

Foreign Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Lebanon: next steps, HC 1650

Tuesday 27 January 2026

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Members present: Emily Thornberry (Chair); Fleur Anderson; Alex Ballinger; Phil Brickell; Richard Foord; Abtisam Mohamed; Sir John Whittingdale.

Questions 1-33

Witnesses

I: Lina Khatib, Associate Fellow, Middle East and North Africa Programme at Chatham House, Chris Doyle, Director at Council for Arab British Understanding (Caabu), and Daniel Levy, President at US-Middle East Project.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Lina Khatib, Chris Doyle Daniel Levy.

Chair: Today is Holocaust Memorial Day; it is an important day to reflect on the terrible events of what happened many years ago, but also to think about people across the world, including those in Israel who suffered the awful attacks on 7 October 2023. I was, this morning, at Islington town hall, listening to youngsters who had learned about what members of their family had been through. It was a very moving occasion, and this is something that must never be forgotten.

Six months ago, this Committee put out a report about the conflict in Israel and Palestine, and it included a section on Lebanon. We would really like to look at what has happened in the intervening period. We are particularly mindful of the fact that Lebanon, we think, gets overlooked too often, given what is happening in Syria, Israel and Palestine, which all deeply affects Lebanon. So we wanted to take this opportunity to learn more about that, and have an open session so that the public can also hear the evidence.

We have three really good witnesses; thank you all very much for coming. Would you like to introduce yourselves for the record?

Chris Doyle: My name is Chris Doyle; I am the director of the Council for Arab-British Understanding.

Lina Khatib: Hello, I am Lina Khatib; I am an associate fellow at Chatham House, and I also work for a company called ExTrac as a principal analyst, focusing on the geopolitics of the world.

Daniel Levy: I am Daniel Levy, president of the US-Middle East Project.

Q1 **Chair:** President Aoun and Prime Minister Nawaf Salam have now been in office for about a year. Can you begin by telling us how that is going? How stable and successful are the Government? Lina, if I can begin with you, could you also give us some information about how the economy is doing?

Lina Khatib: Yes, it has been a year since this milestone Government came into power in Lebanon. I call it a milestone Government because, until 2025, Lebanon had been under Iranian and Syrian Assad regime supervision, to put it mildly; and this was the first time in almost half a decade that Lebanon was able to have a President and a Prime Minister who were not pre-selected by Iran or the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad. So, this is a really transformational Government for Lebanon, and that comes with very high expectations. As we know, the economy started collapsing in 2019 and has not fully recovered. This Government are meant to address that. One thing they have been able to do recently is make some progress on the financial gap situation in the banking system, which will enable Lebanon to finally get funding from the IMF. That is a big



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step forward, because there had been no movement on that front for many years. That predates the arrival of this Government.

External aid, however—for example, from Gulf countries—is not forthcoming. There are promises and pledges, but it is not happening. At the moment, the country is still very much dependent on remittances and individual endeavours. Maybe with IMF funding, the situation could improve, but when it comes to reconstruction, the World Bank has estimated that Lebanon needs \$11 billion to rebuild after the last war, and that money is nowhere to be found yet.

On the political front, the Government—

Q2 **Chair:** Before you move on to the political front, if you look at GDP, it is increasing rapidly—but is that because it is coming from such a low base?

Lina Khatib: Yes. Lebanon had really hit rock bottom around, I would say, 2022, when the currency really deteriorated in value. It kind of recovered a little bit, but it is still—

Q3 **Chair:** When was that explosion?

Lina Khatib: 2020. Lebanon has had a series of catastrophes that affected its economy. First you had the financial crisis, which was mainly due to corruption in Lebanon. In 2019, you had the port explosion; in 2020, you had the pandemic; and then, of course, there was the war between Hezbollah and Israel. All those things devastated Lebanon's economy over the last seven years or so.

The currency picked up a bit because of remittances. Things have improved a little bit but, as I said, that is really mainly due to individual endeavours rather than a significant shift at the macroeconomic level in the country. This is not a recipe for recovery or growth. The Government cannot do miracles in one year. Being able to address the financial gap law is quite an important step forward and, hopefully, will also serve to reassure potential investors about doing business with Lebanon.

Hopefully, the situation can also reassure some Gulf countries that have not given money, because in the past the money that they had given—for example, after the 2006 war—went into different people's pockets due to corruption rather than going to the people who needed it. They want to avoid having a diversion of aid.

The situation is obviously not optimal, but there have been some concrete achievements by this Government. When it comes to politics, which is connected, the Prime Minister and the President enjoy wide credibility and support in Lebanon. I would say more than two thirds of the population is supportive of the President and the Prime Minister, with the remaining third still being more on the pro-Hezbollah, pro-Iran side who, again, are divided into those who are being a bit more pragmatic regarding the President and the Prime Minister, so they are not necessarily against them, but their political leanings remain in the opposite direction.

In general, I would say Lebanon has made significant progress over the past year at the level of the Government, but the economic situation is not something that Lebanon can handle on its own.

Q4 **Chair:** Is there anything you want to add, Chris Doyle?

Chris Doyle: I agree largely with what Lina Khatib has said. I would just emphasise that there is a window of opportunity with this Government, which, as she said, has widespread credibility in the region but also internationally. That will not necessarily last forever. I think there is a real risk that, unless they are able to deliver for the Lebanese in a situation where there is inequality, corruption and economic malaise, that popularity, that legitimacy and that credibility will seep away very fast.

I am sure we will come on to it, but that is also an issue when looking at the relationship with Israel to the South and with Syria. It is absolutely incumbent, I think, on responsible external actors to support that Government through not just economic assistance but political assistance. This is an opportunity for a Lebanese Government to land on its own feet, without having to be put there, as Lina said, by external powers and so on, to be almost like a "Lebanon first" project where the interests of the Lebanese are put first and foremost in determining the trajectory of the country. I think that the weakness of Hezbollah after the 2024 war, combined with the weakness of Iran, also adds to that sense of a window of opportunity, but it will not be open for long, so we need to work really hard. I would say that part of that is to restrain what Israel is doing right now. We are looking at a situation where they have made, according to UNIFIL, over 10,000 ceasefire violations since November 2024—

Chair: We are going to get on to that.

Chris Doyle: It is important in the context of supporting that Government, because if they are going to move forward with these reforms, the voting public have got to be seeing some results—some positives out of it. I think also that the tying of economic assistance to progress on disarmament needs to be queried. Yes, if you make some progress it has got to be met with some assistance for the economic sector. You cannot wait until the end of that disarmament process.

Q5 **Chair:** Is there anything else you want to add, Daniel Levy?

Daniel Levy: Two very brief points. Can I first just appreciate your opening comments, join you in acknowledging International Holocaust Remembrance Day and speak, for one moment, from that Jewish tradition where "Never again" means never again for anyone? Let me commend this Committee, but also encourage you to do whatever you can to ensure that international law, international humanitarian law and UN charters and conventions, including that against genocide, are upheld universally everywhere, and when we are falling short of that standard, to hold the Government's feet to the fire on that.

On this point regarding Lebanon, what I hope we will also touch on, following on from what Chris just said, is how does one strengthen this



ceasefire, which in parts of Lebanon does not feel like a ceasefire at all, and prevent another escalation? Nothing is going to set back those economic prospects more than another major conflagration, and I would not take too lightly the prospects of that in this year.

