at that time was markedly different from what al-Shabaab is calling for at the moment.

Roger Middleton: I would just like to tie something important together. When we look at Somaliland and Puntland, it is not necessarily just a case of al-Shabaab weakness there, but of strong and effective political settlements, more than governance systems. These are not perfect by any means, and there are many challenges there, but these are political settlements that have roots in the community at both the elite level and, to a reasonable degree, at the more general population level.

That gives them a strength to resist something like al-Shabaab, which it is fair to say is lacking in areas further south in Somalia. That creates space for al-Shabaab where it is able to provide, as colleagues have mentioned several times, effective governance mechanisms. To take this question of checkpoints, if you are travelling from Kismayo to Mogadishu, al-Shabaab will give you one receipt for your truck to make that journey. If you go on routes controlled by the federal Government, you will get a receipt and make a payment at every single checkpoint. There is a difference in efficiency.

Q56 **Brendan O'Hara:** I do not think that you can underestimate the importance of the idea of living in that ordered society, if the areas that al-Shabaab controls have that. How is it viewed by the people who are living in areas that it controls, if it is providing basic order?

Nuradin Dirie: It is providing that order as a means of controlling those communities. As Dr Majid suggested, communities will toe the line due to the weakness of the Government and out of desperation, but the social and political leadership and elites of those communities are not in those areas. They are refugees or IDPs in Mogadishu or other safe areas that al-Shabaab does not control. That, in itself, is further evidence that it is not by consensus but by the basic tactics that it uses, such as retribution and coercion. You do not get on the wrong side of al-Shabaab while there is no Government to rescue you. That is what is making most people toe the line in the areas that it controls.

Dr Majid: One of the really big problems in southern Somalia, which Roger has touched on, is the level of the social and power hierarchies. For example, the federal member states and the Government represent certain powerful or dominant clan interest groups. This affects many areas of international engagement, including an interest in asking, "Is this Government, represented by this dominant group, in our best interests if we are a less dominant or marginalised group, or is al-Shabaab a better option?" These tensions are playing out at the moment.



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To some extent, perceptions of the relative value of al-Shabaab vis-à-vis Government are difficult to make and will play out differently in different areas. In some, people are known to have been brainwashed by al-Shabaab into its way of thinking and, therefore, there will be a lot of propaganda against the Government as part of narratives. In others, they will see al-Shabaab as being a perfectly legitimate actor, because of what the alternatives are.

Q57 Graham Stringer: You are giving fascinating information to the Committee already, so thank you for coming. Can you tell the Committee how recently you have been in Somalia? How much recent direct experience do you have?

Nuradin Dirie: I was there last week.

Roger Middleton: I was there last year.

Dr Majid: I have been there three times this year.

Q58 Graham Stringer: AMISOM has been trying to defeat al-Shabaab for 15 years but has failed. Why is that?

Nuradin Dirie: I would not say that it has failed.

Graham Stringer: Not succeeded, then.

Nuradin Dirie: It has not completed the job. AMISOM has been successful in taking control of large swathes of Somali territory from al-Shabaab. It is not only AMISOM; other international counter-terrorist activities have been supporting it. However, in terms of where it is now, you are right that it is not completing the job. Al-Shabaab still controls about 30% of Somalia, all in the south-central region, including some districts that it controls directly and some main supply routes between different districts that it controls, where people cannot move freely.

With the pressure of resources and time, given that AMISOM is due to withdraw at the end of 2024, that makes the job more complex. The Somali Government will need support. Somalia cannot do it alone. One of the worst-case scenarios is that, after 20 years of huge and significant international support of and investment in Somalia, we get into a scenario of abandonment, which we have seen elsewhere. That would be a nightmare scenario. The UK Government can play a role in supporting the Somali Government to achieve that kind of sustained support. The same mission cannot continue, but there needs to be some sort of support in order for Somalia to take responsibility.

Q59 Graham Stringer: You mentioned resources. Is it simply a resource issue or are there flaws with the strategy and tactics?

Nuradin Dirie: It is all of the above, but, in addition, AMISOM is a formidable foe. It has been shown to be robust, adaptable and very resilient, as we have been talking about today. I agree that it takes more resources and better strategy, as well as longer commitment. From now



on, the Somali Government needs to take responsibility. The current President is taking the fight to al-Shabaab and mobilising all Somalis to make the fighting Somali-owned, but Somalia cannot do it alone, definitely.

Dr Majid: With respect to Nuradin, I do not see things in the same way and I do not think that AMISOM—or ATMIS, as it is now called—has had that much success at all. In fact, the current offensive, which has had some limited success, is very much based on mobilisation of clan militias supported by special forces and by Government forces.

There are very real limits, and we see this over a year after the current offensive against al-Shabaab, where there has been some reconfiguration of territory and some changes, but, having just returned with my colleague from Somalia and Nairobi, nobody is saying to us that we are at a stage of seeing sustained progress in the removal of al-Shabaab, because it is too firmly embedded. It has been in the country for 15 years. Its constituency, its political deals and its social arrangements are grounded with local populations and local elders.

Again, it comes back to the question of where the legitimacy of the Government and AMISOM comes from. It comes from their funders, who are the international community in general. That is deeply problematic. I do not see that things are going to change significantly in the foreseeable future, and I am not hearing that from anybody else.

Q60 **Graham Stringer:** Do the federal Government have the capacity to be effective against al-Shabaab?

Dr Majid: It is a very complex question. I would not want to write that off fully, but the Government have to demonstrate a greater connection with local populations and a greater respect for a narrative around including and representing everybody. Even if we think about the mobilisation against al-Shabaab that we have seen going on now, those being mobilised are the militias from dominant, powerful clans, which is problematic in itself. There has not really been an accompanying narrative of the Government claiming, at least discursively, to represent the population at large, and so that is not how they are being perceived.

For certain interest groups, it is convenient to go along with this movement and, among particular clans, there is definitely an organic movement that has been successful. We could take Hiran and the Hawadle, just to give one example, which have largely cleared al-Shabaab from their area. That is one particular movement, where a clan was already contesting power and the control of checkpoints with al-Shabaab. The Government then jumped on this, because it was a good opportunity to take advantage, but that is not the case for many different groups.

Nuradin Dirie: Dr Majid is absolutely right. I do not see things in an academic way, but all of what you are describing is something that can



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be achieved. Some of it has been achieved. I do not think that there is a zero-sum game. AMISOM has made some progress and had some successes. The Somali Government have had some successes.

I do not think that we can aim for an ideal, inclusive democratic process akin to Switzerland in Somalia at the moment, but the Somali Government will have the capabilities to contain. With the current resource commitment and timing, I would not say that defeating al-Shabaab is certain, but what is more certain and more feasible is containment, even if AMISOM or ATMIS troops leave Somalia. That would need some bilateral and multilateral logistical and specialised training support to the Somali Government.

As an advocate of a peace-making organisation, part of the formula should also be a long-term dialogue, because a military solution is not the only card on the table. The Somali Government sometimes need diplomatic support to encourage them to engage in some sort of dialogue with al-Shabaab.

