

Foreign Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: The UK at the United Nations Security Council, HC 930

Tuesday 1 July 2025

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 1 July 2025.

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Members present: Emily Thornberry (Chair); Aphra Brandreth; Phil Brickell; Abtisam Mohamed.

Questions 37-67

Witnesses

I: Richard Gowan, Director of UN and Multilateral Diplomacy, International Crisis Group; Martin Griffiths, Former Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs, United Nations.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Richard Gowan and Martin Griffiths.

Q37 **Chair:** Today the Foreign Affairs Committee is holding a further session as part of its inquiry into the UK at the United Nations Security Council. We are very grateful to have two experts joining us today from New York and Geneva. Could you begin by introducing yourselves for the record? Let's begin with Richard Gowan.

Richard Gowan: Good morning from New York. I am Richard Gowan, the director for the United Nations and multilateral diplomacy at the International Crisis Group, which is a global conflict prevention organisation.

Martin Griffiths: My name is Martin Griffiths. I have joined and rejoined the United Nations seven times in my life—I have been there and done it. I left running OCHA, the humanitarian field, last July, and I am now in Geneva trying to be helpful in different ways.

Q38 **Chair:** Very good. I will begin with a general question. We are particularly interested in the UK's penholdership at the United Nations Security Council. We are grateful for having had the opportunity to talk to Richard informally already, but it would be good to get this on the record as part of our inquiry. What is the UK's reputation as a penholder, as perceived by elected members of the Security Council, and how effective is it at holding the pen? Let's begin with Martin Griffiths.

Martin Griffiths: I have attended the Council frequently in these last years, both as a traditional envoy and then running OCHA; I would go there probably two or three times a month to brief. I was very much aware of the penholder function, but was not part of it. As you know—Richard knows better than me—it is very much a necessarily discrete function behind the scenes to try to get consensus on what might come out of the Council or be debated in the Council.

I am not a fan of the permanent member arrangement in the Security Council, but I recognise that changing that is a huge and difficult thing of its own, so that is not really available. That means that the penholders like the UK, which I think does it extremely well—I have huge admiration for your mission in New York and I work closely with them—need to, as you do, spend a lot of effort with co-penholders from the elected members, particularly those in the relevant region of the crisis that is being considered. I think that is crucial to democratise somewhat this elected and selected Council.

I think it is a good idea, in principle and in general purpose, to have a penholder arrangement, because a hell of a lot of work needs to be done behind the scenes in prep for an eventual debate, statement or resolution. I think the UK does it very well. I would just like to see more, if you like,

expanding this role, so that it is not the permanent members who have a hold on all the key crises.

- Q39 **Chair:** Isn't part of the problem the set-up of the Security Council, with permanent members and those that are elected for not very long, and many crises do not get fixed in that short period of time?

Martin Griffiths: I think that is part of the issue, but for me it is not the end of the issue. A two-year stint at the Security Council should be quite enough. We expect a huge amount from the elected members in their expertise and guidance on all the key crises. Why then, with their specific skills, alliances and networks, can they not be deployed to help prepare the Council to do its best? I can see the continuity issue, but I can also see the quality and the democratising, as it were—I think that is a bit assertive a word in this context.

Chair: Richard, what do you think?

Richard Gowan: I would address this at two levels. At the technical level, I fully agree with Martin. UK diplomats in New York are very competent and well respected. Diplomats from the elected members will say in private that when the UK is running a process, it is fairly smooth. There is actually some gratitude among the elected members to the UK for running a number of processes in the Security Council relatively smoothly. That is the technical level.

At the political level, there has been, as Martin says, some resentment that the P5, especially the western members of the P5, dominate pen holding. There has been some criticism of this. A few years ago, this reached a peak; the elected members were in a revolutionary mood, insisting that the P5 share pen-holding duties more. The UK, the US and France were sensitive to this and did start to share pen-holding duties. The UK has been working with Sierra Leone, for example, on Sudan, and this has lowered the temperature. There is now a recognition that London, Paris and, at least until this year, Washington understand how the elected members feel and are trying to respond to that.

- Q40 **Chair:** Is there added value? Is it just a question of managing the Security Council? Is there something additional that the elected members are able to bring?

Richard Gowan: I think it varies. In some cases it is not tokenistic, but it is not hugely substantive; in other cases it does matter. The US, for example, has brought in Latin American countries on Haiti. That is important because you need the Caribbean countries to have a voice on the Haitian issue for the Council's diplomacy to have weight.

- Q41 **Chair:** But it is just a matter of coincidence that there might be a country that has an appropriate interest and appropriate skills as an elected member when there is a crisis and they are able to contribute as a co-penholder.

Richard Gowan: It is worth saying that elected members are always chosen by their region. Even if a particular member is not especially



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relevant to a crisis, they can draw on the regional expertise. For example, there is always one Arab member of the Security Council from the Arab group, and you cannot really do anything on Gaza without drawing on the Arab member. Countries represent regions as well as their own national interest.

- Q42 **Chair:** It is clear that whoever the elected person is from a country or a region, they are well aware that they are acting on behalf of the region and aware of that responsibility.

Richard Gowan: Most of the time. If you are India, you are India.

Chair: If you are what?

Richard Gowan: If you are India, if you are Prime Minister Modi, you do not represent Pakistan or Bangladesh. But if you are Ecuador or Guyana, who are both recent members of the Council, then yes, you do represent the Latin American group.

- Q43 **Chair:** I see. Is there something in the argument that the pen-holding function—I hear what Martin Griffiths says about it being discrete work, hard work, and to a certain extent behind the scenes, but is there not also something performative and symbolic in some cases? Is there a way of avoiding that?