Q6 Phil Brickell: When the current Lebanese Government was established, it stated that it wanted to suppress the Captagon drug trade and tackle the gangs that profit off it. How successful has it been in that endeavour?

Chris Doyle: The nature of the drugs business is that you are never really quite sure. What you can see is that you have a different Government in Syria that is cracking down on the drugs trade there. Remember that Captagon was possibly the largest source of hard currency earnings for the Assad regime. The Captagon was largely smuggled to the Gulf. It also went to other countries, but that was their primary market, including via Lebanon. The co-operation to crack down on the drugs trade has been very important, and of course that has restricted the income being earned by groups like Hezbollah, which also trades in heroin, cocaine and hash, if you go to the Bekaa. A notorious drug kingpin, Nouh Zaiter, who was a TV celebrity in Lebanon, was arrested back in November. His clan had been running a lot of the drugs operations in Lebanon.

The challenge is the strength of central Government in dealing with this. You can start cracking down, but in order to sustain that, that Government needs the resources and the legitimacy to bring that about. If a large segment of the population in the Bekaa is going to start losing income because they can't trade in these drugs—I am talking about ordinary farmers who use their land for growing, say, hash—what are their employment opportunities in an economy that is almost non-existent?

We are seeing welcome progress, which has pleased Saudi Arabia. It has made Saudi more amenable to working with the Lebanese Government, because that has been one of their demands. It has also had a positive impact within Syria. We need to keep a close eye on that. The assistance that Britain has given—for example, in setting up those border posts, of which there are, I think, 84 in total, to monitor the border with Syria—is very much part of cracking down on that drugs trade. The caveat to that is that historically that border has been very difficult to keep closed. For years and decades, there have been smuggler trails across it. It is pretty tough to keep closed over those mountains, so it is not something that you can take your eye off.

Q7 Phil Brickell: Lina Khatib and Daniel Levy, do you have additional thoughts on how that plays into ensuring stability in the country? Chris Doyle made a point about economic assistance. He spoke about Saudi Arabia, but of course other jurisdictions might be thinking about how they can support the Lebanese people and will want assurances about the progress that the Government is making on Captagon and other drugs in-country.

Lina Khatib: I agree with Chris's assessment. There are now a lot fewer Captagon factories than there were just a year or so ago, when the Assad



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regime was in place. This is a major development, because it is not just about trade; manufacturing was a big part of the picture. Right now, the trade in drugs that have already been manufactured but have not yet been sold is still ongoing, but not at the same scale as before. We have to be mindful of the fact that for Hezbollah, this is still bringing a degree of funding.

The second issue with the border is, of course, weapons smuggling. We are talking mainly about weapons being smuggled from Syria into Lebanon, but also the other way around. The situation in Syria is such that remnants of the old regime that have some links with Iran have interest in destabilising Syria. Therefore, the co-operation when it comes to smuggling weapons is happening in both directions. If Iran can't dominate Syria, it has tried to be a spoiler. That is another thing to keep an eye on. Whether it is drugs or weapons smuggling, it is very important to support the security sector in both Lebanon and Syria. Their capacity is still not at a high enough level to really be on top of what is going on there.

Q8 **Chair:** Is the market for Captagon in Saudi Arabia more than anywhere else?

Lina Khatib: Yes.

Chris Doyle: Yes, principally. It is very cheap to make, which is one of the reasons why Syria, under the Assads, was able to produce these factories. They didn't need inputs that were expensive or rare. They could sell it there. The best-quality Captagon tends to go to those richer Gulf markets, and the lower-grade Captagon tends to go to places such as Jordan or even for Syrian use themselves. It is very addictive, which is another challenge with all of this.

Q9 **Chair:** That is why you are saying that Saudi Arabia is giving Lebanon assistance?

Chris Doyle: It is far more amenable to helping with Lebanon now it sees that both the Syrian authorities—the new ones—and the Lebanese are co-operating together and trying to stop it, because it is a big problem socially and domestically in Saudi Arabia.

Q10 **Alex Ballinger:** Mr Levy, you mentioned the importance of strengthening the ceasefire between Israel and Lebanon. How would you assess its stability at the moment, considering the frequent violations that Mr Doyle mentioned?

Daniel Levy: There were 10,000 violations in 14 months, as registered by UNIFIL, but if you dig beneath that headline, and beneath the headline that Israel maintains five military outposts inside sovereign Lebanese territory, what I think are most prominent are the permanent violations of sovereign Lebanese airspace. That is constant drone surveillance and fighter jets, primarily in the South but not exclusively; and the extent to which this life under surveillance is the reality for so many Lebanese people. That does something to the credibility of the mission of this potentially, as Lina suggested, transformational moment; because there is



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an inverse relationship in terms of how much the Government can achieve, I would argue, vis-à-vis Hezbollah, and how much Israel continues to give fuel to that resistance narrative by continuing to bomb Lebanon, which is, I imagine, quite an obvious point.

Israel has been allowed to get away with that. It is not entirely dissimilar to what we see in Gaza, where you have a ceasefire but every day Palestinians are still being killed, with Israel occupying 58% of it. If you want the Lebanese Government to be in a stronger position vis-à-vis Hezbollah, you have to see that there is actually the ability to hold Israel back.

One thing we have seen, which is quite unprecedented—certainly very unusual—is that there have been open—not open to the cameras, but publicly acknowledged—Israel-Lebanon meetings under US auspices, between senior officials. The Lebanese sent a former ambassador to the US and the Israelis sent members of the National Security Council in September. There was a subsequent meeting at a slightly different level in January.

However, having gone out on a limb in making those things happen, what we see is a repeated pattern whereby you do now have a reality in Lebanon, and I would argue in Syria, where there is an effort to say, “You know what, we can have a new beginning here. We have got some support from the outside. The Americans are looking at this slightly differently. Let’s try and come to some kind of a modus operandi with Israel. We have significant differences, but let’s see if pragmatism on our part will be met halfway.”

Unfortunately, that is not the modus operandi of the Israeli Government, and they are not being pushed to that, so it is met with maximalism on the Israeli side. This is the hard thing for people to wrap their heads around. The project is maintaining stability in terms of what Israel is trying to achieve in Lebanon, Syria and elsewhere. They don’t want to see a strong central Government in Lebanon. That would withdraw the justification for maintaining buffer zones in both places.

Q11 Alex Ballinger: Sorry, the mission is maintaining stability in—

Daniel Levy: Maintaining instability—chaos. I think that is where you have a significant divergence in UK interests and Israeli interests—certainly the interests of the Lebanese or Syrian Governments and state. The question is, how do you change that equation? I think it encourages two things. It encourages, on the Lebanese side, the difficulty in going further beyond what has been done already in terms of asserting one’s central authority vis-à-vis Hezbollah as well; and it encourages on the Israeli side the sense, “How much more can we get away with? How much further down this regional military domination path can we go?”

In the lead-up to the new year, there was a lot of talk on the Israeli side of another major military operation against Lebanon. That is in abeyance; I



would argue, in the context of an election year in Israel, don't be surprised if that comes back into play.

Q12 Alex Ballinger: Who would that military operation be against? Because, of course, Hezbollah has been weakened intensely after 2024's attack. I don't know the situation there. Are Hezbollah rearming; are they planning other things? Is that a fair reflection—or what is the situation?

