

Foreign Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, HC 488

Tuesday 11 March 2025

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[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Emily Thornberry (Chair); Alex Ballinger; Aphra Brandreth; Phil Brickell; Richard Foord; Uma Kumaran; Blair McDougall; Abtisam Mohamed; Sir John Whittingdale.

Questions 147 - 233

Witnesses

I: Mr Hamish Falconer MP, Under-Secretary of State (Middle East, Afghanistan and Pakistan), Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office; Stephen Hickey, Director, Middle East and North Africa, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/133635/html/



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Mr Hamish Falconer MP and Stephen Hickey.

Q147 **Chair:** This is the Foreign Affairs Select Committee, and we are continuing our inquiry into the Middle East. We have the great pleasure of having the Middle East Minister in front of us today, as well as Stephen Hickey, who is the director for Middle East and North Africa at the FCDO. Thank you so much for coming in.

You probably know that we have ourselves just come back from the region, where we had a series of meetings. We went to Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the West Bank and Israel. This is a subject that is of huge interest to us and to our constituents, so it is fantastic to have the opportunity to speak to you today, Minister.

Can I just begin, if you do not mind, by clearing something up that arose from our trip, just to get it out of the way? Minister, if there were a visiting delegation of Members of Parliament to the House of Commons, would you expect them to be videoed without their knowledge or consent?

Mr Falconer: If someone was visiting the House of Commons, certainly not. I would think that that would be very unusual.

Q148 **Chair:** What about if it were put on Instagram and briefed to, let us say, *The Daily Telegraph* in disparaging terms?

Mr Falconer: I am not familiar with the details, but clearly if someone were visiting the House of Commons we would want to show them courtesy.

Q149 **Chair:** It would be particularly bad, would it not, if it were the Deputy Foreign Minister of Israel being videoed in the UK, and for disparaging comments to be made about her evidence or about a private meeting that she had had with us, let us say? The opposite has just happened to us. A video of us meeting the Deputy Foreign Minister at the Knesset has been posted on Instagram. Certainly, we had no knowledge that it was being videoed, and we assumed, of course, that it would never happen.

I have to say that I have just found out about it, and to say that I am cross might be an understatement. There were many things said in the Knesset by many of its Members that we found quite provocative and indeed, if I am really honest, quite insulting. The attitudes of some Members of the Knesset were remarkably rude. We did our utmost to keep decorum at all times and to remain polite and restrained, but I do think that this takes it to another level. I would ask the Foreign Office to investigate this, please, to find out why this has happened and who made the decision, and to ask them to take it down and to apologise.

Mr Falconer: Thank you for bringing it to my attention. It is the first that I have heard about it. I will look into it and come back to the Committee.



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Q150 **Chair:** Thank you very much. Having got that off my chest, we have a series of questions, the bulk of which are going to be about Israel and Palestine, but we would like, if we have time, also to ask you a few questions at the end on Syria and Iran.

I wondered if I could kick off with some general political questions. In your view, why is Israel refusing to move on to stage 2 of the ceasefire deal?

Mr Falconer: I do not want to seem evasive, but it is clear that, at this very moment, there are detailed talks between various parties in relation to phase 2, and I would not want to speculate on how those talks are going. Our position is clear: we want to get through all three phases of the ceasefire; we want to bring this conflict in Gaza, which has had such terrible consequences both for Israelis and Palestinians, to an end. We do want to see a move into phase 2, but I am not really in a position to be able to speculate on the very latest from the Israeli side.

Q151 **Chair:** Have there been discussions around the possibility that it is because Netanyahu needs to keep his Government going until the end of March, when he is going to have a Budget before the Knesset and, in order to keep the Government going, he has to pass that Budget? The concern would be that, if they move to stage 2, there would be individuals within the Government who might withdraw their support, and so the best thing for him to do is to keep things going until then and to get his Budget passed.

Mr Falconer: For reasons that you will understand, I would not want to be drawn into providing too much commentary about internal Israeli politics. I recognise that for the Israeli side, phase 2 is complicated and difficult, and you can see, from the public statements of various Israeli Ministers, that there clearly is a range of views within the coalition Government about phase 2. All I can say is that the UK's position is that we should be moving to phase 2. We have a ceasefire deal on the table. We want to get through all three phases of it.

Q152 **Chair:** Rather than speculation, maybe I will ask you a factual question. Do we know whether the Americans really have agreed to an extension of part 1 of the ceasefire until the end of Passover? Have the British seen that agreement?

Mr Falconer: I am sorry to be tricky about it, but the Americans are literally there right now, having these talks. You can see, from the language from both their hostage envoy and their Middle East envoy, that there is clearly quite a lot going on at the moment, so I cannot tell you concretely the very latest in terms of where they have got to in the talks.

Q153 **Chair:** I understand that, but there was a ceasefire deal and, by now, we are supposed to be in part 2. Part 2 has obligations on the Israelis to withdraw forces and to work towards a permanent solution, and that has stuttered to a halt, but Netanyahu, at least, is saying that he is unilaterally extending part 1 because the Americans have agreed that



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that is what he should do. As a country with interests in the region, have we seen such an amendment to the ceasefire agreement?

Mr Falconer: As you say, we are behind where we should be according to the original agreement. We should be in phase 2 rather than phase 1. Fighting has not resumed, so there has, de facto, been an extension of phase 1. The precise terms of what an extension to phase 1 might look like have not been determined or decided.

There clearly are hostages who were originally envisaged to be released in phase 2, not least Avinatan Or, whose British mother I saw recently. We watch very carefully. We are interested parties. Of course, we want to reach a stage where Avinatan and, indeed, all the other hostages are released. If that could be done before phase 2, we would be only too delighted, but I cannot provide detailed commentary on whether an agreement has been made to bring the hostage releases forward into phase 1 or whether there is a wait to get into phase 2. This is some of what is under discussion at this moment.

Q154 **Chair:** If the Americans have agreed to extend phase 1, we have not been told about that.

Mr Falconer: As I say, we are, practically, in an extension of phase 1. The conflict has not restarted, and we are clearly not in phase 2, so we are still in phase 1.

Q155 **Chair:** There is a conference in June that the French and the Saudi Arabians are going to be holding. Could you help us with what the purpose of that is? Is it that the French are considering recognising Palestine and announcing that in June?

Mr Falconer: The purpose of the June conference being held by the Saudis and the French is to try to advance a two-state solution. How you might approach that conference is still being considered by the French and the Saudis. We support the conference and will be looking to play our full part, but I could not tell you what is on the agenda yet, because that is for the French and the Saudis.

Q156 **Chair:** Could this be a moment when a coalition of nations—the French, the British, the Australians and various others—come together as western nations and recognise the Palestinian state, and perhaps start engaging properly with the Arab League’s initiative on the rebuilding of Gaza?

Mr Falconer: We are engaging properly on the Arab initiative. We have put out a statement with the French and Germans welcoming the Arab proposal. I have been engaged quite closely with my Arab counterparts in its development. It is a plan with real merit and a good starting point for what might come next. We welcome it and are engaged in it. I have spoken to colleagues in Jordan, Egypt and elsewhere about this plan, which has real strength and is a good place to start.

Q157 **Chair:** In order for the west to show good faith and real commitment to



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the Arab League plans, do you agree that now might be the time for us to be recognising Palestine, along with a series of other nations, so that we can come to the table with good faith and join the Arab League in pushing for a rebuilding of Gaza and the development of a Palestinian state?

Mr Falconer: We support a Palestinian state. We want to be in a position to recognise it as the inalienable right of the Palestinian people. I read the transcript of your session with my predecessor, who described the many dilemmas quite well, about recognition and how the timing would work.

As is obvious from just our opening exchanges, this is an incredibly delicate moment. We desperately want to play our full role in getting Israel and Palestine back on the path towards a two-state solution, which inevitably involves the recognition of a Palestinian state. That is the second state. We want to play our role in that.

The diplomacy and the developments in the region are incredibly sensitive, so I am not in a position to make a further announcement this morning about the timing or the method by which we might end up recognising a Palestinian state, other than that it continues to be our hope and our commitment. We want to do so in a way where we will end up with a real, functioning Palestinian state.

Chair: You are going to be asked some more questions about this; these are just opening questions. I just want to say that it has been our experience that any conversation that we have with any representative of Arab nations always begins with, "When are you going to recognise Palestine?" It is like asking, "Do you mean this or don't you?" We just need to pass that on to you, because that has been our experience.

Q158 **Phil Brickell:** The Government have expressed their concerns at reports that the Israeli Government are preventing humanitarian aid from getting into Gaza. With that in mind, what are the Government doing to ensure that the Israeli Government comply with the UK's demands to unconditionally and immediately lift restrictions on humanitarian relief into Gaza?

Mr Falconer: As I am sure you saw, we put out a statement on 5 March with our French and German partners. I put out a statement this morning about the restrictions on electricity into Gaza. We follow these issues incredibly closely. We have had staff on the ground. I have been to see the restrictions on aid coming from the Sinai side into Gaza.

I need to be straightforward about the fact that we have been calling for this for some time. There have been moments where progress has been made. In the early phases of the ceasefire and until quite recently, there was a very notable uptick in the amount of aid going into Gaza. Is that enough? No, it is not enough. Indeed, the kind of aid that went in was still subject to restrictions, particularly around items that could be dual-use. The consequence of those restrictions is very significant on the



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people of Gaza because much of what was restricted was the kind of shelter required to try to make life in Gaza more habitable as the temperature has dropped.

There is no neat and easy answer to this. As you say, we have been calling repeatedly for a lifting of restrictions, which has not happened. We have made a statement about the latest further restrictions from the Israelis. We will continue to work with our partners and to talk to the Israeli Government about this, and we will not stop until we see the progress that we need to in terms of aid access.