Richard Gowan: The United Nations is a performative and symbolic place. To some extent, this is part of the package. But I do think that Martin is right. I think that pen holding is mainly about tedious process management. The Security Council renews most of its mandates every year, and in some cases there is not a lot of space to innovate. Sometimes it is just about the process.

But there are cases—Somalia is one—where the UK has held the pen and almost every year there is a need to reorient, recalibrate and shift policy. In those cases, pen holding is genuinely substantive work of trying to identify what the international community can do in a very difficult case.

- Q44 **Chair:** Talking about Somalia, we heard from the former UK permanent representative, Mark Lyall Grant, that regional elected members on the Security Council are sometimes not keen to hold the pen due to domestic concerns about a backlash. Is there hesitancy from other African countries, particularly a country like Somalia, not to want to get involved, because there are such difficulties? Is that a real issue?

Richard Gowan: It is a real issue. It is a real issue right now, because Somalia itself is a member of the Security Council. Our Somali colleagues are having to walk very carefully, because they do not want to offend some big powers on the Council.

I think that this dynamic has changed more generally since Mark was in New York; African members have grown more assertive in recent years. There are still sensitivities, and there are still cases where African countries keep their heads down, but more often than not they want to jump in. This is definitely a tendency that we have seen in the last four or



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five years: elected members, especially elected African members, are looking for a greater role and greater status at the UN.

Q45 Chair: Martin Griffiths, is there anything that you want to add before we move on to peace and security missions?

Martin Griffiths: I agree with Richard, who in many ways is one of the historians of the council; it is a bit embarrassing to be on a panel with Richard—that is what I am trying to say.

Chair: Don't be silly.

Martin Griffiths: On that last point, I remember Kenya being on the Council recently. Richard, of course, will remember; we all will—I am sure you do, Chair. Their remarks and speeches were extraordinarily eloquent and quite moving at times. The permanent representative, Martin Kimani, was remarkable—not just because of his name—and very interesting on bringing the history of being an African into the Council when considering, obviously, the Tigray issue, as well as looking across to Sudan. That is something that the British, for example, would not have, even with all due diligence and very good motives.

Bringing in the co-penholder is the way to go on this, because of the factors of capacity and continuity. Bringing in countries that have different perspectives, reaches and networks should be a priority for anybody who is a permanent member and holds a pen.

Q46 Phil Brickell: I wanted to touch on the topic of peace and security missions, perhaps starting with Martin Griffiths. The latest iteration of the Global Peace Index, which ranks countries according to their peacefulness, showed that there are more state conflicts this year than at any time since the second world war, and that circa only 4% of conflicts in the last decade were resolved through a peace agreement, down from about 20% in the 1970s.

Against that backdrop, we have seen UN peacekeepers expelled from Mali and violent protests against the US's presence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Martin, how do you think that reflects on the political and peacebuilding capacities of the United Nations as it stands?

Martin Griffiths: I totally agree that this is the worst we have seen for many years in terms of peace, security and the lack of resolution of these many conflicts through dialogue. The erosion of the peacekeeping operations is part of the geopolitics. I was in the humanitarian field, mostly. We would not automatically be interested in peacekeeping missions and I did not get involved in debates on them, but we could certainly see in the field the obvious partnership. I was focused, as many others are—particularly now, as it gets worse—on the lack of political diplomacy, peacemaking and resolving through dialogue, which is not normally a prime function of a peacekeeping mission, but it is through peacebuilding.

The erosion of UN activity, simply said, and as many people have said, means doing less on this. We see it absent from many parts of the world.



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In Gaza, for example, I remember the very frank statement of António Guterres, the Secretary-General, last year. That was a time when we were talking about the reconstruction of Gaza—those are surreal days now. He said that the UN could not play a role because Israel would not permit it. So the UN is absent from a lot of this. Mediation has gone in a very different direction. It is now driven by key member states, including now Qatar and the Gulf—often states with interests, which is not appropriate for mediation in a classic sense, but they need to be partners of it. There is a serious problem of not enough activity on resolving through dialogue and, frankly, not much appetite. People are now seeing victory trump dialogue in a general sense.

Q47 Phil Brickell: Thank you, Martin. Richard, will you come in on that? What are your thoughts on how the UN's conflict prevention mechanisms might be strengthened, given Martin's comments and the direction of travel we have seen over the last few years?

Richard Gowan: Before I answer in policy terms, we should recognise that there are still about 60,000 UN peacekeepers operating in some pretty difficult places, such as South Sudan. UN peacekeepers continue to take casualties and lose their lives.

Chair: I am so sorry; I am finding it difficult to hear you again. This is entirely our fault. We have ongoing technical problems.

Richard Gowan: Just to repeat, we should honour the UN peacekeepers who are taking risks and, in some cases, fatalities in places like South Sudan. But it is absolutely true that UN peacekeeping and UN mediation are less effective than they were in the 1990s. In the last few years, the UN has been marginal or absent in cases including not only Ukraine and Gaza, but Sudan, Ethiopia and Myanmar. That is partially due to geopolitics. The world shapes the UN; the UN does not shape the world. The big powers often keep the UN out. China wants to keep the UN out of Myanmar. But it is also true that, with the exception of Martin, who was everywhere, the current UN leadership is quite cautious and risk averse. It would be good if we had a UN Secretary-General who was more willing to take risks and use his or her good offices in difficult places.

When it comes to peacekeeping, we need to move on from the models of the 1970s. We still effectively have the UN peacekeeping model that we had during the cold war, and we need to draw on better technology. We need to draw on drones and other tech that would allow the UN to operate in today's conflict environment. That is potentially expensive, and it is politically sensitive, but there is a growing sense in New York that we need to update UN peacemaking for 2025.