Daniel Levy: Yes, it would ostensibly be against Hezbollah, but what one sees, especially if the major area of operation is not in the south, and at least according to UNIFIL again—the UN forces—there is not evidence of Hezbollah rearming south of the Litani, which is the line of what was supposed to be achieved in the first phase. I would be surprised if the Government had achieved everything, but they have clearly gone much further than in the past. Those strikes on Hezbollah can be very pinpointed, but they also can be extremely destructive well beyond Hezbollah targets. People may be familiar with the term “the Dahiya doctrine”—Dahiya is the neighbourhood in southern Beirut, and it is something that Israel has used elsewhere as well: you destroy the entire neighbourhood; you destroy the civilian infrastructure. That is the worry, if one goes back to that.

Lina Khatib: May I present a bit of a different reading? I have been going to Lebanon every month for the last few months—I was there earlier this month—and every time I go, I see small progress when it comes to the issue of disarmament of Hezbollah. There is a lot of public criticism that disarmament is not going quickly enough. However, the Lebanese army are not making a huge public fuss about the achievements in that regard because they are very sensitive about mainly the Shi'a community that is still supportive of Hezbollah—not all the Shi'a community is supportive of Hezbollah, but the elements of the Shi'a community that are supportive of Hezbollah. The Government are aware that they don't want this issue to be turned into a sectarian tension situation. So they are achieving a lot more than what is known in the public domain.

When it comes to Hezbollah itself, unfortunately the group is also trying to court that community—its hardcore supporters—by trying to present things as business as usual, and part of that is trying, whenever they can, to move fighters or weapons, and sometimes manufacturing new weapons. But this is happening on a very small scale.

Israel is of course monitoring all this, so, operationally speaking, even though there is this degree of movement by Hezbollah, which is mainly aimed at appeasing its local support base to show them, “We are still strong militarily; we still have capacity,” this does not operationally threaten Israel's security to merit a wide-scale attack. I think this is one of the reasons why the wide-scale attack that was anticipated around October/November did not happen—because Israel would not benefit operationally from it. And if Israel had attacked on a wide scale and destroyed infrastructure, this would damage the credibility of the current Lebanese Government, which is very much aligned with Israel regarding disarming Hezbollah. So, actually, it is in Israel's interest for this



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Government in Lebanon to succeed and to be seen as credible, and to be receiving as much international backing as possible so that the disarmament of Hezbollah actually happens.

Personally, I do not think that Israel is going to threaten Lebanon in that way. With all the attacks—I have been really tracking where Israel has been striking in those 10,000—I would say that it is a process and strategy of gradual degradation of Hezbollah militarily. Israel is basically attacking sites where Hezbollah stores weapons, when there are incidents in which Hezbollah personnel are moving around or where there is transfer of weapons. Unfortunately, Israel does not seem to be too concerned if, for example, civilians happen to also die in those attacks.

Q13 Alex Ballinger: Yes, 127 is the number of civilians who have been killed, according to the UN.

Lina Khatib: Yes, that is what is going on. The way I am observing shows me that it is not that Israel is targeting civilians, but that Israel does not seem to mind if civilian deaths happen as part of its objectives in these strikes, which of course is unfortunate. It is not something that the Lebanese Government have been silent about either. It is being brought up again and again by the authorities—

Q14 Alex Ballinger: Sorry, I think that we might have to move on, but I have one more question before we do. How are the strikes, the killing of civilians and the five outposts inside Lebanese territory compatible with UN Security Council resolution 1701 and with international law? I see that Mr Doyle has his hand up.

Chris Doyle: I was actually going to come on to 1701. I think that it was 8 January when the Prime Minister of Lebanon announced that Hezbollah was no longer operational south of the Litani and that the Lebanese armed forces had a sole monopoly on power. Largely, I think that that is true, and there has not been evidence to say that it is not.

I think that what we do not see on the other side are some reciprocal measures on behalf of the state of Israel to remove its forces from the five positions that it holds in Lebanon, to stop violations of the ceasefire—it is a ceasefire in name only—or even to reduce them. In fact, they have been escalating in the last few months. I think that we are way short of that.

It also troubles me that, in 12 months' time, the UN mechanism to verify and check this—UNIFIL—reaches the end of its mandate, and we have no idea what will go in its place. To my mind, it is crazy, if you look historically at what has happened across that border, that you do not have a responsible international mechanism to try to deconflict and cool matters, which UNIFIL has done in the past on many occasions. So I think that that is very important.

On what Daniel said about fragmentation, it has been a long-term Israeli aim in Lebanon, going back to the days of Ben-Gurion, to try to fragment Lebanon and reach links, particularly with the Maronites. That is not new, and it has also been approaching Syria in a similar vein. It has undermined



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the new central authorities and has tried to support the Kurds and the Druze, also to prevent a strong unified state in Syria.

On disarmament and where the weapons are, the main strategic weapons have probably been hidden in the Bekaa and to the north. It is going to be very difficult to get to disarmament. We have a problem coming up, because getting Hezbollah out of the south is one thing, but how do you disarm Hezbollah—who is going to do that? The Lebanese armed forces are not strong enough, but also, if you get the Lebanese forces to do that and push them, as some are trying to, you are putting them in an unenviable situation. They are meant to be a national institution that is there to defend all Lebanese, regardless of identity, and they will be pushed towards what will be seen as a civil conflict. We need to be very wary of that. It will be devastating to Lebanon.

The final thing I will mention is that the push, particularly by the Americans and also the Israelis, to a normalisation of relations with both Syria and Lebanon is happening way before two pretty weak Governments, and populations that are still traumatised and are coming out of conflict and economic trauma, are ready for it. We should be looking at how we get to a situation of non-aggression and various deconfliction agreements, but without pushing them much faster than they can politically afford at this juncture.

Chair: I want to ask Richard to ask some follow-up questions, because we are going from one of our military experts to the other.

Q15 Richard Foord: Chris, you talked about how this could be really quite difficult if the Lebanese armed forces seek to remove and decommission weapons from Hezbollah. Elsewhere, where we have seen a monopoly on armed force and violence in pursuit of stability, that has happened because there has been an integration of militias and fighters. They might maintain their identity, but they are then part of the national armed forces. How is this disarmament and demobilisation programme different?

Chris Doyle: I was referring to a situation in which it would be done by force. The alternative would be some sort of political agreement where, as you say, those who have been fighting with Hezbollah could sign up to the Lebanese armed forces. Bear in mind that Hezbollah pays more. Historically, you do not get paid very much in the Lebanese armed forces, so there is that issue—Hezbollah is a provider.

When you look at this, you need to have a way in which you are going to convince Hezbollah to do this, and there will be a lot of fears within the Shi'a community—"So we give up our weapons, but Israeli forces are still bombing every day, and they are still occupying Lebanese territory?" That will be—you can argue—the excuse that they will hide behind, but it actually will attract some degree of sympathy among supporters. They will say, "If we are going to make such a move, we need to see progress."

There is a catch here as well: if Hezbollah is still armed, and you open up discussions about political reform in Lebanon, Hezbollah will be an armed



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actor with a disproportionate weight in discussing how the cake will be shared in Lebanon. It would like to see more Shi'a representatives in the Lebanese Parliament. There is a very difficult process of trying to persuade Hezbollah, and a divided and much weaker Hezbollah leadership—let's face it—to do this. Rather than pressing timetables and so on, we must appreciate that there has to be a political negotiation that says this would be better if external forces were outside Lebanon, and that this could be resolved internally within Lebanon.