Q159 **Chair:** Phil, before you go on, just for the sake of people watching, we use terms such as “dual use”. We all know what that means, but why the Israelis will be restricting certain goods going in because they say that it is for dual use may need to be explained for the public. I am sorry to interrupt, but I wonder if you might explain that, and perhaps give us some of the more extreme examples of when things have been refused because they are said to be used for dual use.

Mr Falconer: Forgive me, Chair, and please do correct me if I am becoming too jargony. “Dual use” is a term that tends to mean items that could be used for both military and civilian purposes. In this context, it has been used, for example, to restrict tents going in because the claim is that the poles could be used as weaponry. There have been restrictions on sleeping bags because they are said to be in camouflaged colour. There have been restrictions on water purification units because there is some fear that they could be used for some other purpose.

The nature of the dual use restrictions that Israel has imposed has been so far-reaching as to make what the aid community would call winterisation—some other jargon, I am afraid; it means providing the aid required to help people respond to the colder conditions of winter—very difficult indeed. It was a question that was very much on our mind as winter arrived in Gaza, and it was an issue on which we made limited progress, I am afraid, with the Israeli Government.

Q160 **Phil Brickell:** Are you able to confirm that it has been impressed upon the Israeli Government that they have an obligation under international humanitarian law to allow the free and unimpeded access of aid to Gaza?

Mr Falconer: I can, yes.

Q161 **Richard Foord:** Last September, the Foreign Secretary assessed that, overall, Israel is not committed to compliance with international humanitarian law in Gaza, which led to the partial suspension of arms exports. Why did it not lead to a full suspension of arms exports?

Mr Falconer: It is really important, when we talk about the arms, to start with the context, which is that this is a small amount of arms compared to the overall quantity of arms that the IDF has.



Let us then talk specifically about what has been suspended and what has not. The assessment that we made was that there was a serious risk of breaches of IHL, and so we made restrictions with one caveat, which I will come to. The restrictions that we made were for the permission to sell weapons that could be used offensively in the conduct of hostilities that could pose a risk of a breach of IHL.

What are the things that are not included? It includes things that are not for use in hostilities. There are dual-use items such as food processing chemicals that we satisfied ourselves were not for use for these purposes. There were things like components for air defences, which were clearly not being used in relation to the activities in Gaza.

I have seen some commentary about the numbers. There are quite a large number of things where a licence is still in issue, whereby it would be easy to draw the conclusion that that means that we are still selling arms. Lots of this stuff is dual-use stuff, where we have to satisfy ourselves that it is not arms. There has to be a licence because they could be used in other contexts, but in this context we are confident.

Q162 **Richard Foord:** Perhaps we could talk about the F-35s specifically.

Mr Falconer: Yes, and I was coming to those. We made a specific carve-out for F-35s, because to do so was in the interests of international peace and security. The F-35 programme is a very complex, multi-nation fighter jet, as you know. We provide components to a global spares pool under an agreement. Where those components were being sold directly to Israel, those licences were suspended. Where those components were being supplied to the global pool, we could not suspend those licences without imperilling the overall F-35 supply chain, which, as I am sure members of this Committee in particular would understand, would have significant, far-reaching ramifications, given the role of F-35s right across our allies and indeed in our own region of Europe.

Q163 **Richard Foord:** You talk about introducing this so-called balancing test of international peace and security. How is that consistent with the UN arms trade treaty?

Mr Falconer: I hope that you will understand that, while I will not point to the exact part of the treaties, there is provision for international peace and security. This has been looked at in great detail, as you would expect, by legal advisers right across Government, and we were satisfied that that was consistent with our international legal commitments.

Q164 **Chair:** Holland produces some spare parts for the F-35s as well, does it not? There has recently been a challenge in the courts saying that it should not be supplying those parts for F-35s, because they could be used in Israel. Given the way that the Israelis were using F-35s, they could, in turn, be used for breaches of international humanitarian law. The courts in Holland have said that it can stop selling those parts, or label them as not for use in Israel, and that has been the Dutch position.



If it is the Dutch position, why can it not be the British position?

Mr Falconer: As in Holland, this is going to be tested by judicial review in the Al-Haq case, and I would imagine that some of these arguments will be tested by the courts.

Q165 **Chair:** You will wait until the courts in May, and then we will find out.

Mr Falconer: To be clear, we are confident in our position. As in Holland, there will be a court case here, and it will come to a finding.

Q166 **Richard Foord:** We have just heard about the Government position and the statement that you put out this morning, Minister, around breaches of international humanitarian law. If this is a balancing exercise, between IHL on the one hand and the serious prejudice to international peace and security on the other, what thought has been given to the possibility that, when we see an acceleration in breaches of international humanitarian law, we might then up the pressure on arms exports through this carve-out for the F-35?

Mr Falconer: I would not describe the balancing test as one that balances IHL against international peace and security. IHL, in applying the law, allows for decision makers to consider the balance between international peace and security and some of the other provisions of international humanitarian law.

I would not want to quite accept your framing that it is IHL on one side and international peace and security on the other. IHL considers questions of international peace and security. If the question is whether we will, in the face of further concerns, take actions on the F-35, I would just restate our position. We believe that the continued operation of the F-35 programme is critical to international peace and security for a whole range of our neighbours, and our position is as I have set it out repeatedly in Parliament.

Q167 **Richard Foord:** It seems to me that the Government have not denied that the position on the F-35 carve-out is in breach of international humanitarian law.

Mr Falconer: Could I just stop you there? No, we have not. We are saying that it is consistent with international humanitarian law, and it will be tested in a judicial review.

Q168 **Richard Foord:** In correspondence that I have seen between Minister Doughty and the Chair of the Business and Trade Committee, it seems to me that the UK is potentially willing to admit that there are violations of the Geneva conventions, but that those are outweighed by the fact that the F-35 is supplied to a partnership of 20 nations and that there are other uses of the F-35 in the world, which means that international peace and security could be prejudiced by any withholding of F-35 components. It seems to me that there is a recognition that we cannot be fully compliant with international humanitarian law, but there is an offset here.



Would you not agree?

Mr Falconer: No, I would not, for the reasons that I gave in my previous answer: if international humanitarian law provides, in its provisions, for a balancing act, which is quite common in both international and domestic law, it is not fair to say, and the Government would not accept, that the continued sale of F-35s is in contravention of or in some way outwith international humanitarian law. I do not think that Minister Doughty's response to the Trade Committee indicated that.

Q169 **Richard Foord:** I have one last question on this. In recent days, it feels as though there has been an escalation in breaches of international humanitarian law by Israel—for example, the withholding of electricity. Would the Government consider keeping in play the parts that we export for the F-35 that we have no means of tracking and which might go to our allies and, subsequently, go to Israel for potential use in Gaza, should the war flare up again?

Mr Falconer: I want to be clear. There are two particular elements of recent announcements that have caused us concern. One is about the entry of humanitarian aid into Gaza, where we have been very clear with our partners on how serious an issue this is. I have been clear this morning that, in order to be compliant with international humanitarian law, it is very important that energy is provided to Gaza for de-salination and many other purposes that are essential for supporting life in Gaza. Those are very important issues to us.

I have set out the position on the F-35s, and I do not anticipate that that will change, but I am sure that it will, indeed, be tested in a judicial review in due course.

Aphra Brandreth: If I could just come in on this question and bring a slightly different perspective in relation to arms exports and Iran, I welcome the Government's condemning of Iranian malign activity in the region. In relation to a ban on the export of arms to Israel, the Prime Minister was right to utilise our assets in the region, particularly the RAF and Royal Navy, in response to the recent drone and missile attacks from Iran. On the other hand, by banning exports, we have limited Israel's options to defend itself.

I just wonder if you can see how these policies may appear to some not to be fully aligned. It might be helpful if you could share what you see as the long-term strategy for exports to Israel—not necessarily what is happening right now, but looking forward.

Mr Falconer: I should say that it is a matter of regret that we have suspensions of arms to Israel. We would like to be in a position where we were not in that place and where we could satisfy ourselves that there was not a serious risk of breaches of international humanitarian law, and that our deep partnership with Israel could continue on that basis across a whole range of fields.



As you say, we did mobilise assets to defend Israel, consistent with its completely legitimate right to self-defence under international humanitarian law. We deplore Iranian attacks on Israel and the malign influence that they have in the region. These two things are in some tension. We wish to act in defence of Israel against Iran, but we also want to ensure that all of our partners, friends and allies take a rigorous approach to international humanitarian law. That is an important principle for us.

You can be most critical with your friends, and so we are clear with Israel about where we differ from it. On this question, we have been clear, as I have been clear this morning, and as the Foreign Secretary, along with his counterparts, was clear last week, that that does not mean that we have in any way become misty-eyed about what is happening in the Middle East. We are clear on the threats that Iran poses to Israel, Syria, Lebanon and a whole range of regional partners, as well as, indeed, the threat that they pose here. The Security Minister laid out some pretty important measures last week on steps that we are taking to ensure that they do not pose a threat here as well.

Q170 Alex Ballinger: What has the UK's response been to the International Court of Justice's ruling in July that the Israeli settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territories were illegal?

Mr Falconer: As I am sure the Committee knows, we are still considering the advisory opinion. It is quite a far-reaching one, with some novel elements, and we want to treat it with the rigour and the seriousness that it deserves.

On the substantive point that you make, we agree that the settlements are illegal. That has been our long-standing position, and we want to see them ended. We want to see a move back towards a two-state solution. The fastest way to get the Israelis to leave the Occupied Palestinian Territories is through negotiations where the Israelis can have confidence in their security, and the Palestinians have the confidence that they are going to have the stability and security that they require.

On some of the fundamental policy questions of the advisory opinion, we are in total accord. It is consistent with long-standing British policy. On the detail of the advisory opinion from a legal perspective, it will take us a bit more time, I am afraid.