Q48 Phil Brickell: I will dig into that point about embracing technology for peacekeeping missions, because that is the first I have heard of it. Are there states at the UN in New York that are pushing in particular to embrace technology to support their missions?

Richard Gowan: Yes, and not always the countries that you would expect. South Korea has been talking about the use of tech in



peacekeeping for some time. It has quite smart ideas about how we use new tech. Just to put this in context, if you look at a situation like southern Lebanon, we currently have about 10,000 UN peacekeepers there. They are observing and patrolling. Do we need 10,000 people to do that in a very small space, or could we get the same effect with 3,000 or 4,000 peacekeepers, plus drones and satellites? Quite probably, yes. This is not going to work in every single case. Sometimes you need men and women on the ground, projecting security. But in some places, you can actually get the same effect or better with a tech-enhanced mission.

Q49 Phil Brickell: I want to touch on a slightly different topic. Some of the evidence that we have received to date has suggested that the UN is now primarily a vehicle for responding to humanitarian crises, with reduced involvement in peace settlement or promoting security through peace and security missions. I want to understand what both of your thoughts are on that statement, and whether it reflects your assessment—maybe starting with Richard.

Richard Gowan: I really should not speak before Martin on this, but as you have invited me to do so, I will. Yes, this is an absolute reality. Over the last 10 to 15 years, the UN has lost space in conflict prevention and resolution, as we just discussed. We have seen conflict rising in the same period. How has the UN responded? It has responded by mitigating the human fallout of conflict. You can see that by looking at the numbers. Fifteen years ago, around 2010, the UN spent \$10 billion on peacekeeping—these are rough numbers, but good enough—and about the same on humanitarian assistance. This year, the UN is spending \$6 billion on peacekeeping and \$30 billion on humanitarian assistance.

Humanitarian assistance has rocketed, and the main reason it has rocketed is because we are trying to save lives, feed people and shelter people in places where we cannot make peace. Actually, the main role of the UN in conflict today is providing that form of humanitarian assistance. It is tragic, because this is not sustainable in a period where the main humanitarian donor, which is the United States, is walking away. The US provided 50% of the money for the World Food Programme last year. If your main donor walks away, you do not even have the humanitarian conflict mitigation function. So this is a real crisis for the UN.

Q50 Chair: Do you mind if I jump in? When was the last time that there was a mediated peace through the United Nations? I was just thinking about it, and I am finding it difficult to remember. Was it the western Balkans?

Richard Gowan: No, there were a series of mediated peaces in Africa, in particular, in the first decade of this century. The last full-scale comprehensive peace agreement was in Colombia in, I believe, 2016. The UN did not mediate that deal, but it has provided verification and monitoring for the deal. It has been about a decade.

Chair: I did not hear that last bit.

Richard Gowan: It has been about a decade. The UN did not mediate in Colombia, but it has monitored the resulting peace agreement.

Q51 **Phil Brickell:** Martin Griffiths, do you want to come in on the interplay between peacekeeping and humanitarian affairs, given your former role?

Martin Griffiths: Yes, and thank you very much for the question. I very much agree, of course, with what Richard was saying about the threat to it now, given the funding cuts. That is an important other issue.

In some ways, humanitarian assistance has become—certainly in my period, in recent years; I was there from 2021 as the emergency relief co-ordinator at the head of that community until the middle of last year—a placebo, or a substitute, for other action, because other action is more difficult, as Richard has described and as we all know. Then, members of the Council, but also the international community, can at least say, “Well, at least we are doing something.” It is an important something; it is not a nothing, obviously—I would argue strongly about that—but it is not a substitute for political action. It is an additional option. As Richard describes it, it is mitigation.

What I found very striking in the last year or so, particularly looking at this through the lens of humanitarian operators in the field—in warzones and crises—is that there is a growing view within humanitarian agencies of the need for political diplomacy and mediation. Traditionally, we would not have talked about this, and we certainly would not talk to mediators—God forbid! They are the political side, and even to have this sort of contact with them would be so-called politicising humanitarian aid. I have never believed that myself—that is why I have done the things I have done—and that approach does not work, anyway, in crisis management. Humanitarians are involved in crisis management.

Take MSF, one of the biggest, most effective and most impressive humanitarian organisations, which is generally traditionally opposed to any discussion of humanitarian issues in the Council. Along with the ICRC, as you know, they have been coming, and you will remember that they recently briefed the Council on Sudan and talked about a humanitarian compact, which would also be a mediation contribution. So the world is changing—thank goodness—from the sometimes rather isolationist views of humanitarian leadership, and it is about time. That is born out of frustration, not out of invention, but it is a good thing.

Can I quickly say something on the AI issues that you were discussing with Richard? Beyond peacekeeping, the use of drones and other such indirect means to monitor what is going on in a conflict is incredibly important for the rest of us. I was the regional humanitarian co-ordinator for the Great Lakes—Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda, Congo—and if we had had some drone intelligence which we ran, let’s say, on where the war was going as Laurent Kabila crossed the country to take Kinshasa, it would have been incredibly useful for our planning, and it would have made us much more efficient. That was not available, and we were still relying on people we could talk to in this and that Government to help us. That is really important. It is not a novelty; it is absolutely well known, and it is for all of us, not just for peacekeeping—although certainly, of course, it is primarily for peacekeeping.



Q52 Chair: When we were in New York, I think the phrase that people on our Committee latched on to was that when a new Secretary-General is selected, we need to have an activist Secretary-General. In a way, I think you have both been saying this, so do you agree that that is what we need next?