Lina Khatib: Can I just add an important point, which is about Iran? Unfortunately, this is not internal within Lebanon. Iran is the decision maker right now for Hezbollah.

Q16 **Chair:** Even now?

Lina Khatib: Yes, Iran is now. When the former secretary-general of Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah, was alive, there was a degree of decision making at the level of domestic politics that Nasrallah was in charge of. With him gone, the decisions right now in Hezbollah—politically, as well as militarily—are very much those of Iran and the IRGC in particular. That is how the group is running at the moment.

Israel has decapitated several levels of leadership within Hezbollah, and that is actually a drain on Iran's own capacity. I always give this simile: if you are the CEO of a company, and you have to run different departments yourself, that is obviously a drain on your resources. That is what is happening with Iran and Hezbollah right now. That means that Hezbollah will not disarm for as long as the regime in Tehran continues in the way that it exists today. Hezbollah is a very important card for Iran. As long as that regime is in place in Tehran, Iran will not want to give up on the privileges that Hezbollah has inside Lebanon.

Arms are what give Hezbollah political clout, and that is why Hezbollah has been so stubborn. Iran does not want it to disarm, and Hezbollah itself doesn't have the agency any more to make decisions of that kind. The way I see it is that, at the moment, the Lebanese authorities are doing what they can under the circumstances. Hezbollah is being stubborn to gain time because there are meant to be parliamentary elections in Lebanon in May. Hezbollah knows that if it hands over its weapons now, it will lose the support of the hardcore community that I was talking about earlier. It does not want that, so it is trying to hold on to its weapons for as long as possible to retain this political standing, even though it has been greatly diminished.

However, if the situation in Iran changes, Hezbollah will no longer have the external backing that it is using to flex its muscles. I expect that when the situation in Iran changes, this will have a direct effect—not an indirect, but a direct effect—on the disarmament issue in Lebanon and the status of Hezbollah. Maybe then we can see some pragmatists accept a political deal. As Chris is saying, maybe some others will want to be spoilers, like we are seeing in Syria with remnants of the Assad regime. But I think the issue of Iran is crucial in Lebanese domestic politics.



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Daniel Levy: I was looking through the notes, and I will draw you back to something that you heard in one of your previous hearings from a former Minister here for the Middle East. He made that point about not having a cardboard cut-out, overly simplistic view of Hezbollah and its relationship with Iran, and about not ignoring its internal rootedness in Lebanon. So I would probably question some of that. But if what we just heard is more accurate than that previous Minister's portrayal, that raises some very worrying potential short-term questions if we do see a further American intervention militarily against Iran. If that is true, one would expect Hezbollah to do its worst in response to such a thing.

I align with how Lina just depicted, in response to me, what was going on internally in Lebanon with Hezbollah. Where I would part ways is with Lina's interpretation of Israeli intentionality and what is going on on the Israeli side—what is happening in terms of Israeli politics and Israeli coalition politics. It is insufficiently satisfying in the Israeli political arena to be quietly hitting these targets in the way that you described, in terms of what they are trying to achieve there. I worry that, as we have seen elsewhere in the region, if you do have an Israel that is treated with impunity—especially under this coalition in an election year—that is the impetus to do more damage inside Lebanon. I argue that the way you address that is to insert accountability into the mix—you do not allow impunity. There are many ways that that can be done.

Q17 **Chair:** This is so interesting. I will abuse my position as Chair and ask another question. If what Lina is saying is right—that the connection between Iran and Hezbollah remains strong and Iran continues to pull the strings—why was there no response from Hezbollah when Iran was bombed in the summer? There was nothing.

Lina Khatib: Iran did not want them to because that would bring more damage to Hezbollah's standing in Lebanon than doing nothing. It was a matter of choosing the lesser evil, as far as Iran was concerned. At that time, the ceasefire had already happened—in November 2024—and we had mass displacement going on in Lebanon. To have this community go through yet more hardship due to renewed fighting would have cost Hezbollah a lot of its, let's say, outer-circle support within the community, because, of course, the hardcore supporters will still rally around it. But it would have cost Hezbollah politically, and that is not in Iran's interest. At the moment, the approach that I am seeing is to hold on to the fragments that they still have, in terms of Hezbollah's political standing in Lebanon. That is why they did not intervene.

Daniel Levy: I think, Lina, that you have precisely highlighted the difference between the relationship remaining strong, which I agree with, and pulling the strings, which I disagree with. It is hard to explain why, if we consider Iran to be significantly on the back foot, they would not think that this is the time—this is what you are implying in your question, Chair—to say, "We don't really care any more about your domestic entities—Hezbollah. Our support for you is there for a reason. And this is D-day when it comes to us." If part of that explanation is accurate, I think it should lead us to step back, pause, take a deep breath and understand



that the Iranian regime is almost certainly more resilient than many people would like to depict it.

- Q18 **Abtisam Mohamed:** I want us to go back a few steps to the discussions that took place in December between Israel and Lebanon. A number of you have referenced the fragile ceasefire, the lack of a ceasefire, the ceasefire just in name. How might we get to a position where there is enforcement of the ceasefire and discussions around normalisation can begin? Is that a possibility at all in the future? I am keen to hear your views on that issue. What is the purpose of these discussions if they are not going to lead to peace? I am particularly keen to hear what that would mean in an election year for Israel. I will start with you, Mr Levy, and then move on to the others.

Daniel Levy: I think that, with strong American encouragement, it was testing the waters as to—I go back to something Chris said—whether you can put some of the building blocks in place to have a degree of predictability and regularisation of some things on the Israel-Lebanon front. I am intentionally not using the word “normalise”, because I think that that word now carries such baggage with it. We saw the Abraham accords normalisation; many people were terribly enthusiastic about that. I am not attributing causality to what happened in the Abraham accords and then what happened in Gaza—October 7—and Israel’s response to it, but they certainly did not help us. You certainly could not deploy those relationships with Israel to try to get a de-escalation on the Gaza front.

On the Lebanese side, I think it was not dissimilar to what we have seen in Syria with the al-Sharaa regime, where you have had the Foreign Minister directly meeting Israeli Ministers to test the water and say, “Okay. We are being encouraged to create an element of predictability in this relationship. Where can we go with it?” I think what the Lebanese have seen—again, I would say that this is fuelled and encouraged by Israel’s sense, unfortunately, that they can get away with anything—is Israel putting such a maximalist position on the table that, as a Syria or a Lebanon, in your own political realities and in the regional political realities, and with the images from Gaza still fresh in everyone’s minds and still being added to, you could not go anywhere with that maximalism. So I do not think that those things have even laid a foundation for very much—maybe just the smallest elements of a pre-foundation.

I think that what you have to do is try to get both sides to adhere to the terms of a ceasefire, which sounds like a really obvious and reasonable thing. What worries me, in the context of UNIFIL leaving at the end of this year, is, what are you going to have there? I do not say that in the context of someone who thinks that a UN force should stay forever. I mean, this force was established in 1978; the intention should be to wind it down. But what other mechanism will you have? Will it be a multilateral mechanism that is legitimate in different parties’ eyes under international law, or will you see slippage in the direction of what we have seen in Gaza, where there is a civil-military co-ordination centre inside Israel, overseen by Israelis and the Americans, and not under any kind of international, multilateral UN umbrella, and where you have the idea of an international



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stabilisation force, but it has not come about and is not actually happening?

