

International Development Committee

Oral evidence: Post-Assad Syria: development challenges and opportunities, HC 1773

Tuesday 17 March 2026

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Members present: Sarah Champion (Chair); Janet Daby; Tracy Gilbert; Monica Harding; Brian Mathew; David Mundell; James Naish; Sam Rushworth; David Taylor.

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Witnesses

[I](#): Mr Hamish Falconer, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for the Middle East, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office; and Peter McDermott, Syria Development Director, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

[II](#): Dr Ahmed Ekzayez, Deputy Minister, Ministry of Emergency and Disaster Management.

[III](#): Najat El Hamri, Regional Director, Middle East, Mines Advisory Group; and Mr Andrew Moore, Director of Middle East, The HALO Trust.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Mr Hamish Falconer and Peter McDermott.

Chair: We are going to start this one-off evidence session, in which we will look at post-Assad Syria—the development challenges, but also the opportunities. Minister, we are very grateful to you for being with us today. Thank you very much. Would you like to introduce your colleague?

Mr Falconer: I am joined by Peter McDermott, who is our lead on all things development. He is our development director for Syria.

Peter McDermott: Good afternoon.

Chair: I will hand straight over to Sam.

Q1 **Sam Rushworth:** My question is a simple one: what assessment have you already made of the humanitarian implications that the US-Israel war in Iran has had, particularly for Syria, but also more broadly for the region?

Mr Falconer: Chair, I am happy to answer the first question, but if you wouldn't mind, I would like to say a few opening words, including making an announcement to the Committee about some of our further funding on Syria. It will not take very long.

Chair: The protocol is usually that you ask for that in advance, but as long as it is brief, Minister, please go ahead.

Mr Falconer: Chair, as you know, Syria remains one of the world's gravest humanitarian crises. After 14 years of conflict, around 15 million people require humanitarian assistance, and 12 million remain internally displaced or as refugees in the region. The challenges facing the new Syrian Government, as they seek to rebuild the country, are immense.

While the pace of change in Syria is encouraging, and we welcome the progress made to open Syria to the world, attract investment and reduce the threat of terrorism, we remain concerned about ongoing sectarian tensions between different communities. Our overarching objective in Syria is stability. A stable Syria is, of course, in the Syrian people's interest and firmly in the British interest. It will reduce the risks of irregular migration, terrorism and wider threats to regional and UK national security.

On the political side, we continue to engage regularly with the Syrian Government, advocating for an inclusive and representative political transition and for the protection of all Syrians, regardless of religious or ethnic background.

On the development side, we are adjusting our aid programme to meet the needs of a new Syria, to pivot support to longer-term recovery, and to enable refugees and IDPs to return home and rebuild their lives. Our humanitarian and recovery efforts are focused on three priority areas: lifesaving humanitarian assistance, sustainable programming to support



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long-term recovery, and creating the conditions for economic recovery, including lifting sanctions and helping to create the conditions for private sector trade and investment into Syria.

To support these priorities, the UK is playing a leading role in co-ordinating international assistance with other donors and providing funding to the World Bank and other international institutions. Through our integrated security fund programme, we are also providing technical assistance to the Syrian Government and grant funding to civil society organisations.

Finally, we can demonstrate that even while budgets are tighter, we can still respond rapidly to crises, as we have just shown through our response to the recent escalations in north-east Syria. Our humanitarian partners were able to respond immediately to provide ongoing medical care through hospitals and mobile medical teams, and vital assistance and supplies for those displaced in freezing winter conditions. We have already provided over £4.65 million to support that response, and I am pleased to announce today to this Committee that we will provide a further £5 million to provide ongoing support to the north-east.

Q2 Chair: Thank you very much. Do you think the integrated security fund will survive the cuts?

Mr Falconer: I understand from the Development Minister that there will be a further announcement about our overall allocations very soon, so I do not want to get too drawn into the different modalities, but I am confident that the Syria programme will survive the cuts.