Q171 Alex Ballinger: We were in the West Bank a couple of weeks ago and saw, as many others have reported, some of the extremist actions by Israeli settlers against Palestinians in Area C. Schools were being burned, mosques were attacked and livestock was being stolen. It is a particularly awful situation. It feels like the UK's response of just providing advice to businesses not to trade in those settlements is not enough in that context. Particularly when we have such a strong response to the ICJ's ruling on the Chagos islands, it feels like our response in this case has been much weaker. Are we going far enough? Is it appropriate for us to



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be negotiating a new trade agreement with Israel under the current situation?

Mr Falconer: Since this is the first time that settler violence has come up, let me say that the Government track this closely. We recognise both the increase in such settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territories and the very worrying increase in violence in relation to settlements. We condemn that completely, and put in place sanctions in October to reflect the strength of our feeling on these questions.

We are very clear about our position in relation to trade with settlements. We update that guidance to British businesses routinely. We are not an outlier in this. This is the same approach that the European Union takes. We advise British businesses in pretty strong terms to bear in mind our view on the illegality of settlements under international law when considering their investments and activities in the region. That is quite a strong statement from the British Government. Were I a British business, I would not be conducting settlement trade.

Q172 **Chair:** Why would you not just ignore it?

Mr Falconer: I would think that the British Government warning me about matters of international law would be quite a serious risk to my business. Given the clarity of both the British and the European position on the labelling of goods, you would want, as a British business, to assure yourself that you were confident about what was from within and from without the green line.

Q173 **Chair:** If you were to invest in the West Bank, what would happen to you?

Mr Falconer: If you were found to be inaccurately labelling goods that were traded into the UK or the EU, there would be consequences.

Q174 **Chair:** Would there?

Mr Falconer: There would, yes.

Q175 **Chair:** What consequences have there been?

Mr Falconer: If the question is whether there have been cases where people are found to be inaccurately labelling their goods which were, in fact, from the Occupied Palestinian Territories rather than from within green-line Israel, I would have to come back to you with what the precise legal consequences are for businesses that inaccurately label their places of origin for their goods, because that is a DBT responsibility rather than an FCDO one.

Q176 **Chair:** They just have to label them as Israeli. That is what they do.

Mr Falconer: Why we update our guidance so regularly is that we are aware of the challenges of ensuring that goods are properly and accurately labelled. The Co-op has done some work on this, for example,



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to try to ensure that it is confident in all of its goods. I recognise the difficulties in enforcement, but we are clear on our position.

Q177 **Chair:** Quite frankly, if the Co-op did not do it, nobody would be doing it at all. Good for the Co-op, but we are talking about a whole range of British businesses. To be honest, if we just got advice from the Foreign Office saying that they should think twice, what does that mean?

Mr Falconer: Were I a British business, I would take it seriously.

Q178 **Alex Ballinger:** With all the breaches of international humanitarian law, the ICJ rulings and the other challenges with Israel that we are going to hear about later in the Committee, is it appropriate for us to be pursuing a trade deal with Israel? The Government have just announced a trade envoy to undertake that. Are we not going too far?

Mr Falconer: We are reviewing a number of our trade agreements and negotiations across the world, and the Secretary of State for Business and Trade will be setting out a bit more where we intend to prioritise in due course.

Q179 **Uma Kumaran:** The Government have condemned some comments by the Israeli Government and Ministers on proposing the annexation of the West Bank. We were there not long ago. I would argue that the annexation has already begun, but I would like to know what actions the Government would take if there were an attempt to annex the West Bank.

Mr Falconer: I want to be clear on the general questions about the Occupied Palestinian Territories. I really would just re-emphasise our concern about the expansion of settlements and of violence. We are absolutely clear that we do not want to see annexation. We would consider it illegal under international law. I imagine the Committee will understand that I am not going to speculate about what would happen in a hypothetical situation.

Chair: Is there a plan? It is not like we do not know that the Israelis are thinking of doing this. Does the international community have a plan if the Israelis annex the West Bank? What is going to happen? That is the question that Uma was asking.

Q180 **Uma Kumaran:** Minister, you do not need to disclose what the Government would do, but are there actions in place? Will there be consequences if this happens?

Mr Falconer: There are two main scenarios for what is going to happen next. One scenario, which I very much hope that we see, is that we are able to try to return towards something that looks like a path towards a two-state solution, which involves the long-sought normalisation of relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia. As I am sure you heard from them during your visit, the Saudis are clear on what they would need in order to be on that path.



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I hope that we are in a position where the Abraham accords started under the last Trump Administration are in a position of being completed, the incredibly difficult politics on all sides of this are seriously engaged with, and progress is made towards a two-state solution. It is the only answer. I can only imagine how distant that feels to the Committee, having recently visited the region, but the reason we repeat it with such emphasis is that it is truly the only option.

The alternatives, including annexation, are disastrous. They are a breach of international law. If they were to come about, we would, of course, have more to say, given the magnitude of what that would involve for Israel, for Palestine and for the region. It is not a scenario that we want to entertain, because it is so clearly not what the region requires, if we are to get to that happier scenario that I truly hope that we see, which is a two-state solution, normalisation with Saudi Arabia, and a more becalmed region.

Q181 Uma Kumaran: Are we making that clear in our negotiations and discussions with counterparts? I have here some of my notes from our meeting, and a member of the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee said to us that the solution of a two-state is a bit far. They are openly saying that.

Mr Falconer: In response to the first part of your question, yes, we are making it clear. I recognise that across Israeli politics, there is a whole range of views about where we get to. There are those in Israel who understand that in order to live in harmony with their region and to complete the Abraham accords, a two-state solution will be necessary.

Q182 Chair: Before we move on, I just want to ask something again. I appreciate that you say that you will have more to say if there is an annexation, and that you have clear views about it. If anybody disagrees with me, do say, but the clear impression that we got from our visit was that the Israelis do not really care that much about what the international community thinks or says. We want to know what they are going to do about it.

We certainly met many more people in the leadership and among politicians who were interested in annexation of the West Bank than in a two-state solution. Given that that is the situation, can I just ask my question again? What is the plan? What is plan B? What are we going to do if they annex? We could be sitting here and it could just happen.

Mr Falconer: I recognise that we all see the reports from debates in the Knesset and from Israeli politicians. I am pleased to confirm to the Committee the strength of our views on these questions, but I am afraid that I will not be drawn into speculating on what we might do.

Q183 Chair: You can assure us that you will do something.

Mr Falconer: I can assure you that we will do something.



Q184 **Alex Ballinger:** Just as a quick follow-up on a point that you made earlier when you referenced the importance of the Abraham accords, I just wondered whether you are taking any steps to push for UK leadership on those. For example, might you consider having a special envoy for the Abraham accords from the UK?

Mr Falconer: We do try to show leadership on a range of issues. I am sorry for the acronyms again, Chair, but we joined CSIPA, which was previously a bilateral security and investment partnership between the US and Bahrain. It came about in the aftermath of the Abraham accords. We joined it in December, partly due to our commitment to Bahrain and to the Middle East, and partly because we do want to see the very positive trend that the Abraham accords represent, which is towards a region in harmony. That progress has clearly been arrested very significantly by the violence in the Middle East over the last period. We will continue to work with the Saudis and others, because we do want an Israel at peace with its region, and we will do everything that we can to try to support that.

Q185 **Alex Ballinger:** My question was really around whether we are doing anything to show leadership, rather than supporting international efforts that are happening. Do you have any thoughts on how the UK can show that we are at the forefront of trying to find a long-term solution?

Mr Falconer: Yes. What will it take to make further progress on the Abraham accords? We have already rehearsed some of the questions that are at issue, and we would like to play our full role in trying to bridge some of the differences that exist between those who are not yet signatories to the Abraham accords and the Israelis. Clearly there are a whole range of issues that are deeply emotive, and on which you have clearly heard very strong views recently, I am sure, from both the Saudis and the Israelis and from many others in the region about what it would take.

I want to be clear that we are not happy with the status quo. We want to move forward. There is incredibly difficult politics and policy in the midst of that. I would not want to give the Committee the impression that I think completing the Abraham accords soon will be easy, but it is something that is at the very centre of some of our diplomacy in the region.

Q186 **Uma Kumaran:** I went into the Occupied Palestinian Territories a few weeks ago, into Area C, and met Bedouin women. Some of the stories that they told me and the images and videos that I saw on their phones of the violence that they are facing, in particular as women and their children, and young girls, are shocking and harrowing, and I do not wish to repeat them here. I want to know what steps the Government are taking to prevent the indiscriminate violence and attacks on civilians that many people in the West Bank are facing. As Alex mentioned earlier, we saw a mosque that had been burned out. Some of this is being state-sanctioned. The IDF is standing outside. The police will stand outside. The



settlers go in and do what they want, and come outside. What steps are we taking as a Government to call this out?

Mr Falconer: Let me start by saying that, clearly, I am not familiar with the details of what you were told, but I too hear truly awful stories of violence in the West Bank, where there has been a very concerning trend. I saw, Chair, that last night, in the media, you were rightly highlighting the importance of events in both Gaza and the West Bank. Stability in the West Bank is vitally important too, and we are concerned by some of the developments there. We are particularly concerned by the violence against civilians that you described.

As I say, we have been tracking this very closely. We have seen a marked uptick in violence associated with settlements on the civilian population of the West Bank and elsewhere. We have taken sanctions measures already, which we keep under very close review. You mentioned earlier, Uma, some of the comments of Israeli Government Ministers, one of whom has left and one of whom remains. It is very unusual for one Government to comment on the comments of Ministers of another, but we took that rather unusual step because we were so concerned by some of the violence in the West Bank, which clearly has political support from some elements that we would like to see stopped.

Q187 **Uma Kumaran:** Some of this has been described by the UN Human Rights Office as an unlawful use of force. People want to see us hold perpetrators to account in line with their obligations under international law. They want to see Britain leading from the front. We have had a long history of standing up for human rights around the world. What will we be doing?