Q61 Royston Smith: How much of a threat do you consider Daesh Somalia to be? Do you expect that threat to become more significant?

Nuradin Dirie: Daesh is more limited than al-Shabaab. It is geographically constrained to the north-east of Somalia, in the mountains of Puntland, and carries out some operations in the port city of Bosaso. We have not seen a lot of evidence of Daesh increasing. Even though, from time to time, it tries to resurge, it has not been having much success like al-Shabaab. Al-Shabaab sees it as a nuisance and, from time to time, there is a conflict between them, which I wish could be encouraged. I do not see that threat as being more serious.

Roger Middleton: Daesh faces a double challenge. It has the problems from the member state Government in Puntland, but also from al-Shabaab, and principally so in the case of Daesh Somalia. For the foreseeable future, its opportunities are limited.

Dr Majid: I completely agree—and Nuradin certainly knows these dynamics better than I do—that the fact that there are different clans with different grievances is demonstrated by the relationship with Daesh or ISIL in the Bari region. It is a particular group that feels excluded from power, which is one of the underlying predicaments in Somalia. I also agree with Nuradin that some kind of dialogue needs to be started with groups like al-Shabaab, because these grievances that exist across all parts of Somalia are also the case in Puntland. Those extremist groups like al-Shabaab and ISIL can take advantage of some of those forms of marginalisation or discrimination that are widespread, and that is also the case in Puntland.

Q62 Royston Smith: Do sanctions have any impacts on al-Shabaab or Daesh? Do they act as a deterrent at all or do they have no impact?



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Dr Majid: I am not sure whether they have no impact, but the UN monitoring group report that came out last month, which describes a lot of the current offensive over the last year, does not see that their financial or military capacity has been significantly affected by what has been the most significant move against them in the last 10 years or so, so it is questionable. Somalia has the second largest coastline in Africa, so there are plenty of smuggling routes and ways in which arms can come into the country. I cannot say with my hand on my heart that I know for sure, and maybe these guys can correct me, but there does not seem to have been any significant impact so far.

Nuradin Dirie: The charcoal structure targeting al-Shabaab had some affect on its finances, but it quickly adapted. That is probably what pushed it hard into taxation, with the unintended consequence that its revenue has just shot up in that way. The arms embargo is having more impact on Somali Government forces. The Somali President, who was here last week, always talks about this. The UK Government are working with him. The Somali Government not having enough military assets has been one of the issues behind Somali forces not succeeding.

Q63 **Royston Smith:** So sanctions are having no impact. It has found another way to tax people in order to keep its activities going. They have more impact on the Somali Government.

Nuradin Dirie: The arms sanctions have more impact on the Somali Government. Al-Shabaab does not need a huge amount of military assets to cause trouble, but the Somali Government need real military assets, which they cannot get at the moment.

Roger Middleton: The first thing around sanctions is that it is not that they have no impact. They certainly make things more difficult. All arms markets in Somalia, whether they are being used by Government forces or by al-Shabaab, are operating in illegal space, which makes it harder. There is plenty of evidence in UN monitoring group reports of weapons and ammunition issued to federal Government forces turning up on arms markets all over the country, which al-Shabaab is then able to buy and use to fire back at Government forces.

Arms restrictions on Somalia, lowering the number of rounds coming into the country or making it more difficult, has some impact, but it does not alter the war in a fundamental way. Likewise, with financial restrictions and so on, al-Shabaab is highly adaptable and it finds other ways to generate it.

I do not think that it is fair to say that sanctions have no impact, have been negative or should never have been put in place, but we have to recognise that sanctions on their own are not sufficient, in the same way that military action on its own is not sufficient to remove al-Shabaab without effective political strategy from the federal Government and federal member states, and a really nuanced political understanding from Somalia's supporting partners around how our interactions with Somalia



affect those dynamics on the ground. Then you create space for al-Shabaab and it can adapt into it. That is perhaps the way to look at it.

Q64 **Royston Smith:** Is the conflict in Sudan and Ethiopia having any impact on Somalia?

Roger Middleton: You are here looking at UK foreign policy in east Africa. It has really added to the number of things that have taken the attention of Somalia's international partners—the UK, the EU, the Americans and others—away from Somalia. There is big interest in Sudan, which is still massively neglected, and tragically so. For the Americans, that is a really important locus of focus. Ethiopia is a major hegemon for the whole region, and so, naturally, everybody is looking at that.

It left a lot of space for Somalia, and we saw that with the last election crisis, when there was much less international engagement in mediating or pushing the parties into seeking resolution there than had been seen in previous election cycles. That has been a really important impact. Some people might say that that is good, but it has certainly been a big impact.

Nuradin Dirie: Somalia is increasingly looking like the most stable country in the region. Things that happen in Ethiopia in particular have direct consequences on Somalia, and vice versa, because we have a border with Ethiopia that is more than 2,000 kilometres long. Movement of people, arms and information is very fluid in that area. Roger is right that Ethiopia has been one of the major partners working with the international community to persuade Somalia one way or another. If Ethiopia becomes busier with itself or if there is more conflict in Ethiopia, it will have negative consequences.

Dr Majid: Roger touched on the fact that Ethiopia is in a deeply problematic and potentially fragmenting state. Ironically, the Somali region of Ethiopia that has a huge border with Somalia is more peaceful than it has been for decades. There may be an argument to say that, under the previous Ethiopian regime, which very much saw Somalia as a security threat, the change of regime, as well as the conflict in the centre and the north of the country, is certainly giving space in Ethiopia's Somali region.

We are not really seeing any major impact yet on security in Somalia. There was an attack by al-Shabaab over the border earlier this year, but there is also a lot of interest on the Somali side in maintaining the security of its borders. Ethiopia is definitely a volatile and fluid context at the moment, and it is very difficult to see exactly what path it is on, but it is certainly preoccupied with its own internal strife, which seems to be giving a certain space and reprieve for its Somali region and possibly for Somalia.

Chair: We are going to have to go to the last question of this session, but



it would be helpful, as part of answering whatever question Graham asks, if you could also touch on what more the UK could be doing to counter al-Shabaab.

Q65 Graham Stringer: I was very impressed by your recent, immediate and direct experience of Somalia. What is the breadth of that experience? Who were you talking to when you were there? If there is such a thing, what is the ordinary Somalian's view of the UK's support for counter-terrorism?

Dr Majid: That is an interesting question. In terms of who we talk to and where we get our perspectives from, this touches on a crucial issue, in that it is very difficult to get a good appreciation of what the different perspectives are of people on the ground. As a researcher, I have been working in Somalia since the late 1990s, and so I get my impressions through my Somali networks, which are built on trust and long-term relationships and will have their own biases and interests.

A lot of people will struggle to get out into rural areas and to really understand the positions and interests of different people. That is a slightly long-winded answer to your question, but it is also quite fundamental, because it affects all forms of international engagement in Somalia. They all take place through different interlocutors—you could call them gatekeepers—who sometimes provide the type of information that they think we are looking for, or sometimes the type of information and analysis that serves their own personal or group interests.