Martin Griffiths: I will try to answer this a little bit. I, for example, characterise myself as not an activist, because it is a slightly different function, but I think we need a more active Secretary-General. We have heard from Richard the boundaries that are self-imposed, and also imposed, and I think that is a great pity. I am coming from the context of working in the UN with Kofi Annan as the Secretary-General, who was an active person, if not an activist, but had strong views. He was very important on accountability. He went to the scene of the crime very early; he went to Iraq. I must say, I congratulate António Guterres, who I passionately admire for going to Lebanon in the early days, for example. The more of that, the better.

The Security Council should be hearing people in Lebanon, or in Syria. I addressed the Security Council from Damascus on the issue of cross-border aid after the earthquakes, after I had just seen President Assad—our long-lamented departure—and it was telling. It was a new—well, it was not new at all, but it was a good spirit.

So it is engagement, involvement beyond statements, going to places, talking to the people who are unpopular—I think António Guterres has made great progress in some of his meetings with President Putin, for example, with one creating the Black Sea deal. That was very much a UN process. He is more active, but on the basis of a real sense of the fact that his world—the world of the Council and the General Assembly—is an equal world, despite all the evidence to the contrary. That goes back to the co-penholder business.

Q53 Abtisam Mohamed: I will ask a few questions on our penholder responsibilities with a number of countries, in particular Sudan and Libya. I will start with you, Richard. What is your assessment of the UK's leadership in the management of the Sudan file? How might we do better on accountability and holding the regional proxies to account?

Richard Gowan: First, we have to be realistic. Twenty years ago, about the time of the Darfur genocide, the UK was a huge player in diplomacy on Sudan; we are now in a world where many other powers have much more leverage in this conflict.

Chair: What you are saying is important, but I am finding it increasingly difficult to hear.

Richard Gowan: I am sorry. If you spend time at the UN, you often feel you are shouting into the void—

Chair: You are not shouting into a void, but if you could shout, we would appreciate it.



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Richard Gowan: We are in a world where the UK's direct leverage in Sudan has reduced, and the leverage of countries like Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt has much increased. The UK continues to do what I would describe as yeoman work, trying to end the Sudanese civil war both in the Security Council and through what we saw in the recent London conference on Sudan. In terms of process, the UK is doing a good job.

We have to be realistic about what the UK can do in the Security Council, which is to keep a focus on the conflict and to try to cast a spotlight on what other players are doing. That is complicated, because the Russians have taken the side of the Sudanese Government, and the Russians vetoed the last UK draft resolution on Sudan. The Russians are doing that mainly for big-power political reasons.

None the less, the UK can still use the Council as a platform to highlight the conflict. We should, however, understand the difference between using the Council to highlight a conflict and push for humanitarian aid, and actually being able to use it to resolve the conflict. My gut feeling is that the solution to the Sudanese war probably lies in Jeddah, Abu Dhabi or somewhere in the region, rather than in New York.

Q54 **Abtisam Mohamed:** Martin, you said previously that global powers have failed to find ways to end wars and humanitarian crises. There is an absence of consequence for powers involved in conflict, and a lack of accountability when it comes to dealing with that. How might we deal with it, based on what Richard has just said about Sudan? Various countries in the region have their own interests in Sudan, which could be in conflict with peacekeeping.

Martin Griffiths: That is a very good question. Recently, I have been quite busy talking to some of the mediating powers to which Richard referred about, frankly, the failure of their mediation. The failure of their mediation is not necessarily their fault, but it is because the conflict has a lot more fighting, killing, disaster, tragedy and famine to come, which is deplorable.

The British are playing a yeoman role, to use Richard's word, but they are not in the inner circle. That goes to a bigger point I want to make. The Security Council should not only be about resolutions or presidential statements; it should be about debate. Not putting forward issues for debate because there may be a veto is, in my view, a mistake. It is obviously true about humanitarian issues; there are other issues as to whether that is the right forum, but it is important.

It is certainly true of conflict resolution, and Sudan is a classic case for that. Why is there not a discussion around that table, bringing in as observers to the session key mediating states, such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE—Richard mentioned them—to talk about their obligations and accountability for doing very little, frankly, and for arming one or other of the parties? It has not gone well. In my recent experience, there is an acknowledgment from those powers that it has not gone well. They would say that is because it is too difficult.



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Nothing is too difficult for conflict resolution—nothing. It was suggested to me recently by one of the senior British diplomats dealing with Sudan, because of the relative unsuccess of the Sudan conference in London, that we should look at the outcome, the end state, which has not been looked at yet in mediation. I believe that is a global pattern, by the way. Even though the war is by no means ripe for an outcome at the moment, that is the sort of thing that Britain has a mandate to do.

It would need to do so in consultation with key powers, as I said earlier. Mediation is done these days by those with leverage, not necessarily by those with status, as in the Council. It would be really interesting to set that on the table. I am sure you know, as I do, from direct experience, that absence of an end state and an outcome means absence of hope for the people, largely. We see that clearly in Gaza, of course, but we see it in many places round the world. Humanitarians see it on the frontline. What an extraordinary and important thing that is to have discussed in the highest court in the land, which is the Security Council.

Q55 Abtisam Mohamed: Martin, you used an interesting phrase there: the UK is not in the inner circle. How might the UK bring itself into the inner circle, to be more involved in these debates?

Martin Griffiths: I go with Richard on this. They were much more involved some time ago, much less now. The initiative was taken in Jeddah. I was sitting around in the first Jeddah, though I was not allowed in by the US and Saudi Arabia in that case, as you know. It is a different world we live in. I do not worry if the UK is or is not involved in something, so long as something happens.

In this particular case, precisely because it is the penholder and is very efficient as a penholder, as we have said, with great wisdom and capacity, it can—this is what the senior official said to me—focus the minds of those mediators who clearly do not want more to join the group in general terms, to understand their obligations in a larger context. It is important to debate that in the Council—with care, of course, because it would be dangerous, improper or impolitic to talk in the way I am doing about the failures of mediation. It is important to get that debate out, and that is a mandate that the UK has because of its permanent membership.