Mr Falconer: On settlers in particular, there are questions in our mind about what role we can play to try to practically reduce the violence. The sanctions in October were far-reaching and aimed at the perpetrators of violence, as well as those who provide the infrastructure required for the construction of settlements. We keep these issues under close review. I will not comment on what we might do next, but sanctions on settlers, in terms of both the physical construction and violence, remain very much at issue within the Foreign Office.

Chair: When we have discussed this, we have all been very encouraged by that. We do not want to just criticise the Foreign Office today. The sanctions that you have taken out against those who are responsible for facilitating the building of settlements, and against violent settlers, are absolutely the right thing to do. Our only criticism is that there is not enough of it.

Q188 **Abtisam Mohamed:** You mentioned that you do not want to talk about hypothetical situations or speculate about things potentially happening. Palestinians are going through annexation now, and it is currently happening. What specific action will we be taking now to prevent annexation from taking place? I hear your comment that action will be



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taken in the end, if annexation goes through, but will it not be too late at that point? What are we doing now to prevent it from becoming complete annexation?

Mr Falconer: Jump in if I am mischaracterising your question, but I took some of the questions about annexation to be about formal, legal annexation of the Occupied Palestinian Territories. That is not to say that we are not focused on the elements of practical annexation. You cannot get aid into Gaza without the agreement of the Israelis: that is, clearly, very significant de facto control. You have seen yourselves the degree of control that is exerted in the West Bank as well.

We want to see, in both Gaza and the West Bank, a situation where normal Palestinian life can return. We do not want to see forcible displacement. We do not want to see an expansion of settlements and settler violence. All of these things, such as the accounts that Uma and Alex give of elements of day-to-day life in the West Bank being impeded by Israeli measures, are clearly a degree of de facto annexation of some of the areas, even if they are not legal.

On all of these issues, in the way that I describe, we are clear with our Israeli partners that we want to see a reduction in tensions in the West Bank. We want to see, in both Gaza and the West Bank, freedom for Palestinians to go about their lives.

Q189 **Abtisam Mohamed:** What specific action are we taking to prevent the expansion of settlements?

Mr Falconer: Beyond the sanction measures and the pretty strong diplomatic language that we have used about them, we have worked with partners. We have made joint statements. We have sought, at each and every stage, to create the conditions where settlements are not happening. I recognise that we are in the midst of an expansion of those settlements, so we will continue to work on it.

Q190 **Abtisam Mohamed:** Israel continues to ignore our condemnations, to do as it pleases, and to either cross an uncrossable line or set new precedents that it seems to jump over. Will there be a red line for us where we say, "That's it. Enough is enough. This will now result in the lack of viability of a potential two-state solution"? When is that red line going to be for us?

Mr Falconer: Honestly, the problem with ever saying that a two-state solution is not viable is that the alternatives are definitely and considerably worse. I recognise that the viability of a two-state solution requires a whole range of very difficult practical policy problems, which settlements make worse. Clearly, settlements undermine the physical viability of a two-state solution.

Does that make me think that the UK Government and our partners should pivot towards talking about a one-state solution? No, I do not. It would not work. It would be worse. As painful as it is, we need to always



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hold open the gateway back to a two-state solution, because ultimately that is what will secure security and stability for both Israelis and Palestinians.

I recognise how difficult it is in this moment, where settlements are expanding, not to give up hope in a two-state solution, but we have to. If voices like Britain's do not continue pushing for a two-state solution, I fear it will be extinguished as a hope.

Q191 Abtisam Mohamed: You referred to trade earlier. In response to the Chair's questions, you said that businesses are expected to bear in mind the illegality of trade that comes from settlements. Why would we not consider banning the imports of settlement goods? Would that not prevent settlements from thriving?

Mr Falconer: I am going to set out the position legally as it is in both the UK and the EU.

Q192 Abtisam Mohamed: That is merely advice that they are not required to follow.

Mr Falconer: There is a different legal status for goods from within and from outside the green line, which is why I said to the Chair that if you breach the labelling so that you try to pretend, in either the UK or the EU, that your goods are from inside the green line, when they are from outside, there are consequences, because there are different legal structures. We and the Europeans have preferential access for Israeli goods from within the green line, but that does not extend to settlement goods, so there is a legal difference.

Q193 Chair: The Israelis refuse to change the labelling. They do not distinguish. I have always gone out of my way to support Israel, and I will buy Israeli goods; I will also go completely out of my way to ensure that I do not buy settler goods, but sometimes I just do not know, because they are labelled as Israeli. That is the problem, is it not? We do not seem to be able to do anything about it.

Mr Falconer: As I said in the earlier exchange, we are conscious of this issue. We keep the advice very regularly updated. Clearly, there is an issue with the labelling of Israeli goods. The whole system of international trade relies on accurate labelling at the point of origin. If it were not to be accurately labelled, that does undermine the whole system. It is difficult from outside to enforce proper labelling on goods from within and outside the green line. I recognise the dilemma that you describe. We do everything that we can to try to ensure that the goods that come from Israel are properly labelled, but I recognise the issues that you describe.

Stephen Hickey: On the question of tackling the growth in settlements, in addition to all the bilateral measures that the Minister has set out, the role that the UK plays with our European allies and the United States in pushing back against the growth in settlements is very important.



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I know that this was on the agenda for the EU's Association Council with Israel two weeks ago. As the Minister said, we know that the United States is keen to progress the Abraham accords to and secure normalisation between Israel and Saudi Arabia, but it will be very challenging and very difficult for that to happen unless there is a Palestinian state in place.

Unless we, as the international community, can work with our partners to prevent the further growth in settlements and to preserve the opportunity for a Palestinian state, it will be very difficult to achieve that wider aim of normalisation between the United States and Saudi Arabia. We are prioritising this in our conversations with the new US Administration and also with our European partners. Working together with the US and European partners, we can have additional impact on this question, but also on other barriers to a two-state solution, which no doubt we will come on to.

Q194 **Chair:** Did President Trump not say a month ago that next month—i.e. now—he was going to tell us what his view was on the annexation of the West Bank?

Stephen Hickey: He did hint that there would be further announcements to come, although I would note that at the end of President Trump's first term, his Administration made a proposal for a Palestinian state. It was not a proposal that was taken up by either side at the time. The last time President Trump looked at this, his proposal was for a two-state solution.

Chair: Before we move off the West Bank, Uma has an important issue that I would like her to cover, about the 40,000 people who have been displaced.

Q195 **Uma Kumaran:** The Israeli Defence Minister stated in February that Israel will not allow the return of at least 40,000 forcibly displaced Palestinians to their homes in the West Bank. What is the UK doing to prevent this forced displacement and escalation of violence in line with our obligations under international humanitarian law?

Mr Falconer: We have been clear that we do not support forcible displacement. The whole thrust of the Arab plan that was announced following their conference and that we welcomed last week was that there should be no forcible displacement of Palestinians and that there should be a programme for reconstruction that allows Gazans to stay in their homes, if they wish. Clearly, there will be some Gazans who do wish to leave. The rubble in Gaza is testament to the degree of destruction that has happened there. People will make their own choices about where they want to be, but we do not want to see forcible displacement. We all heard the Prime Minister talking movingly about the images of people walking back to their homes, despite them being rubble. We are clear that we will support them to do that, and the Arab plan is a very important component in that.



Stephen Hickey: Uma's question was about the 40,000 who have been displaced from the Jenin refugee camp in the north of the West Bank.

Mr Falconer: We have been watching events carefully in Jenin. We do not want to see forcible displacement in any part of the Occupied Palestinian Territories or, indeed, anywhere. We saw those reports about the 40,000. As I said earlier in relation to my comments about the West Bank, it is vital that we see stability in the West Bank, in Jenin and across the whole territory, just as it is that we see it in Gaza.

Q196 **Sir John Whittingdale:** Minister, you have been admirably clear about the position of the Government in seeing a two-state solution as the only possible way forward. That has been pretty much the evidence that this Committee received prior to our visit to Israel, and it represents the views of the Arab nations. It is fair to say that when we spoke to Israeli politicians from all parties, it seemed further away than ever before.

The reason is the utter trauma that Israel still suffers as a result of 7 October and the determination that it can never happen again. They said to us very clearly that they would never accept the idea of living next door to a state controlled by people who wanted to destroy them. Part of the challenge is to persuade Israel to resume working towards that solution, but it will require very clear assurances about their security. What can we do to try to win support in Israel by giving them that kind of reassurance?

Mr Falconer: I have been both a pure diplomat and now a politician. I visited Israel in December, relatively shortly after the 7 October attacks, and that palpable sense of trauma, which I know you feel even now, was so visceral, even from the Israelis who had spent the longest time working on outreach and on pro-Palestinian activities—what would sometimes be described as the peaceniks of the kibbutzim. That trauma was clearly found right across Israeli society, as it is, of course, also in Palestinian society. We have all heard these incredibly evocative accounts of the trauma that has been visited on so many Palestinian civilians.

As you would expect, I see families of the hostages on a regular basis, and you can hardly get your mind around the awfulness of the situation that they live in, day in and day out. I recognise that, as a politician, you can only imagine. We all have constituents who come to us in states of distress, and I am sure that we all feel that distress very earnestly. One can only imagine what it is like to be an Israeli or Palestinian politician in these moments. It is incredibly hard—I make no bones about it—for either side to see the route towards a two-state solution, given that that requires, exactly as you say, a shared commitment to each other's security. That is a shared commitment that is so hard to imagine with the politics that exists today in Israel and in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

In a previous life, I was a negotiator with the Taliban on a peace process. I spent some time in Northern Ireland talking to some of the communities



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there about how they made their steps forward towards a peace process, and the horrifically difficult politics within communities about agreeing to trust the other side. I make no bones about how difficult this is. For there to be trust between the two sides in these conditions, it is incredibly difficult, but, as I said to Abtism, that does not mean that there is any other option.