Chair: Thank you. Sam, apologies.

Q3 Sam Rushworth: That is fine. Thank you for that statement, which was interesting. Can you give us a sense of what the humanitarian implications for the region are? What have we seen that has changed since the US-Israel war in Iran?

Mr Falconer: As the Committee will be aware, Syria is closely linked to Lebanon, and many of the sectarian issues that I described in my opening statement are also true in Lebanon. We have long had a concern that large-scale displacement in Lebanon can have wider implications, given the delicate sectarian balance in that country. It is quite hard to imagine a Syria that is totally becalmed if Lebanon is facing very significant disruption, so I think it is probably most immediately through the Lebanon connection that the current conflict will be causing anxiety in Syria itself.

Of course, there will be wider implications. Syria, as I said, faces very significant humanitarian needs, in the way I outlined. The global energy crisis, should one materialise as a result of the conflict in Iran, would also affect Syria in obvious ways.

Q4 Sam Rushworth: Can I ask you about the increasing Israeli military presence in south-western Syria and what steps, if any, the Government are taking to de-escalate tensions?



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Mr Falconer: It is vital that Syria stabilises. We have long encouraged direct contact between Israel and Syria to try to deal with the issues, particularly those facing the Druze. There was a very concerning sequence of sectarian tensions in southern Syria. For many minorities in Syria—many of those communities would dislike being described as minorities—such as the Kurds in the north-east and the Alawites in the coastal areas, it is very important that there can be some kind of political resolution within Syria for the Druze of southern Syria, and that is the path we hope that the country takes.

Q5 **Sam Rushworth:** In the Government's engagement with Israel on that, do we have any influence? Do you feel that we are listened to?

Mr Falconer: We make these points with the Israeli Government. It is obvious that the British and Israeli Governments have disagreements on a whole range of issues, so I would not wish to claim that we are able to see our policy adopted entirely by the Israeli Government—that is an obvious statement of fact—but we do make these points with some force and regularity with our Israeli counterparts.

Q6 **Sam Rushworth:** Can I ask about ensuring safe passage of humanitarian aid and what the Government are doing to make sure that aid is unimpeded in getting into Syria?

Mr Falconer: We have seen a considerable easing of the ability to get aid into the whole of Syria. There remain restrictions in particular areas, and where restrictions remain, we take that up with the Syrian Government. I am particularly keen to see a reduction in impediment to aid into Kobani in the north-east of Syria, for example.

Q7 **Sam Rushworth:** With the welcome return of refugees, both from here, but also from the wider region, the Syrian Government will inevitably face pressures. What are the UK Government doing to support the Syrians in managing the return of refugees to their homeland?

Mr Falconer: We have done a lot to try to support Syrian refugees in the region, and indeed to support them in their return, if that is what they want to do. We have had quite extensive discussions with Syria itself and with the neighbours who have hosted the most significant populations. Türkiye is obviously one of those countries that has had a very significant Syrian refugee population for some time, and we have talked with it about the programming response to those pressures, but also what some of the wider policy responses might be. I am happy to ask Peter to say a little more about the programming, if that would be useful, Sam.

Chair: David, did you want to come in?

Q8 **David Taylor:** Yes. My question follows on from that, but is specifically about education. A lot of kids have, hopefully, been getting some education—Education Without Borders, for example, was doing its best to educate kids who have been in refugee camps for almost the entirety of their education—but there are all sorts of challenges with them coming back into a country with no public services. Specifically on education and



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schooling, where do you think we are at the moment?

Peter McDermott: I am happy to start on education. We have a particular focus on helping refugees who have returned, including on catch-up classes. That includes Arabic, if they have been in a country where they have not been learning Arabic. I think that is important.

We also have a strong partnership with the Ministry of Education, building on our previous programming in Idlib. We are looking to help them develop their priorities and plans. We are also setting up donor co-ordination mechanisms with the UN and with the donors, so that everybody can align behind a strong plan to rebuild education in Syria.