Q56 Chair: Could I clarify something? People watching might want to know whether it is possible for the Security Council to call witnesses before it. With Sudan, as you say, the big players are not in the room, so you would bring them into the room and ask them to explain what they are doing, where they think it is going and what should happen next. Could that be done?

Martin Griffiths: Yes. Richard knows much better than I do. We see it happen all the time now, Chair. The contributions and briefings by so-called civil society in many of these crises are very impressive and incredibly important, albeit sometimes skewed one way or another, depending on the penholder. I have sat next to them in that Chamber. Similarly, the observers who come in and brief are very valuable. As you



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say, Chair, Sudan is a perfect example of that. Why not bring the ALPS group to the Council to talk about where it is going? Even just talking about what they are going to do next would be very interesting for the Council and for us.

Q57 Abtisam Mohamed: Let me move on to the conflict that has been raging in Libya since 2011. Martin, do you think the UK can do any more? Is the UK's involvement as the penholder on Libya somehow conflicted because of our involvement in the original conflict back in 2011?

Martin Griffiths: I'm afraid I do not know much about Libya—*mea culpa*. I think Richard does.

Richard Gowan: Libya was a very controversial issue for some time after the fall of Gaddafi, and not only the Russians but the African members of the Security Council were very negative towards the UK and US over their approach to the war. But I would say that it has lost some of its toxic nature in recent years.

I think the UK has been a solid backstop in diplomacy over Libya. We do not see the UK driving initiatives around the conflict. The last country that actually drove a real diplomatic initiative was Germany, which partnered with the UK in the Security Council about five years ago to try to get progress towards a political settlement. Berlin took most of the political lead, but you had the UK in the background, being the best supporting actor—being a competent backstop in the Security Council.

We come again to the limitations of the Council. Turkey now has a big role in Libya, as do the Gulf countries. The UK can affect events from New York, but it cannot shape events from New York. Sadly, that is true in a lot of the other cases where the UK is the penholder, such as Myanmar and Yemen.

If I can add to Martin's comments on bringing in witnesses or knocking heads together, it is important to distinguish between the public meetings of the Security Council, where you can bring in NGOs and civil society, and what Council members can do in private. A lot of the real business of the Security Council is done not in the Security Council Chamber, and not even really in the UN building, but in backrooms around New York where the big powers can get countries together and say, "What are you doing? What are your plans?" In recent years, that sort of backroom diplomacy has been hobbled because the Ukraine war has meant that the P5 has not been a functional group. But as and when the P5 becomes more functional, that sort of backroom diplomacy can be quite effective.

Q58 Abtisam Mohamed: Last week we heard evidence that potentially the UK is the penholder for Yemen because no other country would want to do it. Is it a similar case with Libya?

Richard Gowan: The question is who else could hold the pen on Libya who would be impartial. African countries might want to hold the pen on Libya, but Libya has a complicated relationship with the African Union. Malta was recently in the Security Council and was very interested in



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Libya, but obviously Malta has Libya on its doorstep. In the Libyan case, we could say that the UK is more or less the best possible option of those that are available. I have not heard direct criticism of the UK as the penholder on Libya for four or five years. The tensions over that were significant and persistent, but they have dropped off.

Q59 Aphra Brandreth: I have some questions about the UK's role in respect of women, peace and security. Mr Gowan, some of the evidence the Committee has received raised the concern that the UK, as penholder on women, peace and security, has not spoken out against recent moves by the US to frame women's reproductive rights as being in opposition to what they would say are traditional family values. Of course, back in April the US Defence Secretary said he had ended the women, peace and security programme in the US Department of Defence. Given the central importance of reproductive rights for things like women's autonomy and economic security, are you aware of whether the UK has challenged this publicly? If not, why do you think it has not?

Richard Gowan: First, the women, peace and security file in the Council has been difficult for about five or six years. Not only the first Trump Administration but Russia and China have worked very hard to contain the Council's work on WPS, and it has been difficult for the UK to navigate the situation. I think the UK's principle is "do no harm": do not pick fights with the US and other conservative powers that would actually undermine the file further. You can say that that is over-cautious, but it may be the best possible strategy.

In the last few months we have seen the UK and other Council members pushing back on the US in specific cases. In the spring, the mandate for the UN peacekeeping force in South Sudan came up for renewal and the US tried to strike out all references to gender in that mandate. The UK and other European countries stood firm and said, "No. We have a massive problem with sexual violence in South Sudan. You cannot strike this out." In that case, the US retreated and allowed the language to stay in the mandate.

In a case-by-case sense, then, I think the UK can stand up to the Americans, the Russians and others to keep the agenda moving forward, but it is now very difficult to put big thematic resolutions on the table, as we used to do, that talk about WPS as a general global priority. That would run into huge opposition from Washington.

You touched obliquely on an enormous challenge for the UK and the Security Council that we should probably talk about, which is the US. For the last few years, during the Biden Administration, the UK and the US had very good relations at the UN. Of course, there were occasional differences, but mostly the alliance was working. Now, no diplomat in New York, and no UK diplomat in New York, can be confident of what their relationship with the US is going to be tomorrow or next week, which means everyone is naturally more cautious than they previously were.

Q60 Chair: That is right, but some might have caricatured the relationship



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between Britain and America during the Biden Administration as being Britain just agreeing with everything the Biden Administration said. I do not know how creative that relationship really was.

Richard Gowan: Martin saw this up close and will, I am sure, provide a more diplomatic answer than me.

Chair: I am obviously thinking about the middle east in particular.