I just want people to cast people's minds back, because this is so pertinent to the last few days. Everyone was okay with the board of peace when it was just something to be imposed on Palestinians in Gaza. Right? The board of peace—everyone endorses it; they all go to Sharm el-Sheikh for the summit, including our own Prime Minister. We voted with that UN Security Council resolution, as did everyone else, except for two permanent members—Russia and China—which abstained. It was okay, in a UN Security Council resolution, to create this sui generis body, owned and led by one person who could decide everything that happens. Suddenly, when we woke up and read the charter of the board of peace, it did not say Gaza anywhere—and heaven forbid that it might be applied to Ukraine and Greenland. It was like, "Wait a minute! We don't like this so much. This doesn't have any international legitimacy." In terms of legitimacy in west Asia or the Middle East region, it does not have legitimacy at all if it does not have legitimacy for us here. In short, all parties will need to be held to the ceasefire.

Q19 Abtisam Mohamed: Mr Doyle, do regional countries—Saudi and Qatar—have an additional role to play in trying to de-escalate the situation?

Chris Doyle: The regional countries can do that. Saudi has improved its relations with Lebanon—there is no question about that. The UAE has started tentative relations; for a long time, they were very sour, even to the extent that the UAE banned its nationals from going to Lebanon.

Q20 Chair: Why?

Chris Doyle: This was a couple of years back. Last summer, there was a meeting and they agreed to try to push things forward. The UAE had a very anti-Hezbollah position.

The Qataris have just announced quite a large sum of money in terms of assistance. So they do see that they can play a role in trying to shore things up, but they are not confident in the political process at the moment. If you have a situation where the ceasefire is being violated every day; where reconstruction cannot happen in the south, and that is the reality, with 27 villages destroyed, and 100,000 buildings destroyed or damaged; and when there is not greater transparency—Lina Khatib referred to the corruption earlier—they are not going to plough money in. They want to see that there is a mechanism by which Israel is not just able to bomb areas of Lebanon at will. That, I am afraid, is what we are seeing at the moment, both in Lebanon and in Syria.

They also look at what is happening in Syria. They see the way Israel bombed the Defence Ministry in the middle of Damascus, and nothing happens. I have to say there is a huge degree of silence—including from the UK—on some of this. Where are the statements that Israel should withdraw from the territories it occupied in December 2024 in Syria? Nothing. Where is the statement about withdrawing from the territories it has occupied in Lebanon? These should be insisted upon, but there is no



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accountability. All the accountability goes on to Hezbollah, the Lebanese side or the Syrian actors, and Israel is let off. The region sees that.

I think these other countries are not going to invest—just as they will not invest in Gaza—if there is not a proper political mechanism that means they are reassured and that they have confidence in, and that means that, in four or five years' time, there is not another major bombing and flattening of Gaza. It puts them off; they are not going to continually re-fund the reconstruction of these areas unless there is a proper model and system of accountability on all sides.

Q21 Abtisam Mohamed: Lina, do you want to come in?

Lina Khatib: Just on normalisation. Not too long ago, that word was basically taboo in Lebanon. Invoking direct talks with Israel would have landed someone in Lebanon with a prison sentence for treason. That is no longer the case. The special representative representing Lebanon in the negotiations with Israel has himself said that he would be willing to go to Tel Aviv to negotiate with Israel, were he given the mandate to do so by the President and the Prime Minister.

This kind of approach reflects a wider sentiment. Every time I go to Lebanon, across wider society, I hear more and more expressions of the fact that people are tired and just want to get on with life. Unfortunately, for a lot of Arab ideologues there is also a tacit acceptance that the cause they thought they would win has not quite succeeded against Israel's superiority in the region. They feel that, pragmatically speaking, this is where the region is now, and that there is no point in being ideological and saying, "No, we are always going to regard Israel as an enemy, because we are Arabs and we are on the Palestinian side of the cause." They are saying, "We would have liked to say we won against Israel, as Arabs, but the situation is very different now and we have a different configuration of geopolitics in the Middle East. If we are going to move on, we need to try to rebuild our country"—in this case, Lebanon—"according to the current variables, and Israel has shown that it has US backing that has transformed it into a regional agenda setter." The public sentiment is changing.

Of course, the Government in Lebanon will not normalise just like that, as we heard from Chris. There have to be all kinds of long-term peace mechanisms in play for the Government of Lebanon to embrace normalisation. That includes, crucially, a peace deal with the Palestinians. However, there are now talks of something in between, perhaps, which was never the case before; before, as I said, it was very absolute. So there is space right now to be creative in terms of policy and to move things forward in a way that may not be called normalisation, but that would bring stability to both Lebanon and Israel.

Q22 Alex Ballinger: Several of you mentioned the need for accountability, with Israel's military activity in Lebanon and Syria going across several lines. What do you think the UK should be doing to ensure that accountability? What should we as a Committee be recommending to Ministers?

Chair: Sorry, I am just watching the time. We probably have half an hour left, and we want to take advantage of the fact that you are here to ask you about Syria and refugees, if you don't mind. So let's hold back a bit of time to do that too.

Daniel Levy: I think that if you fail to assert accountability in the circumstances of Gaza, you are unlikely to do so in the circumstances of Lebanon. It is about the broader signal that that sends. One thing that is well overdue—I hope it is on the radar screen of this Committee—is that we still have not had a response from the Government to the 19 July 2024 International Court of Justice position on Israel's permanent occupation of the Palestinian territories and the responsibilities of third-party states in that respect. I understand that that opinion exists inside the Government, and I hope that you will find cause to ask, "When are we going to find out?"—18 months after the ICJ made a ruling on the issue.

Q23 **Chair:** That is one of the things that we asked for in our report, so if we do a catch-up, we can ask again.

Daniel Levy: Great. I note that, in the case brought by the Gambia to the International Court of Justice regarding Myanmar on violations of the genocide convention, the UK Government at the time did see fit to submit its position in support of the Gambia's appeal to the ICJ. There is the South African case, and urgent provisional measures were issued by the ICJ in January 2024, which were robustly ignored by Israel. That is something the UK could join as well.

Going specifically to Lebanon and how some of this plays out, I want to draw attention to something that is not automatically associated with Lebanon, which is UNRWA—the UN agency. UNRWA does operate in Lebanon and outside of the Palestinian Territories. UNRWA's operation in Lebanon involves the Palestinian community under the most precarious circumstances of existence, and it is where UNRWA's role is most indispensable. Why? Because of the historic situation of the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. They do not have permanent rights in Lebanon, are not allowed to hold most jobs and are not allowed to open businesses. The state does not provide services to Palestinians, so everything depends on the role of UNRWA. There are 230,000 refugees, and UNRWA runs 61 schools, with 34,000 children in those schools, and 29 primary healthcare centres. A 20% cut in the budget of UNRWA across the board means a 20% cut in salaries and in services provided to that community in Lebanon.

Feeding into the earlier conversation, what does that mean? There is a mosaic of armed groups in the camps. There are now young people who are going to have even less opportunity and even fewer things provided for them. That is fantastic recruitment ground, if you want to look at it from that angle. The British Government—credit to them—have resumed funding to UNRWA. I do not know if that can be increased further.

I do not know if we can lean further into pushing back against this constant attempt to denigrate UNRWA. The evidence has not been



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provided. The UN set up a commission under the auspices of former French Foreign Minister Colonna. It came out with findings that did not corroborate what Israel was claiming, but it also came out with recommendations that were taken on board. That is an issue that really matters.