Ultimately, it is going to be politics at its very core on both sides. I can only imagine what you heard during your trips, and I imagine that you heard a lot of intemperate views about the impossibilities of taking any steps towards having any trust with either side, but ultimately, for all the reasons that I have said, that is the only way that we are going to see a calmer region and two states living safely side by side.

Q197 Sir John Whittingdale: What do you hope that we can achieve at the conference coming up in June, in terms of trying to begin to give that reassurance?

Mr Falconer: The June conference is important, but my own experience is that politics does not tend to revolve around international conferences. My hope is that we are able to build up from the Arab proposals towards an answer for what is going to happen next in Gaza that provides safety, security and stability for the Gazan people, that provides for the release of all hostages, and that gives Israel confidence that what happens next in Gaza will not be a return to Hamas plans for tunnels, violence, rape and murder.

There needs to be a plan whereby they can have confidence and can relax the restrictions with confidence in the West Bank, and we can move towards a single state for Palestine that joins Gaza and the West Bank, and a two-state solution with negotiations. I recognise that as I go on in that sequence, it gets harder and harder, but that is what we have to try to build confidence towards. That is what all of our diplomacy with the Israelis, the Palestinians and the region is pushing heavily towards. It is difficult, but we cannot stop.

Q198 Sir John Whittingdale: We talked to them about the possibility of achieving a two-state solution one day. They spoke of it being generations away, and the recommendation that they made was education. The reason they said education was that they simply do not believe that the current generation of people running the Palestinian Authority, as well as Hamas, are willing to accept a peaceful solution. They want to see, literally, the children of children brought up without being radicalised. First, can we do more to support that? How do you see reform of the Palestinian Authority as a part of this?

Mr Falconer: I will come to those points about education and the Palestinian Authority, but just on the point about generations, I hope you will not mind me recounting a story. In 2014, I was in the Foreign Office and was sent briefly, as part of a rapid deployment team, to Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories as part of the crisis then. I remember



seeing a friend who had gone to university with me, who had done aliyah and was now an Israeli citizen and a rabbi there. I asked him about the route out. At the time, as will you probably recall, there had been terrible violence on both sides. People in Gaza were suffering then as they suffer now. He gave me a similar answer then, which was, "It is not possible now. There are not partners for peace. We have to wait and hope that it will change."

This is so much worse than what I saw in 2014. The trend has not been a positive one. The hope that the next generation will be able to address the fractured politics of this one is, I think, said more in hope than expectation. It may be true that this is incredibly distant, but we cannot accept that. We need to work with urgency and determination, and that is why I am being so stubborn about the two-state solution. I truly could not bear to go back, 11 years from now, and find the situation no better, in the same way that I have come back to the patch after a long time away to find the violence yet worse than it was.

On the questions of education and PA reform, there were some very important provisions in the Colonna report. I recognise that that is jargon, so the Colonna report, conducted by the well-respected former French Foreign Minister into the operations of UNRWA, looked in particular at some of the questions of the content of the textbooks provided both by UNRWA and others in Gaza. I have met with those who are concerned by what is in those textbooks. There were provisions in the Colonna report, which we fully support, to try to make sure that the textbooks in Gaza and across the Occupied Palestinian Territories are teaching a curriculum that can help enable peace rather than hate. That is incredibly important.

We are also clear that there needs to be reform of the Palestinian Authority. It plays a very important role, but there are changes that need to be made in order to give Palestinians, first of all, as well as the rest of us, the confidence that the PA is able to discharge its functions in an effective way and that it can be a good partner for peace. There have been some welcome reforms that they have made. We recently provided £5 million for their reform journey. We work closely with them. I talk to Prime Minister Mustafa and other Palestinian counterparts. Sir Michael Barber continues in his role in supporting their reform, and this is an important question for us, on which we will remain focused.

Q199 Sir John Whittingdale: And the support that we are giving will not be affected by the reduction in overseas aid?

Mr Falconer: The Prime Minister has been clear that Gaza is one of the areas that will get particular protection from the cuts, but I am not in a position yet to spell out the full implication of the reduction in ODA on the Middle East.

Q200 Aphra Brandreth: Just to be clear, do you agree, Minister, that Hamas must play no part in the future governance or administration of Gaza?



Mr Falconer: I do. Hamas have committed the most astonishing acts of brutality. Returning to Sir John's question about trust and confidence, and two sides working together, how could any Israeli politician have any confidence that an Administration controlled by Hamas could be a real partner for the Israelis?

Q201 **Aphra Brandreth:** Just as a follow-up to that, at the beginning of last year, we had initially paused funding towards UNRWA because of information that suggested that its officials had been involved in the 7 October attacks. In the middle of last year, that was changed. There are still some of our allies who are continuing to pause aid to UNRWA. What conversations have you had with UNRWA officials or your counterparts that assure you that there is confidence in the organisation?

Mr Falconer: As I say, we have engaged closely with the Colonna review and its recommendations, and we are putting our money where our mouth is. We are supporting the changes that UNRWA needs to make through the Colonna process with funding. I have had conversations with the commissioner-general and others in UNRWA, as have my ministerial colleagues. We remain closely focused on these issues.

Given that you have given me the opportunity, I would just like to address some of the recent allegations about UNRWA—in particular, the comments of Emily Damari upon her release, where she said that she believed she had been held in an UNRWA hospital. We have talked to UNRWA about those very serious and concerning claims. UNRWA makes the reasonable point that many of its hospitals have, at various points, not been in its control. There have been points where they have been forcibly evacuated, or their operation has not been possible, but these are, clearly, very serious concerns to have been raised, particularly by a British national who was held by Hamas for an incredibly long time. We welcome UNRWA's commitments to do an independent review into those claims, which we will update the House on once we have the findings.

Q202 **Blair McDougall:** Minister, you mentioned earlier your previous professional background and quite deep experience in issues around hostages and trying to secure their release. I wonder what lessons the British Government have drawn from the experience of dealing with attempts to release the hostages over the last 18 months, both during the period of intense violence and since then. How does that inform the Government's approach to hostages going forward?

Mr Falconer: This has been just the most astonishingly difficult period for the hostage families, as we all know. I know that many in this room will have met them. When I compare my own experience on hostage negotiations to this period, my heart so goes out to those families. I worked on a whole series of British nationals who had been detained by the Taliban; the efforts to secure their release happened largely in private, rather than being broadcast in public in the way that these have. They did not all come out at exactly the same time, but there was not this terrible wait.



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One feels the deepest empathy for those who still have their relatives and loved ones probably underground somewhere in Gaza, when many of them do not know whether they are alive or dead, after we have seen many incredibly welcome releases. What it must feel like for them, including Avinatan's mother, who I met last week, to be in these circumstances is beyond bearing.

Given this and my previous experience, I am so conscious that all of these hostage cases are so distinct and different from each other, and that the pain and the agony for the families is almost unique to their particular circumstances, whether they have come out early or late, whether there has been a military rescue, or whether they have been killed in a military rescue.

It really redoubles my commitment to ensure that in the various changes that we have proposed to the Foreign Office—in relation to these kinds of questions, most particularly in relation to an envoy—we try to make sure that we provide those families and loved ones who go through the most extreme pain that you can imagine, each and every day, the most effective possible support.

I would like to pay tribute to those in the Foreign Office who have worked night and day on the questions of how people might be released, but also to try to support the British-linked families. I was pleased to be able to thank them. Many of them were former colleagues of mine, in fact, sat not far from seats that I used to sit in. I know how consumed they too will have been. They will never be in front of you, but they have my absolute thanks. They are very dedicated public servants who are doing their best. That is not to say that families have not had reasonable criticisms of the way in which they have been supported at different times, and we will, of course, be looking at them.

Q203 Blair McDougall: You mentioned a moment ago that a lot of the work in hostage situations takes place very privately, behind the scenes. You also mentioned the Foreign Secretary's commitment to appointing a special envoy for this. I am wondering what a special envoy would bring to the table that the professional, behind-the-scenes, quiet diplomacy and patient negotiation does not.

As you are thinking about appointing this envoy, there may be two models. There is someone who has a big personality and a status and brings something to the table there, or a model where it may be someone with a quieter, more diplomatic, professional negotiating background. I am wondering what the experience of the last 18 months pushes you towards in terms of the value of an envoy.

Mr Falconer: There are three elements to these cases, each of which is quite distinct. One is whether negotiations are possible. Often, they are not. We will not make substantive concessions to those who take our nationals hostage. As I know painfully well, there is a limit to how far you



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can negotiate in order to secure release, given that long-standing and right policy position that we have always taken.

One element is to be the negotiator, and there are often two views about who the best kind of negotiator is. Often it will be, as you say, a professional diplomat deeply steeped in the region and, hopefully, steeped in the relationships with those involved. It will often be an experienced diplomat such as an ambassador, deputy ambassador or first secretary in the country—I am not talking about Israel-Palestine here, but about the issue in general—who will best know the players and is best able to effect, hopefully, a quick and quiet resolution to a problem.

In other cases—and these are the cases that we have been particularly focused on—quick and quiet is not an option, and you end up in a longer and more drawn-out situation. Some of the Iran cases are very obvious, and my experience with the Taliban is similar. In some of those situations, private negotiations are possible; in others, they are not, because your counterpart wants to broadcast absolutely everything that you do, usually for leverage purposes. We have to be clear that, when people take British nationals, they are often doing it for political effect here, and they want the House of Commons to be pressing Ministers to make concessions or do more, which is an awful situation for everybody to be in.

As we think about the envoy, there is a negotiation role where we need to be clear about whether we want them to do negotiations. In lots of cases—I suspect the vast majority of cases—I would prefer a negotiator who is specific to that context from the Foreign Office, doing the kind of role that I used to do.

The second element is supporting the family. These are emotional tragedies on a scale unlike any other consular case. It is vital that we rise to meet that where we can, particularly over the duration that these cases can often take. We have all seen them play out terribly over months and years, and it needs sustained emotional support. I have seen with my own eyes just what it can do to a family over a really long period of time, and it is incumbent on the Foreign Office to provide the best support that we can.