Richard Gowan: I do not want to make a party political statement, because I am of no party. There was a period in 2023 and 2024 when the UK was seen as being too cautious over Gaza in how it situated itself relative to the US. That has now changed, and the UK is seen as having a more independent policy over Gaza.

Chair: I am sorry but you are fading away again.

Richard Gowan: The UK is seen as having a more independent position over Gaza than it did perhaps 18 months ago.

Chair: And that is not just about the change of American leadership. There has been a change of policy in Britain, so it would not matter who the American leadership was—there would be some space between the two.

Richard Gowan: The space was already opening up before the transition in January.

Q61 **Chair:** Yes, that is the way to put it. Martin Griffiths, is that right?

Martin Griffiths: Yes. It is distressing for people like me to see how difficult it is, in a genuine sense, as Richard has described, for British and other diplomats not to take positions on matters of, for example, international law. We have recently seen the war in Iran, which most people would say at least raises the question of a breach of law. For political reasons—and there are good motives for those political reasons, no question—it is not a distinguished period of history. We are all coming to terms with that in all our activities—the humanitarian community very much so, because of the cuts and so forth, but also with the speaking out. I am a free person, so I do not have to be what Richard exalts me to be as a diplomat, and I can speak out. You can do that and not suffer, and more of us need to do it.

This is a slight segue, but one of the issues in the humanitarian community is to have relations with not just mediation but human rights. Again, that was taboo in years gone by. It goes to the heart of what I was saying about having discussions in the Security Council, not necessarily conclusions—that is a possible way to do it. Listening to some of Dame Barbara's speeches in the Council, she can be very firm and clear on really difficult issues. She is very impressive, as are the team with her. We would like to see more of that.

You cannot find a humanitarian person globally who likes sanctions; they are just something we do not like. We need to officially have a discussion

in the Council about the effect of sanctions as well. It would be relevant to Afghanistan, Syria and elsewhere. It was certainly relevant for us, because it usually meant no development funding for those countries and increased poverty and so forth.

It is now very important to get into the weeds of the difficult debates because of the change of values across the Atlantic. The UK should be able to play that role better: it is not constrained by being in the European Union, it is a long-time ally of the United States, for good reason, and it needs to speak truth in those circumstances more often, which, as Richard says, it is growing to do in the case of Gaza.

Q62 Aphra Brandreth: This has been a very interesting extension to the discussion, but I want to ask a couple more things about the WPS file.

Chair: Sorry, I did not realise.

Aphra Brandreth: It was a worthwhile discussion to have.

Mr Gowan, you have previously written that countries like Norway are increasing investment in gender-related programmes, but others “have quietly paid less attention to the theme.” Given that the UK is reducing our ODA spending, what does that mean for the credibility of the UK’s thematic leadership on WPS?

Richard Gowan: We at Crisis Group have a general concern that the level of funding going into the implementation of policy around WPS and gender-related issues is clearly going down. The level of funding for these issues has always been far lower than was necessary. We see certain countries, such as Finland and Norway, trying to keep that funding up, but the overall tendency is not good.

For the UK and other liberal countries, this is an area where we should continue to invest. There is a risk that, as part of a general cut to development spending, we invest less and less in women’s empowerment and protection, and the agenda will just fade away. That seems to me to be a potentially huge setback for not progressive values but just liberal values worldwide. My advice would be to try to ringfence that funding and link solid funding in the WPS space to continued protection of the WPS agenda in the Security Council. I am a nasty product of realpolitik—I view the Security Council in very realist terms—but this is one area where I think we should stand by certain moral principles that the UN has been pretty key to developing over the last 25 years.

Q63 Aphra Brandreth: Mr Griffiths, some of the written evidence the Committee received pointed to a disconnect between the UK’s leadership on WPS and some of our country-level implementation. When we have enormous global conflict, women are always disproportionately affected. Do you have any thoughts about how the UK is ensuring that, in countries where it is the penholder—we have talked about Sudan, Somalia and Colombia—women are protected, consulted and included in peace negotiations and post-conflict processes?



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Martin Griffiths: I have always found myself, even at this end of life, needing to remind myself of the truism that you just spoke about women suffering the most in conflict. It is not for lack of evidence or will, but in practice, as Richard has been saying, it is so vulnerable. I say that about the humanitarian community and certainly about the mediation community.

In my experience, the mediation community on the whole is insulated and isolated from civil society, including women, by the parties. At the first Jeddah meeting on Sudan a couple of years ago, we argued—I argued, we all argued—for the inclusion of civil society, by which I mean the emergency rooms people: the women who were suffering sexual abuse and attacks, which have only grown. The one thing the two parties could easily agree on was not allowing that to happen. I found that true in so many different places.

I will come back to the humanitarian aspect in a minute, but when I was involved in Yemen, I was reporting to the Council all the time, and it always asked me about women's representation, including in delegations. We did some peace talks in Sweden about Hodeidah, and after a lot of lobbying both parties refused to have women. I think one of the parties—the recognised Government—had one woman there. The Houthis had not one. So it is a good question to prod.

I think there are more questions to prod by way of the special envoy, on tactics, strategy and the choices that he or she is making. We know that the inclusion of women, including as leaders in mediation, has just not happened. It is a huge issue and it is going to be more urgent now because of cuts, but also because of this inchoate but true shift towards the global south. It is a stain on the reputation of people like me.

In the humanitarian world there is a great deal of effort on the inclusion of women and civil society, and particular agencies are particularly good at it, but it has not led to a fundamental change in the programming model, which is still: we get the money—well, we don't any more, but when we do—and we decide where the worst needs are and then pile it in. We do not spend essential time on listening to the frontline communities, to women and to civil society voices and saying, "What's actually going on? What do they actually need?" In my experience, if you do that, you always realise that—this is totally anti-patronising—you do not know the situation as much as they do, obviously. We would say that about our own places.