We are also starting to talk to the Government about, for example, mother tongue education in north-east Syria, for example, where there should be a greater focus on the Kurdish language. So, yes, education is definitely a priority for us.

It might also be worth mentioning that we are trying to move more into agricultural livelihoods, and building that sector up. That is a sector with lots of people in it, so it is a heavy employment sector. Again, we have been building our relationship with the Government. We co-hosted with the Government and the UN a big workshop in Damascus to think through operationalising the Government's plan for the agriculture sector over the last few years.

So it is about that mixture of providing targeted humanitarian aid and funding, but also moving more into the system-strengthening piece, as we can now create a stronger relationship with the Syrian Government.

Q9 Sam Rushworth: Chair, stop me if this question is coming up later, but on the point about system strengthening, there is a state-building project to be done in Syria as well, as it transitions to a new Government. What support is the UK giving in that regard?

Mr Falconer: As Peter said, we have been focusing, in particular, on education and, increasingly, on agriculture, and we recognise that we need the Syrian Government to be a success for the Syrian people. One of the first Ministers of the new Syrian Government that any British Minister met was the Minister of Education, who we hosted here. We are trying to provide technical support to the Ministries, where appropriate, to enable them to do their important work.

When I went to Damascus, I spent, rightly, a fair bit of time in the Ministry of Justice, where we have been supporting some of the accountability work, which is going to be so important to help Syria move on from what is a truly tragic recent history. The work of the officials I met there in collating some of Assad's crimes is going to be instrumental in providing Syria with some semblance of justice and accountability, but also truth-telling about what barbarism was meted out to the Syrian people over the period of Assad's rule.

Q10 Sam Rushworth: UK technical assistance and expertise is being given to those initiatives.



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Mr Falconer: Yes.

Sam Rushworth: Thank you.

Q11 **Monica Harding:** Thank you, Minister, for coming to us. I know the middle east, other than Syria, is taking up a lot of time at the moment.

In November 2025, you said, “humanitarian support overall has not been adequate to address the scale of the crisis in Syria”. Why, then, has the FCDO reduced bilateral aid funding by 36%, from £151 million in 2024-25 to £97 million in 2025-26?

Mr Falconer: As I said to the Chair earlier, the full ODA allocations will be out shortly, so we can have that discussion once they are out and you can see the relative position. There is no escaping the fact that the Government made a tough decision about ODA, which is obviously having an impact on the overall position, but we continue to be very generous towards Syria—I think it is £104 million to the humanitarian allocation. Just this year, I have announced a further allocation. I know that our aid was instrumental in the north-east in keeping Kobani hospital open.

With the fall of Assad, however, there are things that are, rightly, now moving from international donor budgets to the Syrian Government’s budget. We are not in the same terrible patchwork that we were in during Assad’s period. I was talking to officials earlier in the week about the fact that some education payments, for example, are rightly moving from international donors on to the books of the Syrian Government, in a way that the Assad Government never would have allowed. I think you will be reassured when you see the overall ODA allocations that Syria continues to be a very important place for UK aid.

Q12 **Monica Harding:** What is the assessment of the cuts between 2024 and 2025? What impact assessment has there been of that reduced funding within Syria?

Mr Falconer: It is such a difficult question to answer, because obviously a much more significant event than the UK aid budget happened in Syria between 2024 and 2025. It is not a question you can give a straightforward answer to. In terms of what has happened to the country, we have had the fall of Assad, and the new Government taking on quite significant financial liabilities that Assad did not, but also new and different humanitarian caseloads. The caseload in the north-east, or indeed in southern Syria at one point, did not exist in the same way. The humanitarian caseload materialised in different ways in different places.

To answer the question I can answer—do I feel that the reduction in UK aid between 2024 and 2025 has impeded the UK from playing its full role in terms of the humanitarian response to the needs we face?—no, I do not. I think we are still a very significant donor playing an important role.

Q13 **Monica Harding:** But programmes have been cut as a result?