Those of us who have worked in Somalia for a long time will be aware of this and will have multiple sources of information in order to try to verify, cross check and come up with some confidence in what we are saying and how we are analysing things.

Excuse the long initial answer, but it is, therefore, difficult to exactly answer your question. People have very different views on external interests in Somalia. Certainly, some people who I talk to will question whether we are propping up, effectively, a state and financial interests. Somalia is at the bottom of the Transparency International corruption index. As an outwardly looking political elite, people are looking for resources from the international community, whether it is AMISOM, Kenya Defence Forces, private security contractors or the UN. Somalia is a bit of a playground for multiple interests from the Gulf, from the region and from the international community, and there are many elites that play on that and look to benefit and profit from it.

A lot of Somalis see that. A lot of Somalis would like to get rid of al-Shabaab. I do not think that there is necessarily a lot of ideological alignment with al-Shabaab, but you come back to the question, "What is the alternative? Who is the alternative really representative of?" If that alternative is seen as corrupt, which is one of the No. 1 problems in many surveys that are done in Somalia, you have a problem, because the



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Government themselves are not a cohesive actor and are, arguably, more preoccupied with gaining money for different purposes.

Nuradin Dirie: I talk to everybody, and it would be very brave of me to say what the Somali people think about the UK's involvement. I am sure that there are many in the Somali Government and elite, as well as organisations and civil society, who appreciate it, and there are others who do not follow on a day-to-day basis what the UK is doing in Somalia. The Somali Government and administrations have a lot of faults, but that is what we have now in order to get governance in Somalia. Unfortunately, we have no other ideal alternative at the moment, so we just need to work with what we have.

In terms of what more the UK can do, as penholder at the UN Security Council for all Somalia-related issues, it can really work with the Somali Government to enable the support that Somalia needs post ATMIS. That is the most burning question, which the UK Government are well aware of. That is where I see the UK being able to do more.

Roger Middleton: On that last point around what more the UK can do, what has come out from everything that we have all said is that the key point is how the UK can support the political process that creates a viable alternative to al-Shabaab. There are a couple of things that might be really important for that. One is to create that space for dialogue, but it requires the UK and international partners to allow the Somalis the space to think differently.

One of the challenges that Somalia has faced is an internationalisation of political processes in Somalia—for example, “You must have a constitution with this many clauses, hitting these points, and it must be delivered in six months, one year or 18 months”. This is a political process that is creating a new political order in Somalia out of, essentially, a new country in many ways. It needs space and time to do that, and Somalis need to be able to innovate, try things, fail at those things, and try again. They need support to go through that iterative political process.

It is very difficult for international support to step away from the Gantt charts and Excel sheets of how a political process should happen and to give them space to do that. That is the only way in which they will be able to find a political order that has space for those who are sympathetic to al-Shabaab's ideas but perhaps not the violence, while bringing in other types of Somalis and creating something lasting. That would be my not very specific appeal.

Chair: Thank you all ever so much.

Examination of witness

Witness: John Deverell.

Chair: We are privileged to be joined by John Deverell CBE. In this session, we will be looking specifically at the UK's approach in Somalia and what more the UK can be doing, and questioning what the UK's interest is within Somalia.

Q66 **Brendan O'Hara:** What do you understand the UK's security objectives in Somalia to be?

John Deverell: I listened to a bit of the last session, and I would say pretty much what you heard. That is to try to help the Somali Government to do more to dislodge al-Shabaab, which, as you have also heard, is extremely well embedded—more so than any other terrorist or insurgent group around the world that I have come across or can think of at the moment.

Something that was not mentioned in the bits that I heard of the last session is that it has managed over time to introduce its Salafist thinking very widely through the youth, which is at odds with the more Sufist, tolerant tradition of Islam in Somalia. That is very dangerous in the longer term. It is extremely insidious, extremely successful and extremely systematic compared to the people it is up against—that is, the Somali Government and national forces.

When I think about it, our interests are not least because of the considerable Somali diaspora in the UK. Otherwise, you might say, "Why do we bother?" because, in my experience, al-Shabaab is not very interested in doing very much beyond the boundaries of east Africa. Clearly, we are involved and, since we are involved, we need to do it better than we do. I have a few thoughts on that from a military point of view.

Q67 **Brendan O'Hara:** Would you consider, as the FCDO did in its written evidence, the UK's counter-terrorism approach to be coherent and integrated when it comes to what it is doing in Somalia?

John Deverell: Rather than use those words, I would ask whether it is adequate, bearing in mind what we could do. From my experience there and elsewhere in the world, we constrain ourselves in terms of what we could do.

I was there in late 2016 and early 2017, when the British military advisory team started up in a place called Baidoa, which is a town north of Mogadishu. As with other British military advisory and training teams around the world, we are heavily constrained by our risk appetite, which is very lacking, which means that British military personnel doing the training are obliged to wave goodbye at the camp gates. They cannot accompany the trainees outside the camp gates, which goes very much against what we do traditionally, where we not only train but then go out and mentor in the field.



In terms of understanding from a CSSF conflict pool point of view, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to assess the outcomes of what we are doing. We are quite good at measuring the inputs but not the outcomes. If we want to be serious about helping counter-terrorism in Somalia, we need to be better at doing that, and our risk appetite constrains us from doing so.

Q68 **Brendan O'Hara:** Hopefully, I am not misrepresenting what Dr Majid said, but I wrote down that al-Shabaab is too firmly embedded to be got rid of militarily. What we are hearing from a lot of people is that taking on al-Shabaab is almost like trying to catch smoke. Strategically, are we doing the right thing with our military support, if, in fact, those we are trying to catch cannot be caught?

John Deverell: I would not say that they cannot be caught. I would certainly agree with what we have heard until now, which is that it is going to be extremely difficult, because they are so well entrenched. I infer from what you said that there is a general recognition that the military, however good they are—and they are not—are not going to do it on their own. We always advocate, doctrinally and practically, a comprehensive, all-of-Government approach.

As we heard earlier, if the Government are not doing enough, helped by us, to look after the people properly, all bets are off, because there will always be grievances that the bad guys can exploit. That is very much the case in Somalia.

Going back specifically to the military aspects, the point is that AMISOM and the Somali National Army, which we have been busy trying to train up, are woefully inadequate. If you look purely at the military element of the comprehensive approach, they are woefully inadequate. They tend not to get out of their vehicles. They are predictable. The leadership is very poor. They are badly trained.

We have done what we can at mid-level, which is at company and battalion level, to help on that, but, as I tried to point out earlier, we are heavily constrained because the MOD and Permanent Joint Headquarters do not allow our soldiers to take risks by going out, which could improve things significantly. In theory, we are doing the right thing but, in practice, we are severely hobbled.