Of course, just as with UNIFIL, I do not want UNRWA to exist in perpetuity. UNRWA should not exist in perpetuity. But what you need to end UNRWA is not a scurrilous attack on UNRWA or to make the lives of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon or elsewhere even more miserable. What you need is Palestinian self-determination and for Palestinian rights—to return, to restitution, and so on—to be recognised. This is a very ugly campaign.

Just to finish, at the same time as the board of peace was being launched in Davos, the UNRWA headquarters in East Jerusalem were being bulldozed.

Chair: There is a lot to talk about on that, but I am trying to focus on Lebanon.

Daniel Levy: Can I share this one quote? People should pay attention to these kinds of genocidal statements. The Jerusalem deputy mayor, Aryeh King, declared, “With God’s help, we will expel, annihilate and kill all members of UNRWA”—a UN agency.

Q24 **Alex Ballinger:** Mr Doyle?

Chris Doyle: I just wanted to follow up on UNRWA. I totally share what Daniel said, but it is also an issue in Syria, as we are going to talk about. We have seen 40% of Palestine refugees being displaced over the last 14 years. Many of them actually went to Lebanon. Palestinian refugees from Syria in Lebanon probably had the worst lot of all, because they fell in between UNHCR and UNRWA. They had fewer rights than pretty much anybody. In visiting them, their situation was perhaps the most vulnerable. The cut in resources to UNRWA will affect the situation in Syria as well.

Q25 **Fleur Anderson:** I would like to echo your comments, Chair, about Holocaust Memorial Day. That is important context here. I also draw attention to my register of interests: I visited Lebanon with a cross-party group of MPs in 2022, with the Coalition for Global Prosperity, and I visited Israel and Palestine with Caabu in 2023.

I would like to talk further about refugees and about the destabilising influence and results of the numbers of refugees in Lebanon, which are pertinent to everything we have been talking about and to the prospects for peace. I also want to talk about the different types of refugees there are and how able the Government are to deal with the refugee situation.

First of all, on the numbers of refugees, in a population of about 5.5 million people in Lebanon, there are about 2 million refugees. How many are there now? I will come to you each in turn, but you do not have to answer all these questions. What are the numbers of refugees? How many



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Syrian refugees are there? How many Druze refugees are there, as well as those who are Palestinian? I have been to some of the camps that you talked about, Mr Doyle. They are not really camps at all, are they? They are towns that have been in existence for decades. The first question is: what are the numbers?

The second is: how and how well are the Lebanese Government dealing with the refugee situation in their territory? I met with Ministers from Lebanon from the previous Government when I was there. I asked about the refugee situation and the Ministers' answer was, "Refugees? There are no refugees. There are people who come and go, but there are no refugees in Lebanon." That was an extraordinary moment. It really was an indication of how well the Government were coping with the refugees. How is it now? What should the FCDO be doing for the refugees? There are lots of children in those camps, which I know UK agencies such as Save the Children are working with, but what more could the FCDO do so that support for Lebanon is not just defence-focused, but humanitarian-focused? What about economic recovery and state capacity, but in relation to refugees? There is a lot there. Mr Levy, will you start?

Daniel Levy: I am going to come at it from an angle that does not cast light on your question about numbers, because I do not have them at my fingertips. I would just say the following. I think that, as others have pointed out, the Government in Lebanon want to do the right thing on many of these questions. I welcome what you said about a different possibility of accepting Israel, which is why, as Lina said before, the disappointment of Israel not being able to step up to that is so bitter. When it comes to a lot of these humanitarian things, the Government led by Prime Minister Nawaf Salam want to do the right thing, but think about the political capital that that already frail Government would have to expend to have a bigger programme of investing in, welcoming and putting resources at the disposal of refugees.

I ask this Committee to think about something in that respect. This is what comes back to the UK Government. How strong a case do we have as a UK Government in saying, "How are you treating your refugees? How are you treating asylum seekers in Lebanon?" if we are not doing right in terms of our responsibilities to people coming to this country? That is the thought I would share on that.

Chris Doyle: Just to follow on from what Daniel said, to put this into context, Lebanon hosted 1 million Syrian refugees. A quarter of its population were refugees. That is a real refugee crisis. It is remarkable how many people do not understand that of the 5.5 million Syrian refugees, most of them ended up in the region. It was the richer, middle-class Syrians who had the resources to make it into Europe. Most of them went to Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey.

Chair: And that was layered on top of Palestinian refugees.

Chris Doyle: Layered on top of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and Jordan. Also, the internally displaced in Syria had even worse conditions.



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You had 6.5 million IDPs in Syria in some of the most appalling conditions, because they were beyond any international assistance in many cases. That internal displacement continues. We have seen it in some of the fighting in the north and north-east in recent weeks. You also have the people who were not actually able to move because they were frail or elderly and had to stay in areas that were under siege. There is an issue of displacement in what is going on. I remember being in Syria in 2006 hosting huge numbers of Lebanese refugees who were fleeing the conflict of that year. The experience of mass displacement in these countries dwarfs anything that we have in our experience in recent times.

The situation of refugees has unfortunately become toxic in Lebanon, for historical reasons. I remember being out there at the start of the Syria refugee crisis. They did not want UNHCR to refer to “refugees”; they were people who fled the events in Syria. They did not set up formal refugee camps. That was also toxic. You never had a Syria refugee camp; you had Syrian communities, often on farmland and so on. Initially, Lebanese communities were very welcoming, but of course it was a drain on their resources. I met a mayor of a municipality who said, “Look, half my population are now Syrian refugees. I have limited resources, and we have to collect rubbish and provide electricity and water.” That is in a country that was subsequently hit by a banking crisis and had its own problems even before that, so it has been a huge, huge challenge for Lebanon. Of course, those people brought in their own issues from Syria. The war was still going on, and there were all those struggles and tensions, so it has been a monumental challenge.

There was unfortunately an element of the Lebanese political system that wanted to forcibly return them—that still exists. I remember the previous Foreign Minister lecturing us here in London on that, saying, “Syrian refugees need to go back,” when it wasn’t safe to go back. Even today—I would add a word of caution here—Syria is not even in a recovery phase yet. Nine out of 10 Syrians are in dire poverty. There are not the levels of infrastructure to provide for the return of many of those refugees, yet within some of these countries, there is a big desire to see those refugees go back to Syria. That is understandable—I get it—but they are not yet ready.

Something that has not been commented on so often is that, because of what has been happening in Syria to certain communities—you mentioned the Druze—there has been an outflow of Syrians into Lebanon as well as some returning. The UNHCR says that 1.2 million have gone back to Syria overall—not just from Lebanon. But a large number—I think it is about 200,000, but I would have to come back to you with the exact figure—have left. Some of them are Alawis, some of them are Druze, and some have left because they don’t feel safe.

- Q26 **Fleur Anderson:** Lina Khatib, what would you say about that? In particular, what should the FCDO do? What would be the best sources of funding and support for economic recovery? What humanitarian support would address the refugee situation in Lebanon and bring more stability?



Lina Khatib: Certainly, economic recovery is desperately needed. As we just heard, just because there has been a political change in Syria doesn't mean that the Syrian refugees will be able to leave Lebanon. I was also in Syria in December, and the level of devastation remains huge. The Government simply doesn't have the resources. In Lebanon, there was wishful thinking that now the Syrians will go back but, as we have just heard, that has not really happened.