Mr Falconer: There has been a reset in Syria. I am not pretending that the numbers have not moved; of course they have moved. You started



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by talking about the rest of my patch, and there are other places I am responsible for where it is easier to make these comparisons, because the broader situation has remained much more stable, whereas there have been such signal events in Syria that I do not think our top-line aid number is a particularly useful guide on whether or not humanitarian needs have been met.

Q14 Monica Harding: My understanding is that education programmes and services to women and girls were scaled back as a result of those cuts in bilateral aid.

Mr Falconer: Some of that is, as I described, a good news story rather than a bad news story, which is Damascus taking on the bills. Perhaps Peter could talk a little more about this process in Idlib.

Peter McDermott: In the example the Minister gave, we were paying for teacher stipends—contributing to teacher salaries, in effect—in schools in Idlib, in the Opposition-controlled area, with our education programme. In fact, many of the people we were working with then went to take over the Education Ministry in Damascus. They wanted to take this on to their budget; they did not want donors directly funding the teacher stipends in Idlib. So we cut back that funding at the request of the Syrian Government, and we have recycled some of that funding into, for example, school rehabilitation and technical assistance, but some has contributed to aid reductions as well. Partly, the absorptive capacity for the technical assistance is smaller amounts of money, if that makes sense.

Q15 Chair: Are you anticipating a shift from humanitarian to development in the coming years?

Peter McDermott: It would perhaps be more of a rebalancing. I think we would class the work we are doing at the moment on education and agriculture as early recovery humanitarian, if you like, but it is a more sustainable form of humanitarian. Then, with the technical assistance and so on, we would hope to move more into the development space. We want to keep a balanced portfolio, because Syria, as you rightly say, remains a very difficult humanitarian crisis.

The indicators are starting to improve, but it is very early days, so we want to move more of the money into the more sustainable programming, but retain the ability to do the pure humanitarian aid, and also keep a bit of money back to respond to the spikes in need. For example, in north-east Syria we were the first donor to respond, because we have this ability to respond very quickly. We want to retain that; we do not want to move completely into the development space.

Q16 David Mundell: Following on from that, what does long-term sustainable development supported by the UK Government look like in Syria?

Mr Falconer: David, the obvious place that we wish to get to is a new Syria at peace with itself, and I have talked a little already about some of the outstanding pressures. A new Syria could be, we hope, a relatively



stable country in the region. Under those circumstances, we hope that we would be able to build on the areas where we have been initially focused—education and agriculture, in particular—so that we have a country that is capable of growing on its own two feet and starting to recover after what has been an incredibly long period of trauma for the Syrians. I know that one member of the Committee has been very involved in trying to get British business operating in Syria again. That is what success looks like.

Of course, we must retain the capability, as Peter describes, to do humanitarian work in Syria. We are not yet in that environment of stability that we must aspire to, so we have to keep that capability to respond quickly. I am glad that we were able to keep Kobani hospital open during a period of real tension. But ideally, as the Chair just mentioned, we should be shifting an increasing proportion of our budget towards early recovery and into development, and moving an increasing amount of our work with Syria towards its long-term development.

Q17 David Mundell: What are your ambitions for prioritising local and community-based organisations, especially groups led by women and displaced people, in how UK aid and development objectives are delivered in Syria?

Mr Falconer: We want to support local Syrian organisations as much as we can. I have certainly met lots of very impressive Syrians, and indeed British Syrians resident here, who have run very effective organisations for a long time. We have an aid fund for Syria that provides 100% of its funding to Syrian NGOs. There is a pooled fund arrangement with the United Nations and other donors, and we have been pushing hard to make sure that that increases the number of Syrian organisations that are involved.

In the end, it will be Syrian leadership that helps Syria to stabilise. I am very impressed, for example, by the Syrians involved in the White Helmets, who have played such a vital role and who are now playing their part in the functioning of the new Syrian agencies post the fall of Assad. That must be the model, and Britain can be proud of the support we have given—under both Governments—to Syrian organisations like the White Helmets.