Q69 **Chair:** You said that al-Shabaab was focused mainly on east Africa. Does it have the military capability at the moment, given that there is concerted international pressure to try to prevent it from being able to do so, to launch something in east Africa if it wanted to?

John Deverell: It does more widely. Perennially, as you will know, it has done things—in some cases, terrorist acts—against the Brits in Kenya. That has happened over the years. Indeed, one reason why the Kenyan military are involved is because they see these people as a threat to them. There is a large Somali population in parts of northern Kenya. In



terms of whether al-Shabaab has a wider geographic intent than that, I do not know. I have never seen any evidence, but others may well know better than I do.

Chair: That is very helpful.

Q70 **Royston Smith:** Thanks for joining us today, John. It is good to see you. You talked about the MOD and the Government being—in my words, not yours—risk-averse and not going out, and said that they could do better. What could they do better? What are the UK Government not doing and how could they improve?

John Deverell: It is not just Somalia but elsewhere. From my own experience around the world, I would very much like to see our military trainers being allowed to go outside and accompany. One absolutely appreciates that Somalia and other places like it are not particularly safe, and so I am by no means advocating some form of recklessness, but, if one looks at the two parts by which risk is normally measured—the potential impact and the likelihood—one can mitigate both by being careful.

For instance, without wishing to sound overly detailed, one could go out on the ground with the people one has been training and stay one tactical bound behind where they are, making sure that one is well linked in with communications and things like that, and so move relatively safely through parts of the country. In other places, one would say, “No, we are not going to go there. It is too dangerous. We will leave our trainees to go and do it on their own”. I would advocate going out.

There are contracting organisations such as Bancroft, which is an American company that employs former British, French and American special forces who are there for much longer periods than our people. Our people are typically there for six months or a year at most, but these people are there for several years and, therefore, understand the ground much better. They go out on the ground with the people they have been training, and they have marked effect. By and large, al-Shabaab is sensible enough not to want to confront directly—it is much cleverer than that—and that is another reason why it is less dangerous than is cited, in terms of a force that it might respect.

There is more that we could do, not only in Somalia but elsewhere, with our training teams. It comes down to how seriously our Government take these places and how important they are to HMG. To my mind, if we are going to invest in them in this way, it is axiomatic that they are important to us and, therefore, axiomatic to me that we should be prepared to at least look at taking greater risks.

There is one other thing that I would like to mention, which is that it is all very well, in terms of limited time and space, making efforts like this at the company and battalion level, but it needs to be joined up. Over the years, I have been a great advocate of building relationships with senior



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people, which also requires a really sustained effort over time to have effect, in order to advise people higher up about how they use the tools that we create at a lower level. Otherwise, one creates the tools, but the senior people do not know how to use them, which is, in this case, an oversight.

For instance, when I was there, I would go up to Villa Somalia, which is where the Somali Government are run from. I built relationships with the President, who is now back in power again. I built a close relationship with the Defence Minister and advised them on how to use these tools.

One of the issues in Somalia is that the vast majority of advisers, people in embassies, UN personnel and European trainers, including Brits, as was, is that they sit back in what is called MIA, which is the Mogadishu International Airport. It is a huge compound centring on the airport. The vast majority of those guys never go out, for security reasons.

One thing that I constantly heard when I was up in Villa Somalia and talking with these people was, "What is the good of you lot back in MIA? All you do is write papers and send them to us. They do not help us at all". Again, it is another indication of a lack of hands on and a lack of building relationships. Therefore, once again, we do not really have the effect that we could have, because we constrain ourselves.

When I was there, I got to know very well an excellent ambassador, Dr David Concar. The British embassy was located in the MIA compound, and the only person who really got out on a regular basis and talked to Somali opposite numbers was the ambassador. Again, for risk purposes, the vast majority of people within the British embassy did not do that, which, to my mind, I can understand makes sense from a risk point of view, but, on another level, it does rather constrain us.

Q71 Royston Smith: You are painting a bit of a gloomy picture, if I may say so. How are we viewed? Are we viewed as a credible partner in counter-terrorism, or are we viewed in the way that you have described—that we are there but we are not doing what we should be doing?

John Deverell: We do not really have a very high profile. We are known about by those who know about these sorts of things, but we are not really known as significant players. We hold conferences. We invite people back to the UK. We are there and are one of a number of people.

To give you an example, the UAE is there and it does not dissimilar things. The Turks are there and do a lot more. They are prepared to play loss leaders and spend a lot of money, and are there for the long term. I remember talking to a Turkish diplomat and asking, "How would you summarise your strategy?" He said, very simply, "Over time, to increase by a factor of 100% the average per capita share of gross national income from \$1 a day to \$2 a day. We reckon that, over a 20-year period, that will benefit Turkey".



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Apart from helping in a fairly generalised way, we are not so specific. I am also not convinced that we do it in a sustained enough way. If one looks at the share of national income from fishing, for instance, one thing that I used to push quite hard on our own side was to help develop a fishing industry with proper onshore elements to it.

One reason why there was a such a problem with piracy over previous years—and could be once again—is that the people who are pirates do not really have much alternative. When they go fishing, which is the obvious alternative, there is no point in catching more than they can use to feed their families, because there is no longer any onshore infrastructure for cold storage, transport and everything else.

The Somali Government are more interested in flogging off fishing rights to China, Turkey and God knows who else rather than saying, “We will sell you these fishing rights on the condition that you will process the fish onshore. That will benefit our people nutritionally and we can share the income out among the people”.

It comes back to a fundamental mismatch between what the people need and what the Government are prepared to give them in an unselfish way. Again, that gives lots of scope for al-Shaabab to embed itself and do what the Government really should be doing: looking after the people.

Q72 Royston Smith: Should the UK then be focusing more on working with the Somali Government on things of that nature as opposed to training? You think our training is okay, but it is not sufficient.

John Deverell: It is not either/or. One has to do both as part of an integrated and comprehensive approach. To be fair to us, we do both but only in quite a constrained way. As I say, the ambassador is typically the only person who regularly gets out and speaks with the people who need to be spoken to.

Commercial elements do a certain amount. Previous British Governments have worked very hard, on a personal relationship basis, to move things ahead with the Somali Government. Contracted help can often have much more freedom of operation than, in this case, military help.

Funnily enough, as somebody who previously spent 34 years in the Army, I had more freedom to get out and about and to talk to senior people in the Somali Government than, for instance, my erstwhile colleagues in uniform. It seems to me that that is the wrong way around. That goes back to your point about risk aversion.

Q73 Royston Smith: Who is risk averse? Is it the MOD, the UK Government or the people on the ground?

John Deverell: I would say it is across the board. Diplomatically, politically and militarily we do not want to expose ourselves. We do not want to get out too far ahead. I have seen that around the world. I can understand it on one level, but it is not helpful.



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For instance, as you will know, the way the British Army works in terms of its doctrine is what they call mission command, which is essentially delegated authority. The doctrine says that you give commanders on the ground at all levels parameters within which they have freedom of action. It is not typically the case. "Mother, may I?" seems to be the way we work; if somebody wants to do something, they need to ask. The default setting is not, "Get on and do it". The default setting is, "Ask".