The third element is that, particularly in those cases that run for years, there is almost no country in the world where we will not have other things that we also have to do during that period, whether it is secure overflight rights, secure consular access to somebody else, or try to secure its votes in the United Nations for something else. Understandably, families will always feel very sensitive to the broader bilateral agenda and worry that their loved one is not being prioritised when other things go on. I do not want to comment in detail on consular cases in Egypt, but that is a classic example of where we have very difficult consular cases.

Chair: Blair and I both raised this in the Commons.



Mr Falconer: I know that there are many in this room who are very focused on those cases. You are also rightly focused, as we are, on the Arab proposals for Gaza, in which Egypt plays a central part. In managing this complex range of relationships, one of the benefits of an envoy is to be performing an internal challenge function as well. I would like an envoy to have the ability to challenge.

Clearly, in the end, I will be responsible. I am the Minister; I am accountable to Parliament. I am the Minister for Consular Affairs and the Middle East: I cannot escape that accountability, nor would I wish to, but an envoy can play an important internal challenge role, partly to provide the families confidence that, in and among all the other things that Ministers and indeed the Foreign Office as a whole and all of us as parliamentarians will be considering, their cases are not neglected. It is in those three areas that I see read-across.

Q204 **Blair McDougall:** It is sometimes helpful for the person who the British Government have sent there to seduce an international partner not to also be the person who is having to have the more difficult conversations. When the Foreign Secretary appeared before the Committee, his body language suggested that plans for an envoy were at a fairly advanced stage, but that was some months ago. Do we have a sense of timelines on the appointment of an envoy yet?

Mr Falconer: Soon, I hope.

Q205 **Chair:** No, no, no. The Foreign Secretary said "soon" to us in November. Since then, we have had December, January, February and March, so we are four months on and it is still "soon". What is "soon"?

Mr Falconer: I would love to be in a position to give the Committee more concrete timelines.

Chair: We would love you to, too. That is why you are in front of us: to give evidence.

Mr Falconer: I know—I can tell, Chair. I will endeavour to write to you with a more specific date. The process of appointing envoys involves a number of parts of Government, so it is just taking us a little while. I will try to get back to you as quickly as I possibly can. I am sorry about that.

Chair: You will get back to us soon, will you?

Mr Falconer: I will.

Chair: Very good.

Q206 **Uma Kumaran:** Minister, you spoke about the trauma and the grief. Having walked through Hostage Square myself, we cannot overstate the level of trauma and grief that the Israeli people are feeling. It is palpable. It is in the air. We were there on the day of the Bibas family funerals, and it was devastating. There is a replica of a hostage tunnel in Hostage Square, which I walked through. It was just a couple of metres, and that



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was enough for me to want to get out of there. I cannot imagine what the remaining hostages have gone through. We also met hostages who had been released, and their testimony was so moving.

What is the UK's role in ensuring that the remaining hostages and bodies are released as quickly as possible? This is one of the key points that is holding up any lasting peace deals.

Mr Falconer: I think particularly of Avinatan. I want all of the hostages and bodies back, but Avinatan has a British mother. He is one of the last remaining UK-linked hostages, and so we are particularly focused on his return. He is a relatively young man who was in good health when he was taken, and his sister very movingly made exactly the point that you have just made: "Why does everybody think that he will be fine when he has been underground for so long?" The thought of those circumstances haunts me. There is an urgency with which we have to get everybody released.

The process that had been outlined to release all of the hostages was the three phases of the ceasefire that were set out. I recognise that parts of the Israeli Government and, indeed, the US Administration have said that they wanted a more urgent timeline, possibly in phase 1, as the Chair was asking me earlier. We would want there to be no second of delay. We will do everything that we can to try to support those efforts to get the hostage releases, but also to support those who have been released and their families. There are a number of excellent UK organisations with experience of hostage cases, and we have tried to make sure that their expertise is available to all of those who are affected by this.

Q207 **Chair:** Just so that we put it on the record, we heard from Sharone Lifschitz, whose father was killed. She gave evidence to the Committee.

During our visit to Israel, we also met an extraordinary woman called Aviva Siegel, who was also in the White House, talking to President Trump. She was a hostage for about 50 days. She walked through a long tunnel and ended up having to lie on a couple of mattresses with her husband and two young women. The young women were taken off, raped and abused. They did not look at anyone. They did not talk to anyone. They kept not making eye contact, trying to make themselves as small as possible. She was released after about 50 days. She had to wait for about 500 days before her husband was released, and he could hardly move because his muscles had wasted away during that time. Also, his eyes did not work, because he had been in the dark all that time. These sorts of details are just heartbreaking.

We also heard from Dahlia Kusnir, who is the sister-in-law of the two brothers whom Hamas has been particularly manipulative and brutal about, filming one of the brothers being separated from the other. She has got one brother back, but not the other.

They are extraordinary women, talking about how much they were campaigning and how much the Government ought to prioritise the



release of the hostages and peace. We all remember Aviva saying that she also thinks about the women in Gaza, what is happening to the mothers, and what the future is. She is holding on to that and still understanding the common humanity that everyone has, despite everything that they have been through.

Meeting them was an extraordinary experience and is not something that any of us will forget. We just heard that, and it is important that we put it on record.

Mr Falconer: I have met some of those women. Their strength, dignity and bravery—words honestly fail me. I have met Sharone Lifschitz in particular on a number of occasions. I just want to record to the Committee that I cannot imagine what she has been through. She is a credit to her family and to this country. She has been so astonishingly brave under the most awful circumstances. My heart goes out to her, to all the other families and to the victims.

Alex Ballinger: We have heard that Israeli public opinion is very difficult at the moment, as is, of course, Palestinian public opinion. You spoke a bit about your time in Northern Ireland. You will remember then that there was a big investment in peace-building by the Americans in the run-up to the Good Friday agreement.

We met lots of peace-building organisations in Israel, both Palestinian and Israeli. They have been affected quite badly by the USAID cuts in recent times, but now, with the grand strategic level being so difficult, those sorts of grassroots organisations are more important than ever. We wanted to hear more about the UK's plans for peace-building in the region, and particularly the Prime Minister's commitment to an international fund to bring other countries together to invest.

Q208 **Chair:** What we did not understand when we went was that, given that the Prime Minister has announced our big contribution that is going to be a major push to this fund, the Israelis are saying that there is going to be an 80% tax. Is that going to be an 80% tax on the money that we are putting into this fund?

Mr Falconer: There are two things. There are proposals in the Knesset for taxation provisions around NGOs, as you describe. We are concerned by those proposals and are engaging with our Israeli counterparts about them. It is very important, just on a humanitarian basis, that NGOs can operate effectively. You could imagine that the two interact, but I will just answer the two questions separately, if you do not mind. There is that proposal in the Knesset of which we are aware and on which we are engaged.

On the proposals for a peace-building fund, we see, exactly as you say, Alex, the vital role that grassroots efforts to try to bring the communities together can play. We recognise the acute sensitivity at this moment, so we are looking at these proposals very carefully to try to build an approach that will work and that will be able to navigate the deep political



divergence between the two sides that Sir John was talking about, and to try to ensure that our support can help enable a broader, successful effort to bridge these gaps.

It is not straightforward, so we are taking our time. The Prime Minister has been clear in our commitment, and we are going to meet that commitment. We are just working through what the most appropriate way to do that might be.

Q209 **Alex Ballinger:** Will peace-building efforts be protected as we are approaching the UK's cuts to the aid budget?

Mr Falconer: Peace is by far the most effective intervention in any of these situations, so it will continue to be a priority.

Q210 **Chair:** Can I just get an answer on the 80% cut? If this Bill passes, will this peace-building fund be subject to 80% tax?

Mr Falconer: I am not in a position, for legislation that has not yet passed, to work out whether or not a fund—

Q211 **Chair:** Surely you are making some contingency plans in case the legislation is passed.

Mr Falconer: We are engaging with the Israelis about the legislation to try to make sure that our aid and that of our partners is in a position to reach Palestinians, and indeed Israelis, in the way that we would want.

Q212 **Blair McDougall:** One of the things that the Committee has been struggling to understand is what Britain's unique offer is in helping to resolve the conflict and build a better future. Is it fair to say that that experience from Northern Ireland of peace-building is one of those unique contributions that we can make?

Mr Falconer: That is certainly one of the contributions. You will have heard directly from those in the region about how they see the UK. We have had a very long-standing and close relationship, not just with Israel, Jordan, the Palestinians and the Saudis, but with, basically, the whole region. We have an excellent range of diplomats across the region who are deeply steeped in the languages and the history, and we do have a role to play.

We have a role on our own. We have a role in convening our partners, as you have seen repeatedly in recent months. We have a role too because we have a particularly deep understanding of the threat that Iran poses to Israel, to the region and indeed to us. We have been very clear in recent days—and indeed since we became the Government—about the degree to which we are prepared to take action to prevent Iran's malign activity, both here on the streets of the UK and in the region.

Ultimately, we want to see a region where Israel, Palestine, Saudi Arabia and the whole region are at peace with themselves, and Iran is less able



to exert its malign influence. That is an objective that many would share, and we bring some unique insight and experience to that task.

Q213 **Abtisam Mohamed:** You referred earlier to the recognition of a Palestinian state. What are the preconditions for recognition to take place?

Mr Falconer: We want progress. The narrow path that I set out to the Chair and Sir John to try to get to a calmer region is one on which there are so many roadblocks. We have relatively few strong levers, and recognition is one of them. I would like recognition to be a major contribution to advancing down that difficult and fraught path.

I do not have a set of preconditions to tell the Committee, such as, "Once X, Y, and Z are met, we will recognise." I am clear that we want to recognise a Palestinian state. We want to see that Palestinian state able to function effectively, and we have discussed this morning some of the impediments that could exist to its effective functioning. We want to try to create the conditions in which international diplomacy can move forward on a two-state solution.