With this new Government in Lebanon, the expectations are very high, but the resources remain constrained. I would say that economic assistance that cuts across not just the Syrian or Palestinian refugee populations but Lebanon in general is very much needed.

In addition, civil service reform is needed. I know that is not a very attractive topic to many. In Lebanon, you have a Government that has very good, capable Ministers, but their Ministries are still populated by civil servants from the old guard. It has happened on many occasions that Ministers issue ministerial directives that do not get implemented because the staff in their ministries simply refuse to co-operate. This is also an issue for the refugees, because the Ministry of Social Affairs in Lebanon handles a lot of the refugee-related funding and other issues.

It is not just a matter of giving Lebanon more economic assistance; it is also about whether we can help Lebanon with the reform process that is needed at the level of the state institutions in the country so that it is able to deliver that funding appropriately.

Q27 Sir John Whittingdale: I want to move on to an issue that is very much related to the one that Fleur has been raising, which is what is happening in Syria. Lina Khatib, you said that you were there in December, and that there is still an awful lot to do. Can you give us your assessment of the current situation, in terms of the stability of the Government that has been set up?

Lina Khatib: I should say that I was invited by the Syrian Government to visit and speak at the very first public conference that they had organised. The theme of the conference was challenges and opportunities of Syria's political transition. I thought it was a positive step that they invited Syrians and non-Syrians to speak publicly at this conference—and speak rather freely, I would say. A lot of important criticisms were made at that conference, mainly by the Syrian experts who were invited, which I thought was a good sign: the Syrian Government were at least giving space for people to express criticisms of the Government in a Government forum. That does not happen in many places, especially in the Arab world.

There is scope for at least a discussion, but when it comes to the capacity to actually translate ideas into positive action, a lot more needs to be done in Syria in that regard. There is a distinct lack of capacity within the Syrian Government; not everyone in a decision-making position is really capable. A lot of the work is now being done bottom-up, at the grassroots civil society level, but also at the level of experts in the different domains—the economy, other industry domains or agriculture. You have people coming



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together in the business community to try to make a difference, feeling that they now have an opportunity to act, and they want to do their best.

A lot of the positive change is therefore not to do with the Government in Syria and its own vision and capacity, but to do with the Syrians themselves, who want to use every opportunity to improve their country. I think what we can do is work with these Syrians, who are genuine about improving Syria, but at the same time work with the Syrian Government to address this lack-of-capacity issue, because both are needed.

When it comes to the longevity of the Syrian Government, I think it is a matter of treating this situation as short term, because this is not a sustainable model for growth. As I said, we now have an opportunity to act on those two levels, but we cannot assume that this situation is going to last forever. Just like with Lebanon, even if you have good leaders at least as part of a particular new Government, if they do not deliver then you are going to have complications. That is my assessment.

Q28 Sir John Whittingdale: Do you believe it is the intention of the Government to try to build an Administration that incorporates and includes all the different religious and ethnic populations within Syria? To what extent do you think that is happening?

Chris Doyle: Perhaps I could have a go at that. I will declare an interest: I have in-laws in Syria, so I follow it day and night.

I think there is a serious issue about inclusivity. I think that the President in particular is very good at saying the right words—the right things—particularly to an international audience. We have seen President al-Sharaa doing very well on the international stage. I do not think many of us predicted that he would end up in the Oval Office and have this sort of bromance with President Trump, that sanctions would be lifted so quickly, or that he would be able to engage with pretty much all the regional powers, with the exception of Iran, which he notably has not. He is also engaging with Russia, and I think he is about to go to Moscow.

I think there is a Damascus bias to this: so many diplomats and others just go to Damascus, but if you look around Syria, there are differing trajectories in different areas—in Aleppo or in Homs—where they have experienced the conflict and the new Government somewhat differently, and you do not see confidence that there is going to be great inclusivity.

There was a lot of anger at the constitutional declaration of March 2025. It did not point to inclusivity; it pointed to a President who actually, even as an interim President, had arguably given himself more powers than Bashar al-Assad, constitutionally. There was not enough there to open it up, including in the way that the new Assembly would be appointed: he gets to appoint 70 out of 210.

We saw the massacres last spring along the coast, when maybe 1,000 Alawis were killed, and we have seen what has happened in the north, and of course in Suwayda, particularly with the Druze. Awful stories came out



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of there, I've spoken to people on the ground and to people who visited as well.

I think they have to do a lot of convincing on that front, but there are other issues here. Security sector reform is vital. At the moment, with the military and the security services, there is almost an Iraq element to this. They folded up conscriptions and said, "No more conscription," they folded in the militias that were supportive of them, and they are not recruiting from the communities that they do not like or are suspicious of. The armed forces and the security services do not represent the full national spectrum of Syrians in their different guises. If you are going to get a Syria going forward, that is essential.

There is also a lack of transparency. For example, there is a sovereign wealth fund, headed by the President, and nobody really knows what happens with that money. The banking sector needs serious reform, and you need a lot to happen to get investment into the country. While they work very hard internationally, I think that domestically they have a long way to go to give people real confidence.

There is an opportunity, but we have to be really pretty wary of it. They of course have an Islamist background and some jihadist background—there are still jihadists in the centre of Government—and instinctively they do not trust people outside their clique, because that is how they operated; you knew that there would be other parties trying to infiltrate them. Even when they want to be inclusive—even when they want to interact—their natural instinct is not to, and I think that is really problematic.

We see quite a lot of demand among Syrians for a more decentralised approach. I am not talking about federalism, which is what many Kurds, for example, would like; I am talking about a system that at least allows cities like Homs and Aleppo more control over their own affairs. It is a very centralised, quite authoritarian Government, and a lot of the authority is invested in one man. If the President goes, there is no nominated successor. I think that his security situation is still pretty precarious; this is not a situation of great stability.

As I say, you can go into the middle of Damascus and it all looks quite pleasant, with chi-chi cafés and restaurants. If you go further out, you get a very different look at things, including in the north-east—I am not surprised at many of the things that have happened up there. I would like to say just one thing about the north-east and the situation in these prisons and camps. This security failure, which was entirely predictable—

Chair: And we predicted it.

Chris Doyle: You predicted it, and I think we all predicted it. There was such a failure of countries to realise it. The idea that you hand over responsibility to keep ISIS detainees with a non-state actor that does not have the resources, and that we were not prepared to take some of these detainees back to our home countries and burden-share, is quite astonishing. We now have people who have escaped, and we do not know



who, how many or what will happen to them in going to Iraq. There are also many women and children who should not have been in those camps, as they had nothing to do with ISIS, and who have possibly been more radicalised. This was an utter recipe for disaster and should have been stopped right at the beginning.

Chair: I am particularly concerned about one of my constituents who was trafficked when she was 17. She had two children, one of whom has survived, and I do not know where she is. We have written to the Foreign Secretary about it, but I am not alone in being a Member of the British Parliament who is worried about people who used to live in their constituencies and what is happening to them now. Whatever it is that they have done, for them to be treated in this way is really shocking.

Q29 Sir John Whittingdale: You have covered a number of the areas that we wanted to ask you about, but could you say a bit more about the north-east and Kurdish region? Are the Syrian Democratic Forces still in control, or have they essentially been repressed? Going back to our topic, what does this mean for Lebanon as well?

Chris Doyle: The Syrian Democratic Forces overestimated their position. They did not realise the way that things were going. They were caught out by the fact that the United States pulled away from them, so now they are in a precarious position. They cannot really push back against the Syrian authorities, but the question is that they are quite divided up there. There are going to be those who will want to resist this. They are very fearful.