Again, that means there is quite a lot of displacement activity, detracting from what we are really there to do. One needs a root-and-branch change of ethos. I absolutely accept that that is not easy to do.

Q74 **Chair:** John, before we leave you, is there anything we have not asked or any point you wanted to make?

John Deverell: You are very kind to ask. Let me have a very quick look—not fundamentally, no. The tools are all there to do much better. It is just that we do not really allow the tools to be used in a way that would give them maximum traction, sadly. We could do more with what we have, but we do not, for the reasons I have tried to articulate.

Q75 **Brendan O'Hara:** Very briefly, based on what you were saying, I am struck by this question. If the UK were not there, who would notice?

John Deverell: That is an interesting question. Our interlocutors would clearly notice. Some well-informed people in the diaspora back here would maybe notice that we were not pulling our weight or not trying to pull our weight.

Would al-Shabaab notice? In terms of what we are talking about, one could argue that they are the most important people to notice or not notice. I am not really sure al-Shaebab would notice, quite frankly. Being really cynical, one reason why al-Shaebab does not tend to target us as outsiders that much and tends to target its own people is that we do not really make a maximum difference—a huge difference. You could say that that is an indicator.

From a military point of view, I would like to see much more effort by AMISOM to get troops out of vehicles, to start operating less predictably and to go out at night much more. It does not really happen. That means the impact on al-Shaebab is, to my mind, much less than it could and should be.

Chair: That is very helpful. Thank you ever so much, John. We are grateful to you for taking the time today. With that, I will suspend our session temporarily.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Stig Jarle Hansen, Jonathan Guiffard and Dr Nicholas Westcott.



Q76 **Chair:** Welcome to this hearing of the Foreign Affairs Committee. We are still looking at counter-terrorism, but we are now shifting our focus slightly to the Sahel and west Africa. We are very pleased to be joined by three great guests. Can I ask you to introduce yourselves?

Dr Westcott: I am Nick Westcott. I am currently the professor of practice in diplomacy at the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London. I am a former British and European diplomat.

Professor Hansen: I am Professor Stig Jarle Hansen. I am currently a professor at the Norwegian University of Life Sciences and also an associate fellow at the Royal United Services Institute.

Jonathan Guiffard: Hello, my name is Jonathan Guiffard. I am a French researcher. I work at a French think-tank called Institut Montaigne. Previously, I worked in Government for several years.

Q77 **Chair:** Thank you ever so much. Last year about 43% of all terrorist fatalities around the world took place in the Sahel. Why is it that we see this continued and acute deterioration within that region?

Professor Hansen: What we see now is a consequence of failed policies for quite a while. We have seen an artificial division in counter-terrorism strategies between development efforts and kinetic efforts targeting terrorists. What happened was that we neglected the security of the local population. That is very important. It created a lot of animosity towards France and led to the removal of France. At least that is my version of it. That invites a vacuum.

We also neglected some of the results of the negotiations between the Tuareg movements of the north and Bamako. All of this led to a lot of local animosity. That means we gave an open door to the Russians in many ways. I am not sure whether they are going to do any better, but we will see.

Chair: Maybe we can get on to that at some point.

Dr Westcott: I would add that fundamentally there is a political failure underpinning this, which is the collapse of effective governance in many of these countries. Niger is a bit of an exception, but certainly in Mali and Burkina Faso the Governments have been incapable of keeping their populations with them as well as being unable to protect them.

The international contribution was very much targeted at the terrorist groups and not at trying to remedy these failures of governance. That is what has partly caused the collapse of these, to some extent, democratic Governments. The militaries, which had all been given a great deal of counter-terrorism training by the French, the British, the Europeans and the Americans, have taken over the Governments in all three countries. They say they are going to improve security, but they actually exacerbate the political problems, which is creating an even more fertile field for terrorists, who are gaining ground.



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The Lake Chad basin is a bit different, but we might come back to that separately later.

Q78 Chair: Jonathan, we would like to hear your response to those points, but, in particular, travelling around the world, we often hear that the French were disinclined to have the support of other nations in the Sahel as much as they could have. Offers were made to provide support to the French contingency on-the-ground operations, but ultimately they were rebuffed and there was not any interest in having international support as much as could have been possible. What is your assessment of that?

Jonathan Guiffard: I am not sure that is fair. The French operation began in 2013. The idea of this operation, which became in 2014 Operation Barkhane, was to work with the local forces, not to work alone. From the start of the operation, the French worked with the Americans specifically. Clearly, they were happy to have American support. They were inclined to put their European partners on the ground with them. In the end they managed to do so with the Takuba operation. They were also quite happy that the British and MINUSMA came and worked with the French military.

I am not sure they were disinclined to receive help. You can divide the help that came between help from partners that knew how to do CT operations, like the British, the Americans and so on, and other partners that were keen to help in other areas such as development or training assistance.

Q79 Chair: In terms of what lessons we can learn from the French intervention in the Sahel, what are the big takeaways? We talk about the failure to focus on governance structures, the fact that you cannot ever just look at things through an isolated security prism and the inability to keep the population on board, as you mentioned. What are the other lessons we can learn from the intervention?

Jonathan Guiffard: I agree that one of the main lessons is that we did not put enough effort into remedying the poor governance over there.

Linked to that, one issue is that we trained military forces, but these military forces were part of the problem. The part of the population that supports the jihadists sees the state, and especially the military forces, as a problem or a threat. The moment we empower the military without thinking about the consequences, we push the population into the hands of the jihadists.

Professor Hansen: I would say that the armed forces should be a service institution. They should provide security. We see that the armed forces in this area do not always only suppress conflict. This is something that has really been lacking in our understanding. We see local pastoral conflicts being hijacked by jihadist movements. We have seen that in the conflicts in the Mopti area between pastoralists and farmers.



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This means there is a glaring gap in our efforts to stop the spread of jihadists in governing such conflicts. That is a part of governance, as you mentioned, which is very important. There is something to be said for a more concerted effort in handling local pastoral conflicts so that jihadists cannot take advantage of them. That is what we saw in the Mopti region.

Q80 Chair: Dr Westcott, is there anything more specific, maybe as a handrail for future Governments, that could have been done better to address those governance failures?

Dr Westcott: The political failures have exacerbated the insecurity and the strength of terrorist groups. A number of ethnic groups within some of these countries, particularly Mali but also to some extent Burkina Faso and even Niger, have become more sympathetic to the terrorists because they are being ignored, marginalised or sometimes actually attacked by state-supported forces supporting other groups. This is particularly the case for some of the pastoralist communities, the Peul or Fulani, and some of the Tuareg groups in northern Mali.

There had been a peace settlement negotiated by the Algerians in 2015 with the Tuareg groups around Kidal. Since the military Government took over, they abandoned that peace agreement. They are now fighting not only the terrorists but also the Azawad separatists in the north. The military junta sees that as essential for re-establishing physical security in the country, but instead it is exacerbating the strength of the terrorist movement.