I do not want to prejudge what those circumstances might be, other than to say that I remain committed. I want to do this. I want to recognise a Palestinian state. I want to do that as quickly as we possibly can, but I do not want to do it in the abstract. I want to do it as part of a practical contribution to moving forward.

Q214 **Abtisam Mohamed:** If the Arab peace plan leads to the June conference, and countries such as France and others recognising Palestine, would we potentially at that point have recognition as well?

Mr Falconer: I do not want to be drawn on hypotheticals, I am afraid, Abtisam. All will say is that I want to recognise a Palestinian state, as do the Government. We want to do that as a contribution to a two-state solution. We are looking very carefully at all of the proposals of our colleagues.

Q215 **Abtisam Mohamed:** The frustration for Palestinians, or anybody else watching this, is that this has been said for decades: that we will continue to say we are going to recognise Palestine as part of a peace process. Decades on, we are still saying the same thing. How do we move beyond that, to tangible action of, "This is what we will do to eventually lead to the recognition of a state"? It is tangible action rather than just words, which we have been saying for decades.

Mr Falconer: I understand the frustration. I am sure both the Committee and many of the viewers will say, "British policy has moved on recognition in a number of directions." Initially, British policy was that there would be recognition at the end of a process, and then the previous Foreign Secretary under the Conservatives said that it may happen at the beginning of a process. We are saying we want recognition as part of a



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contribution to moving forward. I am afraid I am just not going to be drawn on what moment we might think is most appropriate.

Q216 **Abtisam Mohamed:** Do you think that Israel has the right to veto recognition?

Mr Falconer: No.

Q217 **Abtisam Mohamed:** Even though they voted in the Knesset against recognition, you think we can still move forward, potentially in the near future, recognising a Palestinian state.

Mr Falconer: I want to be clear that Israel does not have a veto on whether or not the Palestinians have a right to a state, but in practice a viable Palestinian state will require negotiations with Israel. Those two things are in some tension, but they are both true. In the end, negotiations that can provide for safety and security, both for a Palestinian state and the Israeli state, are going to be a vital part of this.

Q218 **Abtisam Mohamed:** Recognition is conditional, then. It is not an inalienable right if it requires what you have just said. It is a conditional right, not an inalienable right.

Mr Falconer: No. I am clear that the Israelis do not have a veto on a state, but practically, in order to make a Palestinian state work, you would need to have negotiations with the Israelis.

Q219 **Abtisam Mohamed:** To what extent are our officials involved in the Arab peace plan?

Mr Falconer: We have engaged closely. I am engaged at ministerial level and Stephen is engaged extensively at official level. Stephen, would you like to say a little about that?

Stephen Hickey: Yes. We have been closely engaged for over a year now with Arab countries, European partners and the United States. In particular, we were involved in setting up a process called the Quint plus Quint, so the five key western countries and the five key Arab states. That has met at Foreign Secretary level now four times, most recently in Munich.

In between those meetings, we have been engaging in particular with Egypt and Jordan, as two of the most active Arab states on the Arab plan, on how to make that Arab plan as strong and as credible as possible. As the Minister said earlier, we have welcomed the Arab plan and we now, in the coming weeks, want to work closely with them to make it even stronger and, in particular, to give more details on the security elements of that plan.

Another member of the Committee spoke earlier about how important it is to reassure Israel about its security over the longer term as we seek to establish a Palestinian state. That is one area where the UK can work with Arab countries to strengthen the proposals on security, whether it is



around a police force, whether it is around deploying the Palestinian security forces to Gaza and how we can train and support them, or whether it is in developing this idea of an international security force in Gaza. There is lots of work we have been doing and will continue to do with those Arab countries, our European partners and the US to strengthen that plan so that it is as strong and credible as possible and can lead to a permanent ceasefire.

Q220 Alex Ballinger: Continuing on Palestine recognition, everything we saw from our visit to Israel, in the rhetoric from the members of the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee and when we spoke to the Deputy Foreign Minister, was about the two-state solution being completely off the table. Many of them were actively talking about the annexation of the West Bank. We saw in practical terms, when we were in the Jordan Valley, the steps that are being taken by extremist settlers. If we do not recognise Palestine soon, is there a risk that there will not be an opportunity for us to recognise it at all, because of all these steps that Israel is taking?

Mr Falconer: We are very mindful of the questions of the physical viability of a two-state solution. A two-state solution always envisaged complicated negotiations, almost certainly land swaps, and a whole range of very difficult diplomacy in order to get it over the line. Clearly, for all of the reasons that you say, that diplomacy becomes even harder as things develop. We do not want to see the viability of a two-state solution fade into the distance. We are making those points with some force to our Israeli counterparts.

I recognise what you say, Alex: that there will come a point where people lose hope in a two-state solution if there is not further progress towards it. For all the reasons I said before, that would be very bad for the region, for the UK and indeed, most immediately, for Israelis and Palestinians.

Q221 Alex Ballinger: At that point, might we recognise Palestine as a statement, rather than as a process towards a two-state solution?

Mr Falconer: I am sure you can tell from the thrust of what I am saying that I do not want to do anything as a statement. People—the Palestinians and indeed hostage families, Israelis—have had enough of statements. I want to do something that is going to make a practical difference. If we end up in a situation where statements are all we can do, then perhaps we might consider that, but that is not the world I want to end up in.

Q222 Chair: You said that you want to move away from a situation where statements are all we can do, and that you want to make practical action. Do you think that until now the British Government have been engaged in the sort of practical action that has made a difference and has pushed us closer to a two-state solution, or do you think that in fact what has happened is that we have made a lot of statements and no one has paid any attention?



Mr Falconer: I thought you might ask me a question like this, Chair.

Chair: I did not mean to, but after an hour and a half of this, I had to.

Mr Falconer: It is clear from everything that has been said over the last hour and a half that there are many areas where we, the Government, are deeply frustrated, where we are making statements we would not wish to make about developments in Israel-Palestine. Does that mean that we are having no influence on what is happening on the ground? I do not think so.

The answer I will give you now will perhaps, to you and to many viewers, seem very small given the stakes at play around the much bigger questions of a two-state solution and the future of the region, but the work that we have done since we became the Government has made a difference, whether that is the efforts that we took in August at the Security Council to try to ensure that there was a pause in fighting for polio vaccinations, which did indeed happen, the temporary relaxations that allowed for more aid in, the painstaking work to get the 511 people with UK links out of Gaza, including a family of three just a few days ago, or some of the other efforts that we have taken to try to ensure that hostage families are supported.

This is not easy. It is not a record I would like to be telling you about. I would much prefer to be telling you about positive progress on a whole range of bigger questions. It is, of course, incredibly welcome. We should underline how welcome it is that we are in a ceasefire and are still in a ceasefire. All of the difficulties that you outlined at the outset clearly pertain. I want to see us in phase 2, and we are clearly not there yet. I do not think that our efforts, or indeed the efforts of the officials on the ground, are for naught. I know and have met many of those whose lives have been changed profoundly for the better by the action of UK diplomacy, but it is clearly not yet the situation that we would like to see in Israel and Palestine.

Q223 **Richard Foord:** Just going back to the Arab plan, we heard some frustration when we were in the West Bank about how the Arab plan was being developed without a Palestinian voice at the table. We often use the formulation "nothing about Ukraine without Ukraine". Does the equivalent not apply here too?

Mr Falconer: Richard, we see the Palestinian Authority, the legitimate voice of the Palestinians, as a very important part and party to all of these discussions. Indeed, when I discussed the Arab plan before it was announced, I did so both with the relevant Arab ambassadors and indeed with Dr Husam Zomlot. We recognise the force in what you say. The Palestinian Authority does need to be reformed. There are varying regional views about how that reform might be gone about, as I am sure the Committee heard during its visit, but clearly a Palestinian voice about a Palestinian future is very important.



Uma Kumaran: We have been talking about the recognition of the state of Palestine. There is a real risk here that there will be nothing left to recognise very soon. We are seeing the annexation of the West Bank in front of our eyes. We have seen huge swathes of Gaza reduced to rubble. They have cut electricity. They have cut supplies. There will be nothing or no one left to recognise soon. I understand that the Government say, "We will do it at the opportune moment," but that moment may be too late. It is not a question; it is just something that I would like to leave you with, Minister, to keep in mind.

Q224 **Blair McDougall:** Can I bring it down from the big summits to the experience of Palestinian children? When we were in the region, we were told about the hundreds of thousands of Palestinian children who are deeply traumatised psychologically. There are a large number of Palestinian children also with pretty horrific injuries. I wonder what support we can give, both psychological and medical, to make sure that those kids get the help they need to recover from the last 18 months.

Mr Falconer: I have seen some of those children for myself. There are three elements to this. The first is clearly the circumstances for children in Gaza, who are like every other civilian in Gaza. We have talked about some of the restrictions on aid and on energy, and what the effect of that might be. I do not want to give the impression that what is happening in Gaza, despite all of the aid that we have provided, is adequate. There are clearly profound risks.

We are working, as I have just alluded to, to try to ensure that those who need to leave Gaza for urgent medical reasons are able to do so. I travelled to the Al-Arish hospital in the Sinai in Egypt to see some of those Palestinian children being treated in the region. I was pleased to announce £1 million for the Egyptian health organisation. Where children have been able to leave Gaza for Egypt, Jordan or other places in the region, we are working to try to ensure, through our funding to UNRWA, the WHO and others, that there is proper care for those deeply affected children.

If you will permit me, Blair, I might just address this to Abtisam, because she has asked me this question repeatedly. We will also support Project Pure Hope in a very small number of cases, to help Gazan children leave Gaza and get access to medical treatment here. There are few cases where that is going to be the most appropriate intervention. Most Gazan children will need to be looked after in Gaza; a smaller number will need to be looked after in the region; for a very small number, there will be a medical case for them to be treated here. I do not want to raise the Committee's expectations about this, but in a small number of those cases, the UK will work with Project Pure Hope to ensure they get assistance here.