Because of the supply chain model, essentially, and the way the donors favour large organisations that can absorb more, exclusion is now fundamentally in need of what Tom Fletcher calls the "reset". He has spoken to this in his recent very important statement to the IASC, but we are not doing as much as we should. We should be held much more accountable to it. Mediators should be held accountable for exclusion in terms of not only gender but diversity and civilian voices. On Sudan, it is interesting that the civilian voice, which is key to the future and transition, is still not something you hear very frequently in public discussion or in mediators' discussions.



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One answer to the question, I think from the Chair, about women speaking is, of course, partly to bring them to the Council, terrifying though that mostly is as an experience for us. But it is essential, isn't it? They are always very well chosen in my experience and speak the truth that we need in that chamber. If that could be sent into the back rooms that Richard described as the backbone of the Manhattan Security Council, even better.

I think the UK is very strong and works a lot on this. Dame Barbara has a passion on this, rightly so, and is mandated, but it has not worked. As Richard said, we have gone backwards these days. Could I just end with this? Sorry to be so long on this one. From my perspective within the Secretariat and within OCHA, on the protection of civilians, which is a related subject with a thematic place in the Security Council agenda, we had a certain reluctance to follow the views of accountability of the Council, because we wanted the Council to do more work than us.

That was wrong reasoning; we did not even really raise the appalling unaccountability of killing aid workers around the world, none of which is prosecuted, not even through our help. I think there is more on implementation here than on policy. Now is the time, particularly because of the cuts—and Richard talked about ringfencing and I agree—to make this happen. Because of the US, we see agencies dropping diversity and gender issues from their websites and so forth. That is just wrong, betraying our heritage and our reason for being.

Q64 Chair: Can I take you back to another aspect of penholding? I am beginning to get the impression from both of you that pragmatism is the order of the day for penholding. Nevertheless, it is still odd for people to see Britain being the penholder on Cyprus, given that we have such interests in Cyprus. We have our bases and I think we still have peacekeepers there. We obviously have a great deal of history, with a lot of people of British origin living in Cyprus and lots of Cypriots living in Britain.

Would it not be a better use of the penholder role for someone else, other than Britain, to be exercising the penholder role, because of accountability and Britain being seen as having a vested interest from one side or the other?

Richard Gowan: Again, the UK's position on Cyprus on the Council is taken as a given. Greece is currently on the Security Council. They would love to be the penholder on Cyprus.

Chair: I can see that not working out very well.

Richard Gowan: That would be somewhat tricky. We should remember that the UK is a country that is allowed to have a foreign policy. That is why you have a Committee that covers this. In some cases, the UK is there to be impartial and a neutral referee in conflicts where we do not have direct interests. I don't think it is disgraceful for the UK to want to maintain a lead at the UN on certain situations where it has particular national investments. Cyprus is a fairly straightforward example of that.



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I would say that in the Council everyone understands that the UK has specific interests in Cyprus. Actually, Cyprus is not a particularly contentious issue among the permanent members. There are sometimes tensions with Russia because of its financial links to Cyprus, but this is not a Ukraine or a Gaza. It is one case where most people would say the UK manages pretty well. I do not think that if you had Sierra Leone or Panama as the penholder, we would move any more rapidly towards reunification. I would actually say that it is fair for the UK to maintain a national interest at the UN on the Cypriot issue.

Chair: Very good.

Q65 Phil Brickell: When the Committee visited New York the other month and met the Secretary-General, we had a conversation about the UN80 initiative, which was launched back in March. Among other things, I understand that it is looking at the 40,000 mandates that have been accumulated since the UN was instituted and the 4,000 mandate documents that govern those, and whether there is opportunity for removing duplication and consolidating those. Martin, do you see that having any impact on how the UN goes about its humanitarian work? Are there efficiencies that could be realised that would have a demonstrable impact on the ground?

Martin Griffiths: That number was quite surprising to me, but then I never really was somebody who was very busy with mandates—or indeed with resolutions. In fact, one of the criticisms made by people like me, including those in the Secretariat as I was, is of producing a resolution or a statement that is anodyne, which goes to the lowest common denominator. Not only is that a waste of time and a huge effort—including by the UK, obviously, in its penholder role—but it reduces the reputation of the Council globally. Mandates that are somewhat toothless, vague or anodyne diminish and demean the UN and the Council.

Clarifying, sifting and narrowing down the number of mandates has to be a good thing. We remember the old stories that the Trusteeship Council could never get rid of any issue. Closing things down in the UN is not one of our core business skills. But I would say that the UN80 initiative, as far as I have seen—I am sure that I have provided, as well as Richard and others, ideas to it—is a vast collection of ambitions. I am sure you and everyone in this room has been involved in restructuring in our lives and in our places of work. It is a nightmarish process. It often causes great damage, but it is also necessary at times. It is now. But I think the ambition of UN80 is something to be careful about.

The crisis, as I see it, of the UN is now one of relevance, and it goes through all the discussions on this issue. It goes through all the discussions on the work that I was doing in OCHA and on Ukraine, for example. The UN became somewhat relevant on Ukraine because it was definitely the Secretary-General personally deciding that we should go with the Black sea grain deal, as you know. It was a remarkable achievement, not least because it brought in people to run the mediation—I was the mediator there for Guterres—across the whole landscape of UN



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departments and agencies: a classic response to the usual internecine warfare that we have between those different lots of people. But it worked, and it worked for two reasons. One, because it was necessary that the parties recognised that they could only do this if they described it as humanitarian, which it was—global food security. Secondly, it worked because of the image of the UN represented by the people that they deployed—I am not talking about myself, but across the board. The IMO, sitting in London, was a huge asset to that. I discovered parts of the UN I had never met, and it was remarkable. We risk losing that because of lack of relevance.