The efforts to have a region-wide co-ordinated approach by the Governments failed in relation to the G5 Sahel, which was underpinned by the French. The three military juntas are now forming a common front, they say, to tackle security but also, to some extent, to face up to ECOWAS, which is trying to get them to restore democracy. It is an increasingly complex picture in which the security of the communities in those countries is at risk.

Q81 Royston Smith: Does the Sahel have capacity to counter terrorism now that there have been these withdrawals?

Dr Westcott: That is a very good question. There has been a lot of capacity-building for the militaries in these countries. It was not just bringing in Barkhane or MINUSMA. There was also training of the local militaries going on alongside that, especially in Niger and to some extent also in Chad. The military focus has now become more internalised on securing power than fighting effectively against terrorism.

You could say that, yes, the capacity is there. The US is still operating out of Niger. I do not know to what extent it is sharing intelligence with the Nigerien military, given that it is now an illegitimate Government. Yes, the capacity exists, but it is not being used effectively.

Q82 Royston Smith: Can Western countries do anything to support them that they are not doing already?



Dr Westcott: You mean outside countries.

Royston Smith: Yes.

Dr Westcott: Yes, but there you face a political challenge about the extent to which you are willing to give assistance to an undemocratic Government to fight terrorism. What is more important? Should you be pressing for a reintroduction of democracy or should you support anybody who is fighting the terrorists? The terrorists are not just terrorists. They represent some political constituencies in that country that ought to be negotiated with.

Professor Hansen: I would say you also have a problem of doctrine in relation to some of the points that have been mentioned. In the past, we have supported armies that have been suppressive and Governments that had a tendency to use local militia groups to act in suppressive ways.

If you go in and support the local forces, you have to ensure that there is a focus on those forces as service providers. They are there to give security to the local population. That needs to be highlighted. That is the only way to win this war. Otherwise, repetitive cycles of violence will come up again and again, and jihadist entrepreneurs will take advantage of pastoral conflicts.

Jonathan Guiffard: If I can, I would like to add to your question. These forces have received training—that is true—but they are not autonomous at all. The Wagner situation shows exactly that. The moment they pushed the French out of the country, they needed Russian support, especially on the ground. The military has a tendency to flee in the face of the enemy.

This is also an answer to your first question, Ms Kearns. The situation is currently degrading also because this is probably the only place on the globe where the jihadists are the best forces. Clearly, they have the initiative. They are better than everyone else on the ground currently, now that the French are out.

The CT capability exists in theory within the Malian forces, the Nigerien forces and even the Burkinabé forces. They lack co-ordination inside their own systems between intelligence, military and special forces, but they also lack motivation and resources from their own state.

This is why, for example, yesterday one of the biggest camps in Burkina Faso was overthrown for the second time. It is in the far north of the country in Djibo. You have the jihadists coming, and they are better fighters. They have more resources and they know how to attack these static camps.

Q83 **Chair:** What are the dynamics between the Russian state or Russian cut-outs and terrorist organisations, in terms of where they are competing and where they are potentially benefiting from one another?



Dr Westcott: Subject to the views of my colleagues, I see Russian military engagement as primarily a money-making concern. It is backed by the Russian state, but it is there to make money and to pay for itself. They offer something that neither MINUSMA nor the French offered, which is unconditional support for the Government, military or otherwise. They support that Government in whatever that Government wants to do. If it is oppressing a minority, that is fine. They are quite happy to do that, which MINUSMA and the French were not.

It gives the juntas what they want. It does provide kinetic support, and to some extent they could claim they are focused on the terrorists, however the Government chooses to define them. It is a short-term solution, not a long-term one.

Professor Hansen: I am also a little bit more sceptical about the capacity of the various countries we are talking about. In order to have a solution in the north of Mali, there needs to be some kind of federal arrangement with local support. You need to have these metaphysical affiliations with the country as such, so you need some kind of federal solution. There will be a lot of local security, not only the Malian army in the future, because of the constraints of the economy of the Malian state. We have to face that. We have to arrange it in a proper way. We just have to face it in the future.

Wagner is repeating some of the mistakes we made in the past. That might be because it is in this for the money, but some of the same things are going on. It is focusing on the kinetic aspect and failing to understand the underlying dynamics.

Q84 **Bob Seely:** You mentioned this a bit earlier, but I just want to make sure I understand. I am also trying to compare it with the British experience in places like Iraq and Afghanistan. I served in both.

The French effectively had the problem of choosing between bad Governments and terrorists. We got into bed with bad Governments, that were not only bad but not very good at fighting. They were up against terrorists, who were very good at manipulating grievances, were much quicker and more entrepreneurial in their political attitude, and fought better. Is that a rough summary of the problem the French and their UK, European and American allies had in the Sahel and more broadly in west Africa?

Professor Hansen: I will be honest. We also have projects in Afghanistan and Somalia. We have a counterinsurgency problem in the West when it comes to our doctrine. A part of this is related to what we are saying. I am not necessarily talking about providing services from central Government. I am talking about providing predictability when it comes to local security. That is not always something we emphasise. At times, it might be related to risk awareness.

Q85 **Bob Seely:** The problem is that we are caught in a bit of a cleft stick situation. If you look at the Russians, they are not going to do very well



there because they will just kill a bunch of people, probably pretty illegally; they will make a bit of money from the Government doing so; and they will run into the ground.

In what we were trying to do, we stuck to the rules of war. The criticism is that, if you securitise all these problems, you do not see them as being social problems and you do not try to develop society. The problem is that that is such a big ask that you could spend tens of billions doing it and you are still not necessarily going to get anywhere because you are dealing with endemic bad Government over generations and so on.

When you say "doctrine", are we talking about the doctrine of the way that Western nations engage or are you talking about military doctrine and counterinsurgency?

Professor Hansen: For me, the two are related. These are lessons that we learned a long time ago but have kind of forgotten. It is about holding forces, which is important in Somalia. Holding forces are armed forces that are there on a more permanent basis to secure the local population against infiltration and abuse from various militias instead of focusing mainly on defeating the enemy on the battlefield. There is a lot of science showing that this has been given too little weight.

Q86 **Bob Seely:** This is long-term policing and a permanent relationship. To misquote Biden, we are effectively engaging in forever wars. We are going to have a long-term presence.

Professor Hansen: If we continue like this, we will be punished because at some stage we will reach a conflict that has real national interest for all of our countries in the West.

Jonathan Guiffard: To answer your question, there is the tempo. Of course, there are long-term policies. We probably put too much money into short-term policies like counter-terrorism and the military approach and not enough on development in general.

If we just talk about the short term, to answer your assessment, the Russian approach, for instance, is exactly as you describe it. It is based on the lie that they managed to do counter-terrorism in Syria, which is not the case at all. A lot of people think they did. Based on that, they managed to market their offer everywhere.