Chair: Unless anybody has any other questions on Israel and Palestine, Alex is going to ask a couple of questions about Syria.



Q225 **Alex Ballinger:** Thank you, Minister, for your statement in the House yesterday. We are obviously hearing about the terrible attacks that happened last week, in which many Alawites have been massacred, but at the same time we are hearing positive news about the Government in Syria, with the SDF co-operating with HTS and the PKK potentially ceasing their attacks on Turkey.

With all of this flux happening at the moment, what is the UK's role? Should we be spending more time in Syria? I know our envoy has visited a couple of times, but it feels as though there is an opportunity for us to be there more often, potentially with reopening our embassy.

Mr Falconer: Stephen is the mastermind expert on the logistical questions about reopening the embassy, not least because he has served there before. Let me just answer some of the broader questions about Syria policy, and then I will ask Stephen to say a bit about our presence there.

Clearly, as we discussed in the House yesterday, the reports of violence on the coast and the death of minorities are very concerning. As you say, Alex, there is progress being made towards a more stable Syria. I hope that progress will prove to be sustainable, and we will do everything that we can to support it. It was one of the reasons why I travelled to Turkey last week, in order to have those discussions.

The elements in relation to the SDF that you described are particularly welcome. Nobody wants to see a disintegrating Syria. Nobody wants to see further violence. The violence that we have seen has been deeply unwelcome. The sign that a range of communities in Syria are being able to make agreements with Damascus in order to provide for their common future is welcome. The progress that I discussed in the House last night in relation to the destruction of chemical weapons is deeply welcome. I know many in this room will remember the awful scenes of chemical weapons being used in Syria by Assad. That progress is very much to be welcomed.

This is a deeply delicate balance. Stephen has travelled to Damascus and is engaged on a daily basis on the questions in Syria, as am I. I want to reassure the Committee that there is, of course, rather a lot going on internationally at the moment, but Syria remains a very significant issue for the Foreign Office; we remain quite focused on it. I might just ask you, Stephen, to say a little about our presence, our embassy and our visits.

Stephen Hickey: First, as the Minister said, we were the first western country to engage diplomatically with the new Syrian authorities in December, and we have kept up regular contact and a regular pattern of visits by our envoy and by other senior officials since December.

On the question of a physical presence, we no longer have an embassy building in Damascus—we gave up the lease on that building after we



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were forced to withdraw in 2012—but we do have an ambassador’s residence, which we have made use of during the regular visits. We are looking to increase the frequency of those visits and also the amount of time that visiting officials and Ministers can stay in Syria.

We are very concerned about the security situation for Syrians around the country, but also for visiting diplomats and Ministers. We pay very close attention to that and consult with our allies who are in a similar position. We would hope to re-establish a permanent embassy in Damascus as soon as we practically can and as soon as it is safe to do so.

Q226 **Chair:** Is that soon?

Stephen Hickey: Yes.

Q227 **Alex Ballinger:** Continuing on Syria, we have also seen recent attacks by the IDF on sites throughout the country, which many of us would agree would be quite destabilising at a time when the Syrian Government are making these positive steps and saying the right things to the international community. Have the UK Government made any representations towards the Israeli Government about these attacks?

Mr Falconer: We are discussing Syria with the Israelis. It is very important that the new Syria is given the best possible chance to be a stable and secure neighbour to all of its neighbours, including Israel. Clearly, the actions of Syria’s neighbours will affect very significantly that trajectory. We are having that discussion with the Israelis.

Q228 **Phil Brickell:** We had a one-off inquiry evidence session in January on Syria. The last British ambassador, Simon Collis, came and gave evidence to us. One of the topics of discussion was about the detainee camps, especially for Daesh fighters, and some of the harrowing conditions as well for women and children in the camps. What access do the Government have to those camps? What assurances have we been able to obtain about security in light of ongoing jail breaks and potential for fighters to be able to get out of those camps?

Mr Falconer: I might ask Stephen to come in, in just a second. On the camps, for the reasons that Stephen says, I want to be clear that we do not have consular access into Syria at the moment. We are not able to provide a consular service to the small number of British nationals who are in those camps in, I am sure, very difficult conditions, as you say. We deal with each consular request that we get from British nationals in those camps on a case-by-case basis and deal with it very carefully indeed, given the acute difficulties in north-east Syria and some of the reports that you mentioned. We will continue to look at this issue closely.

The announcements that Alex has referred to between the SDF, which clearly has control over those camps, and Damascus only came out last night, so we will need to identify what the consequences of that announcement will be for the circumstances in the camps. The camps clearly have a large number of people in and around them who are



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associated with ISIS, and I want to be clear that we remain very focused on the potential terrorist threat emanating from within Syria and the wider region. We will do everything necessary to ensure that it does not pose a threat to the UK or UK nationals. Stephen, is there anything you would like to add?

Stephen Hickey: I might just add that, as the Minister said, the security of those camps and prisons is of the utmost concern to us. We recognise the risks, given the changes that have happened in Syria and that are ongoing. We have a very close dialogue with the SDF on this topic. We have also spoken to the HTS leadership in Damascus about the importance of providing security in the prisons and the camps.

In addition, we recognise that the vast majority of individuals in both the camps and the prisons are either Iraqis or Syrians. We have worked very closely with the Iraqi Government to support them as they seek to take back more Iraqi prisoners and individuals in the camps, working closely with the United Nations and the IOM in this regard.

We also understand that the new authorities in Damascus are keen to find ways to repatriate and reintegrate Syrian individuals from camps into Syrian society over the longer term. It is a very complex problem. We are working closely with our partners in the global coalition as well, in support of the Iraqi, Kurdish and Syrian authorities, to achieve this.

Q229 **Chair:** There are women in those camps who, at the very least, left Britain as British citizens, who may have been stripped of their British citizenship since and told that they should use the other citizenship that it is said they have. Obviously they have not, in that they are still in the camps. Are you under any pressure from Syria to reintegrate those women into Britain? I speak because one of them is a constituent of mine. I wondered where we were, because it seems, on the face of it, as though there has been very little movement for quite a long time and everybody is stuck.

Some of the evidence we heard was about how insecure those jails are and how there have been jailbreaks. That is largely the men, but I am particularly focused on the women and their children. Obviously, their children are completely innocent.

Mr Falconer: I am glad that the Foreign Office has been able to repatriate a large number of British children who were in those camps. I recognise that one of them is your constituent. This is a relatively small number of people who are left, but we are very focused on those who have British links, whether they hold British nationality at the moment or did in the past. This is partly a question for the Home Office. Stephen might be able to shed a little light on the latest.

Stephen Hickey: As the Minister said, we have been able to take back a number of individuals. In looking at those cases, Ministers consider a number of issues, including the security-related aspects. We will continue



to do everything we can to provide a long-term solution to those camps, as I said, working in particular with the new Syrian authorities, the Iraqi Government, the Kurdish regional government in Iraq and the Kurdish authorities in the north-east, which all have an important role to play.

Q230 Uma Kumaran: I appreciate that it is a fast-moving situation and there is limited clarity. We have seen some really shocking videos this weekend of some of the violence. What assurances can the Foreign Office give us that you are working to ensure the safety of religious and ethnic minorities there? Are we emphasising this with discussions with HTS, or whoever it is that we are speaking to in Damascus and in Syria?

Mr Falconer: We are. I said in the Chamber yesterday that the violence is clearly a threat to minorities in Syria, but it is also a threat to the future of Syria. It is a place with great diversity. A functioning Syria is one in which minorities feel safe. That has always been the nature of a successful Syria. We are making that point to the interim authorities. We are, of course, speaking to those affected by the violence as well, in order to understand their perspective. Clearly, as you say, it is a fast-moving situation. It is important to try to get real clarity about how this violence started, how it then continued and whether or not it has indeed fully stopped, as there are some reports that suggest that it has. As you would expect, we remain focused.

Q231 Sir John Whittingdale: Finally, Minister, you referred earlier to Iran's malign influence in the region and its involvement in the attacks on Israel, both directly and through proxies. On the one hand, we have been told that Iran has been severely weakened by the destruction in Gaza of Hamas, Hezbollah and the Houthis, but at the same time there are reports that Iran has progressed quite rapidly in the acquisition of nuclear weapons, with reports from the International Atomic Energy Authority. How concerned are you about that, and what are we going to do about it?

Mr Falconer: We do not want to see Iran secure a nuclear weapon. That is a priority for us. We note the reports from the new US Administration that they want to see a negotiation to ensure that Iran does not nuclearise and does not get a nuclear weapon. We would support that. Along with France and Germany, we have an important role in relation to the snapback of sanctions, which would happen this year if nothing were done with the expiry of the JCPOA. We want to see a negotiation that will prevent Iran from accessing nuclear weapons, which would be a threat to the region and would be viewed very seriously indeed by the UK. We will work with the US, the E3 and others to try to ensure that negotiation happens and is successful.

Q232 Sir John Whittingdale: Are you confident that it can be achieved through pressure and diplomatic means without resorting to military action?

Mr Falconer: I hope so.

Q233 Sir John Whittingdale: That is our intention. Are we intending to take,



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therefore, much stronger diplomatic and economic pressure, perhaps?

Mr Falconer: I do not want to provide too much of a running commentary, but we are taking steps in order to try to ensure that a negotiation happens and that that negotiation would be successful. We recognise the acute difficulties, but we think a negotiated settlement that prevents Iran from getting a nuclear weapon is the right step.

Chair: Thank you for being so generous with your time and dealing with our questions with the amount of care that you have. We do appreciate it. This is obviously an issue, as I said at the outset, of huge importance internationally, to us and to our constituents. I hope that those watching have found this as enlightening as we have. Thank you very much indeed.