That is why I go back to what was being said earlier about ambition, in terms of mediation and peacemaking. That is relevance, but the Black sea was a great example of that. We were the easiest people to deal with in that context. We were obvious, but it came from leadership. The Secretary-General went to see President Putin—not a popular move in some countries—and he had a very long discussion with him. After he came out, I remember he was briefing me, and he said it was a very long meeting, but they eventually came out with these two operations—one in Ukraine and one on the Black sea. Leadership was necessary, but the tools and the skills, which are still in the UN in this residual phase, are not repeatable elsewhere.

Q66 Phil Brickell: Richard, to what extent do you think the UN80 initiative and the structural reforms going on provide an opportunity to improve the efficacy of the penholder role, particularly as it plays out for the UK?

Richard Gowan: First, UN80 is the beginning of a probably fairly long process of reform that will stretch beyond the current Secretary-General's mandate. I do not think we have fully internalised how difficult the next five to 10 years are going to be, financially, for the UN.

Chair: I am sorry, could you speak up?

Richard Gowan: Sorry. At the moment, we are still looking at marginal cost savings to get the UN through the next six, 12 and 18 months. Down the road, there is going to have to be an even more serious discussion of how the organisation shrinks to get better effect with fewer resources. I think that is going to involve some very difficult discussions of merging big UN agencies like UNHCR, the refugee agency, and IOM, the migration agency. Right now, those things seem inconceivable for bureaucratic reasons, but when the financial pressure ratchets up, we will start to make bigger and harder decisions.

There is a huge question about what space there is for reform in the world of peace and security. It has been notable that both the Department of Peace Operations and the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs have been very resistant to talk of major change this year. The political guys at the UN are, frankly, less flexible and perhaps less imaginative than Martin's former colleagues in the humanitarian space. Humanitarians tend to be flexible. Political guys tend to be conservative. Down the road, we should be looking for opportunities to create a single, unified UN peace

and security pillar, recognising that the organisation's peacekeeping footprint is shrinking and that we need to regain a focus on mediation. I would like to think that, five years from now, we will have a leaner peace and security mechanism at the UN, but one that is more responsive to the Security Council and more responsive to the sort of initiatives that the Secretary-General launched in Ukraine. We have built up a peace and security architecture that is just a bit flabby at the moment, and we need to slim it down.

Q67 Chair: You talk about the challenge for the United Nations being relevance, but that goes hand in hand with credibility. Credibility is that money and time will not be wasted by duplication, and that there is not flabbiness, but also that there will be accountability and a certain clarity of who does what, why and when, which really is not there now within the United Nations.

I hear what you say about the UN as a reflection of the world, and about it being only as powerful as the world wants it to be. I do understand that, but I think there has been growth and repetition in the UN over the years that has made it quite difficult for a member of the public looking to the UN as our world council to understand what on earth it does, and why and how. That is another challenge. In order to remain relevant, you have to be credible; to be credible, you have to be efficient. At the moment, all of those things are not the things you think of first when you think of the UN.

Martin Griffiths: Can I quickly add one thing? I totally agree, but I will just add one word: active. Credible, yes, but active as well. You need to get out there and do things, and fail, if needs be. The rate of failure on mediation has historically always been a shocker. You learn from it, and you try again. I would have liked to have seen the UN do more on Ukraine, for example, albeit it was a high stakes, high level and top power thing, and still is.

I would also like to see the UN do much more on the Middle East. We have not heard of UN envoys coming into the Middle East to do the sort of work that we are seeing very honourably done by Qatar, Egypt and others. That is a shame for us; for me and you. I think it is a personal shame, in a way. It is supposed to be the world council, so it needs to do things and not, as I think is often the thought process inside the building, believe that caution means survival—because it is the opposite.

Richard Gowan: Could I say something just before we close?

Chair: Yes, but please could you speak up? I promise this is the last time I will ask you.

Richard Gowan: My lungs are going to be 20% bigger after this session. We should also end by saying—this connects to penholding—that the UN is inefficient, overextended and does silly things. Just recently, the UN announced that the 11 July will be the international day of the horse. While I am sure you are all preparing to celebrate, that sort of triviality is not a very good look in the current moment.



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However, we should also remember that there are places such as Colombia, for which the UK is the penholder, where the UN has spent 10 years guiding a difficult peace process forward. I think that there are still a lot of situations—Afghanistan is another, which Martin was closely involved in—where the UN is the last resort and the last line of defence for a lot of vulnerable people. It is almost an iron law that when the UN is doing some good, no one talks about it. I think we should understand that the UN provides a safety net for a lot of vulnerable people in a lot of places that no one else is going to provide.

The UN is struggling to get any aid into Gaza, but the new Gaza Humanitarian Foundation is a complete disaster. It is not a credible alternative to UN assistance. I have a lot of fun making hay out of the UN's foolishness, but I am also very frustrated by the UN's political and bureaucratic failings, which are multitudinous. However, I hope the Committee will hold on to the fact that, especially in some places where the UK is the penholder, the UN remains pretty much the only lifeline for the people who need it. Let us not let go of that, in addition to the criticism.

Chair: Thank you very much. Thank you both for your time today. If you have any further thoughts after this session and would like to write in, we would be very pleased to have that additional evidence. We have found this to be a fascinating session; it has been really helpful to us. One last thing I would like to, on behalf of London, is to send Martin best wishes for his birthday on Wednesday.

Martin Griffiths: Your intelligence continues to be excellent.

Chair: That is the end of the session.