The problem of the French, British and American CT approach is that it was very targeted on very specific individuals, especially foreign ones and especially foreign fighters linked to al-Qaeda and Islamic State. That was a good approach, but it was too narrow. In the end, it did not address the political issue. For instance, the Malians were pretty happy that the French and the Americans hunted Algerian, Libyan and Sudanese terrorists in Mali.

For me, dealing specifically with that created two problems. The first one is that we totally did not see the local insurgency exploding, especially in



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the Fulani tribes mentioned before, but across the many different communities that felt the military approach was against them. In the end, even if the French were not targeting these guys, the population felt like they were being targeted so they supported the jihadists. This is the first problem. We were blindsided by that.

Secondly, the political issue at first, before the jihadist problem, was the rebels. It was the problem between Bamako and the rebel Tuareg and Arab groups of the north. This problem was not really addressed. The 2015 agreement was a very nice agreement, and after that no one put political pressure on the actors to deal with that situation. In the end, the French and the Americans were targeting al-Qaeda foreign fighters and terrorists, and the Malians in Bamako were targeting the rebels. We were fighting two different wars. In the end, we could not remain partners.

- Q87 **Bob Seely:** To finalise on this point, we are talking about having a balance between social support, political support and relatively narrow counter-terrorism focused on foreign fighters. Effectively, the rebuilding of society is simply too big an ask. That is the fundamental problem, is it not? We can do counter-terrorism, but, when it comes to this other stuff and the doctrine you are talking about, it is beyond our capacity to rebuild societies that are collapsing.

Professor Hansen: There are measures. There are a lot of good institutions that have been handling similar situations. As I say, so far the panel has highlighted the tension between the periphery and the centre of Mali. If you look at Islamic State in the Mopti region, for example, it was seemingly created out of an outright pastoral conflict. The question is whether you can develop local mechanisms to handle such conflicts. You need to be able to do that. It just demands some practical engagement by an NGO, which happened in Somalia with the Life and Peace Institute.

Jonathan Guiffard: I agree with you that the nation-building approach was nonsensical in the end because it is impossible to do that. To be a little bit provocative, when we want to the international community puts political pressure. We have never put on the Mali political issues the kind of pressure that we put, for instance, on Ukraine, Syria or Gaza. You know what I mean.

In the end, we could have done more on this political inclusivity issue—as European, British, French, American and regional partners, such as Algeria, Mauritania and other countries. That is another aspect.

- Q88 **Brendan O'Hara:** I would just like to turn to the UK's counter-terrorism efforts in the Sahel and your assessment of those. To what extent does the UK prioritise countering terrorism in the Sahel?

Dr Westcott: There has been an evolution, in that, 10 years ago, it did not, and about five or six years ago it did. It came in in support of the French efforts. It was very much an explicit support to MINUSMA, which in some ways was a kind of external holding force that prevented conflict



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deterioration while it was there. The UK also participated for a brief while in the EU training mission. Primarily, however, it was supporting Barkhane.

On Lake Chad, there was a much more direct involvement with the Nigerian military, trying to train them in human rights and counter-terrorism actions, but not particularly successfully. There was a sudden increase in effort. With the withdrawal of external forces, at least in the Sahel, we are left with an objective but no means of fulfilling it, so we have had to pull out.

Chad is quite an interesting contrast because there are divided terrorist groups: there are rival al-Qaeda-linked and ISIS or Islamic State-linked groups. They are not really at risk of taking over the state. It is more about the disintegration of Government. It just becomes general banditry, some of it with a jihadi motivation. Therefore, it is really a question of re-establishing basic law, order and security rather than a traditional CT effort. There is more that we could do to help the Nigerians achieve that.

Jonathan Guiffard: That is the case for Mali as well.

Q89 **Brendan O'Hara:** Given that, how could the UK, perhaps working with its allies, better support this idea of a stable and secure Sahel through the regional engagement that it has? What could and should it be doing?

Dr Westcott: I would see two or three immediate steps. First, we should support the coastal states, where there is a risk of terrorist violence spreading southwards, to be more effective in their political counter-terrorism efforts in the northern areas where they are most vulnerable. We should support those communities to ensure that jihadists cannot get a foothold in the local community.

Secondly, we should support those regional efforts that remain, primarily around ECOWAS, to build a more effective African-led regional engagement. That has not worked particularly well in the past. In 2012 and 2013, we put a lot of effort into trying to build a local peacekeeping effort. In the end, it did not work so the UN brought in MINUSMA instead.

There is quite a long way to go. The other ECOWAS states have a big interest in ensuring there is an effective regional response, and therefore we should support that too.

Jonathan Guiffard: For me, the United Kingdom has very good experience on CT military operations. It was the case in Iraq, Afghanistan and several other countries.

You need not only to give money to the local forces to stabilise the region; you also need to build co-operation with these countries and enable them to build their own capacity and capability. I mean for a very short-term approach. You would probably have to put intelligence officers



and special forces, people who have not done that for several years, within the coastal countries—that is true—and with local partners.

Another approach would be to engage with the regional partners with whom you have a good relationship—I mean Nigeria, Ghana, Senegal and other countries—to help them build an understanding of the current risk, which is kind of an emergency for them, to craft a political discussion and to help these authorities deal with the political issues at the same time. I mean things like the conundrums in Mali and Burkina Faso.

For the long-term approach, the agricultural sector is key. Almost everyone in this area has a revenue from that sector, but that sector is not structured and it is not very modern. You need to engage in that for a long-term approach.

Dr Westcott: I would add one point. While military support or security advice is extremely useful and a component of that, as well as the development side, it should be low profile. One of the problems that France had was that it had a very high public profile. That made it easy for anti-French sentiment to grow and for it to be seen as a neo-colonial enterprise. It is very important that we put the African Governments very firmly in the lead here and support from behind.

Professor Hansen: The UK has a unique opportunity. One of the problems of the French engagement was that it simply did not succeed. The delegitimisation of France, I am sorry to say, is quite deep and runs far outside of Government circles in both Niger and Mali. That is my experience from my projects. To a certain extent, the UK is not tainted by that reputation. That means you can play a role diplomatically as well.

Q90 **Chair:** Turning to the Lake Chad basin, what should the UK's priorities be? Do we have a clear plan? What interventions are we seeking to do? Are they working?

Dr Westcott: There was a very interesting piece of research on what the Nigerian soldiers thought they were doing in the north-east of Nigeria. They replied to the researcher, "Actually, we think the generals are keeping this war going because they are profiting very nicely from it. We are just here as cannon fodder. Nobody really wants to win this war. It is just going to go on forever while the generals make money".

With that kind of attitude in the Nigerian military, it will never succeed. There is a deep cynicism about the corruption and incompetence of the Nigerian army within that army and, indeed, within the Nigerian public.

It is very important for the struggle against Boko Haram and ISWAP, as it is called, the Islamic State in west Africa, that we engage politically as well as militarily with the Nigerian Government. That is not saying, "You must do this", but, "If you want to reap the benefits of development, stabilise your country and avoid the risk of growing instability spreading, as it is, from beyond the Lake Chad basin throughout the country, you



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have to have an effective reform of your military and an effective political approach to this problem". But that requires high-level political engagement with the Nigerian Government, which is possible, but I have not seen it yet.