When I was in that area in April, the fears as a result of the massacres on the coast were widespread, and pretty much whenever I talked to anyone, they said, "If it can happen to the Alawis there, it can happen to us", so they are very fearful. They do see a lot of those fighters as jihadists, as al-Qaeda, as ISIS, or as sympathetic to them. Whether true or not, that is a widespread fear.

Against that, the SDF is far from perfect—you see a lot of pictures of Öcalan, the Turks will say the PKK and so on—but it is a very dangerous security situation. I think that the danger here is that Damascus gets ahead of itself and that there is a feeling of, "We've won." We have seen that quite a lot over the past 12 months: "We, the Sunni Arabs, have won." There is a sense of win/lose—"We've won. We want to have our prize in winning."

That is the danger there in the north-east, that that will be the case, as opposed to really trying to find a political solution that will give confidence to those communities that they are not going to get penalised, discriminated against, arrested and rounded up, and that their rights really will be respected. Yes, the President talked about Kurdish rights, language rights, citizenship rights and so forth—very important—but the question for them is, "Will he follow through? Will this actually be enacted in practice?" On that level, I think there is quite a lot of doubt, but that is where we can come in as Britain to try to insist that that happens.



Q30 Chair: May I ask you about Kobani, a Kurdish town that I think is still under siege, or is it not?

Chris Doyle: It is, although as of the weekend some convoys have got into Kobani. I think some people there are scared and wish to fight out, but obviously I am not on the ground. It has a Kurdish majority and is right up against the Turkish border. I would be concerned. I hope that they reach a political agreement, because that really is the only way forward.

If you look at the north of Syria, you have to hope that you get a political agreement. For Syria at the moment, two countries are what I would call predatory powers, Israel and Turkey. Israel is occupying parts of Syria to the south, and Turkey is occupying parts of Syria to the north. Eventually, just as in Lebanon, I would like to see the external actors withdrawing and pulling out. I am not naive, that is not going to happen quickly, but the real risk at the moment is that this will sow the seeds of ethnic hatred and tension between Turk, Arab and Kurd unless it is sorted out with a credible, legitimate political deal.

Daniel Levy: I have very little to say except to lean into the last point that Chris made. In that respect, it was not obvious what had just happened. Eventually with the SDF and those camps, that was obvious and foreseeable, but not the fact that Trump, I think, had essentially gone along with seeing this now as a Turkish sphere of influence—going along with that project on the SDF.

I think that Türkiye is the only actor. While I agree with that depiction of the two predatory powers—there used to be other predatory powers active in Syria, but that has been whittled down—on the Turkish side, Syria is a priority and there is capacity. I do not think that applies to the same degree on the Israeli side, which had a capturing-of-territory opportunity.

For me, it goes to a place where Syria is one of many spaces where we ask how to encourage an approach that is not about zero-sum outcomes. The thing that I think has captured many people's attention and imagination is that speech of the Canadian Prime Minister, Mark Carney. What does it mean now to acknowledge the shortcomings, the fiction, of what we thought was this system that we are all part of? How do we rebuild something? I hope that the UK is an active partner in trying to rebuild a multilateral set of global rules that are universally adhered to along with the architecture for a multipolar reality.

Q31 Sir John Whittingdale: That is a whole other inquiry.

Daniel Levy: Yes, perhaps.

Chair: I know that Fleur has a supplementary, but I think we need to ask a final question on that. Last year, when the Committee did our inquiry, the Lebanese Government said that it appreciated UK assistance, particularly in defence and security. I wondered if there was scope for expanding the co-operation between Lebanon and Britain. Could you answer relatively quickly just so that we have your thoughts on that as



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bullet points? In response to our report, the Government said that it had been providing a lot of support for Lebanon. Have we done enough and what else should we be doing?

- Q32 **Fleur Anderson:** My question is part of that, rather than being an extra one. I want to add the very successful work that the British have done in de-mining areas of Lebanon and releasing those areas back to the community to use. Is there anything you would add about what the FCDO should be doing in terms of de-mining as well?

Lina Khatib: I am going to talk about the security sector because it is very important. On my last visit, just earlier this month, I found out that the Lebanese army does not have enough capacity to deploy south of the Litani. That is a problem. The local population is demanding that and saying that being south of the Litani, it does not see enough of a Lebanese army presence. That is because of capacity issues. As Chris mentioned, the army's salaries are abysmal. Sometimes people cannot afford transport to go to the bases where they are supposed to be deployed—it is that dire. On supporting the Lebanese army, we have done a lot in terms of training, but it needs more personnel and better capacity at all levels. For me, that is a crucial and very urgent issue.

- Q33 **Chair:** That is interesting because I know that the British Government are particularly proud of the support that they have given to the Lebanese Government. I think they only have one person in UNIFIL, but the support given to the Lebanese army has been the important thing. To hear your evidence about the army not having enough money to get the bus is pretty shocking.

Chris Doyle: Obviously, Britain does not have a shedload of money to throw at these issues at the moment, so there is going to be a limited amount that we can provide in addition to what we are already doing. What the Government have done in helping the Lebanese armed forces is fine, and indeed UNRWA, and I hope they stick with that support. However, as I said earlier, I would emphasise that they need to give political support for the Lebanese Government, particularly in the disarmament, to see Israel back off in the ways that I outlined earlier.

We should also be present. At times we have taken our eyes off both Lebanon and Syria, which is not the right path forward. We should be honest about some of the failings of the American Administration. They have got rid of so many of their specialists on these countries. I hope Britain can be a voice of reason, but we need to be present.

I would urge more visits inside Syria, particularly to allow diplomats to go beyond Damascus. At the moment, I think the Germans have been up to Aleppo, Hama and Homs, but British diplomats are restricted. We need to be out and about. We need to engage with people and find ways to help. In Syria, a resumption of British Council operations, for example, would be very welcome. There are things we can do, particularly with technical expertise. Lina mentioned capacity. They need the capacity. They need help. These guys were running the small province of Idlib, at best, before;

they have lost a lot of that capacity for governance. There are questions about how open they are to receiving that advice and the technical capabilities, but we should still be pushing them.

Daniel Levy: First, let's acknowledge that the UK cannot solve many of these things—you know that. Secondly, when the FCDO aid, assistance and budget is less, we can do less of some of the good things that we can do. I am telling you things that you are very familiar with and deal with across so many issues.

There are two specifics. There was unanimous endorsement of continuing the UNIFIL mandate until the end of this year. That was basically a way of preventing a precipitous ending of UNIFIL, which the Americans at the time were pushing for. In his explanation of vote remarks, the UK perm rep to the UN said that if we want to guarantee a transition to Lebanese armed forces control, we have to make that possible without Israel controlling swathes of Lebanese territory and violating Lebanese sovereignty. Chris, you were pointing this out.

What are the UK Government doing to make good on the comments in that explanation of vote? I was just looking back on what the former Lebanese ambassador said when he was before the Committee. He made the point that all theatres of operation in the region are connected. You can't neatly put a seal around Lebanon and say, "This is the approach just to Lebanon." It is about the overall approach to the region and de-escalation in the region.

Chair: Very good. Can I thank you all very much for your time today? It has been absolutely fascinating. If there is anything else that occurs to you, you are always welcome to write and the Committee would be glad to read your thoughts. Thank you all very much for your time and expertise, and for sharing it with us so generously.