Jonathan Guiffard: Considering the threat currently in Nigeria, I would recommend also to engage at both the technical and the political level with Niger, even if the context is quite difficult, and Chad. These Governments are less touched but still really threatened by Boko Haram, ISWAP and now a new group that has pledged allegiance to JNIM and al-Qaeda in the north-west.

Chair: What is it called?

Jonathan Guiffard: It is called Ansaru. It is a very old Nigerian group, which was in contact with AQIM in the early 2000s and 2010s. It cut the relationship, but now the relationship exists again.

This is important because it is a threat for these three countries and for everyone else in the Sahel. There are a lot of fighters now moving back and forth from the Sahel to Nigeria and from Nigeria to the Sahel. It is not a lot, but, for instance, several months ago JNIM—al-Qaeda in the Sahel—was fighting Daesh in the Sahel. Daesh was receiving help from Nigerian fighters coming from Nigeria. Everything is intertwined.

Nigeria should be reinforced and helped with that battle, but so should Chad. Chad has often tried to do military operations. Sometimes it manages to push Boko Haram or Daesh back into Nigeria, but other times it has had heavy military losses. One risk coming from that is that Chad is currently a country facing challenges north, east, south and west. Supporting these guys is an issue.

Professor Hansen: In many ways, we have seen Chad react in the way we expected Nigeria to react in the 1990s. Chad has been there. I would say that Chad more or less saved Nigeria in some phases in 2016. The question is whether it will be overstretched.

Engagement with Nigeria by the UK is very important, especially in the north-west, where we see the security situation faltering. That means not only engaging with the state but—this is easier said than done—local community engagement as well.

Q91 **Brendan O'Hara:** Very briefly, Dr Westcott, you were talking about Nigerian soldiers saying that the generals keep the war going because it is profitable. In your opinion, is there merit in that criticism?

Dr Westcott: The Nigerian military has a certain reputation for corruption. A great deal of the materiel for which funding is provided never reaches the soldiers. It goes somewhere.

Q92 **Brendan O'Hara:** In particular, I am thinking about the Lake Chad basin, where ISWAP and Boko Haram operate. A lot of hostages are



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known to be currently held there, including Leah Sharibu. In that particular conflict, is there merit in what they say, that there is no real great desire on behalf of the Nigerians to do what they claim they are doing?

Dr Westcott: That is hard to say. I think the Nigerian Government are sincere in their wish to bring that conflict to an end. Clearly, morale is very low in the Nigerian military, so they are not going to be very effective at ending it. Up to now, nobody has reformed the military to improve morale and create an effective force. That is ultimately a political decision. The new Government could take a different approach to that of their predecessor, where loyalty was more important than effectiveness.

Professor Hansen: I do not believe in any conspiracies on the regional level or on the national level, but it is very clear that the Nigerian army is seriously hampered when it comes to corruption and mismanagement in general. Some of the strangest army movements I have ever seen were conducted by the Nigerian army around Maiduguri.

They have large problems. I know the UK has engaged in the past. There was a military training mission there, but it is a long way to go. That is for sure. You need to be hands-on. You need to see that what you are doing actually has an impact on the ground.

Q93 **Chair:** I have two final questions before we need to wrap up. We are talking a lot about bolstering neighbours. First, should it be the UK's No. 1 priority to bolster neighbouring countries, whether that be Chad, Ivory Coast or any of the other surrounding countries? What about coastal west Africa? How different is the threat of contagion to the coastal west rather than those countries immediately around the coup belt?

Dr Westcott: Yes, because it is easier to stop a country falling over than to pick it up once it has fallen over. The challenge in the Sahel is that the states themselves are beginning to disintegrate. It is less a challenge around the jihadis taking over the state than there no longer being a state in existence. There are various groups that control various bits of territory. It is more a network of robber barons and jihadi groups all taking what they can. There is a lot of gold in the ground there. That is what is fuelling a lot of the conflict.

Further south, you have states that work. It is about keeping them together, particularly where democracy or the Governments are seen as not terribly legitimate. There has been some recent trouble in Sierra Leone, for example, where the last election was not universally acclaimed as free and fair. They are vulnerable perhaps more to internal instability than to external terrorist attack.

Terrorists are extremely effective at using internal grievances and economic distress to come in and make trouble. They will not hesitate to do so. Therefore, it is very important to support all those coastal states,



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and Nigeria above all because it is the lynchpin, in strengthening their governance and their security capability to resist those kinds of risks.

Professor Hansen: I would like to add that Ghana also has the potential to act outside of its borders, if it is encouraged to do so. It is a peacekeeping nation with a relatively good army, I might add. It might contribute.

I would also ask the UK to keep the focus on Mali and Niger so that these areas are not forgotten. The UK voice is very much needed there.

Jonathan Guiffard: The threat in the Sahel is currently attacking Benin and Togo, and it is starting in Ghana. It started in 2021 in Ivory Coast and then it stopped, but it will probably come back. You also have rumours in Guinea and at the border of Senegal and Mauritania in the western part of Mali. You can clearly see that the threat coming from al-Qaeda in the Sahel and Daesh is spreading.

I totally agree that you need to engage these coastal countries. I would even say that it would be a mistake—and this is not the case; it is not my point—for the UK to consider this general area as some kind of French burden. However, I understand that you need to have priorities. It probably should be priority No. 1 to support the coastal countries because the Sahel issues are slightly different. We need to contain them collectively. The UK cannot do anything by itself on the Sahel specifically.

The second thing is the main lesson I was talking about earlier. You need to focus on the coastal countries. You need to engage the big regional partners, meaning Algeria, Nigeria, Mauritania, Senegal, Ivory Coast, Ghana and Togo. There is a good relationship between the UK and Togo. You need to engage them in a collective way to build some kind of coalition for tomorrow. The Somalisation of the Sahel will probably last for a long period of time. You need to build some kind of political coalition.

My last point is that you need to engage the coastal countries, but you need to do so with very close co-ordination with the US, the French and the EU. My fear is that we will reproduce the exact same policies as we did in the Sahel: everyone going alone and talking to everyone in these countries. These guys know how to play us off against each other.

To add something positive, now that the Sahel is a very different problem, we can at least anticipate for the coastal countries. We have to build co-ordination and do things like that.

Professor Hansen: Some of the coastal counties are more resilient than we give them credit for. We should look for countries that have centre-periphery tension.

I also agree with my colleague that Algeria is potentially an untapped resource, but if we involve Algeria we have to remember its human rights



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record, which is rather nasty. If you do that, you have to watch for the problems that might emerge.

Where I disagree with my colleague here is that I still believe that the UK voice is very much needed for a solution in Niger and Mali. We need outside voices there. We need a new voice from the West.

Chair: Thank you, takk, merci. With that, we will bring it to a close.