Chair: I am incredibly proud of what they have done, and civil societies across the globe. I am very nervous that we might lose that capability in the forthcoming cuts.

Q18 Brian Mathew: In June 2025 the UK Government announced that they intended to keep the impact of sanctions amendments under review. What progress have you made ?

Mr Falconer: I am happy to take the discussion wherever the Committee would like, but the big-picture sanctions decision on Syria was our quite early decision to try to relax sanctions on Syria, largely so that the economy and, indeed, the Government could be given a reasonable chance to get started. There are a whole range of challenges, and I have



talked about some of them already, and I think that that was the right judgment. I am glad that our partners have broadly followed suit in that judgment, both the United States and in the European Union.

There are real outstanding challenges. I follow reports very closely from north-east Syria, southern Syria and the coastal areas. I do not want to sound at all sanguine about the scale of the challenge that still faces Syria. I hope to see a Syria at peace with itself, in the way I described to Mr Mundell, but we will be vigilant until we can all take a little more confidence that the sectarian tensions we have seen over recent years have reduced.

I think that the basic decisions about sanctions were the right ones to take. We have followed through on the wider measures as well. Of course, as you have heard me say in the Chamber endlessly, I do not comment on any further sanction decisions, because we could reduce their effectiveness if we took them, but I am broadly reassured that the early decision we took was the right one to take.

Q19 Brian Mathew: What is your assessment of the impact of remaining sanctions on the ability of humanitarian actors to deliver UK aid effectively?

Mr Falconer: I might turn to Peter to check that I am not missing anything, but I think that there are some restrictions that make the free passage of aid within Syria slightly more complicated than we would like it to be. However, I am not aware of sanctions impeding our ability to deliver, unless there is something I am missing, Peter.

Peter McDermott: No, I think that is right. If there are any issues, we would be keen to hear of them. As the Minister said, we have put sanctions on people involved in the coastal violence, but I do not think that that significantly impedes our humanitarian aid.

Q20 Brian Mathew: To dig down a bit, to what extent do remaining sanctions, including secondary sanctions on organisations and state-owned bodies doing business with Syria, affect long-term private sector investment and rebuilding efforts in Syria?

Mr Falconer: I have had this discussion with some Syrian organisations. I do not think that any British secondary sanctions are likely to be affecting the development of the private sector. As Peter says, we have put some sanctions on specific individuals, but I would not think that even the most over-cautious compliance would lead to that being a major impediment on British companies investing, if they are only thinking about British sanctions. There are, of course, other sanctions regimes, which are sometimes attributed to the UK Government. A British bank might flag compliance with, say, US or European sanctions regimes. I am confident, for my part, as the British Minister, that we have reduced sanctions. It may be that there are firms that are worried about compliance with other sanctions and, as I have set out already, we have been seeking to work with our partners on these questions. However, I accept that there are likely to still be concerns in other jurisdictions.



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Q21 Brian Mathew: Leading on from that, what assessment has the Government made of the implications of sanctions relief and the influx of foreign aid for the potential diversion of UK aid into illicit financial channels?

Mr Falconer: In lifting sanctions, we made it easier to deliver aid to a wider part of Syria. We obviously are very watchful for diversion anywhere. We are reassured by our nascent partnership with the new Government that we have a shared sentiment about that and that there is no desire in the new Syrian Government to see aid diversion; that was a widely criticised characteristic of the Assad regime. We have all the measures in place in Syria that we would have in any other complex environment to try to make sure that there is no aid diversion. Given the scale of the humanitarian need, it would be an absolute outrage if our aid was being diverted. If people have particular worries about our aid in Syria, I would be very pleased to hear about them, but I am not aware of any large-scale reports.

Q22 David Taylor: I know that you are keen for the future of Syria to be inclusive, representative and non-sectarian, and for the rights of women and girls to be protected. Could you give an assessment of where you think we are on that at the moment and, if appropriate, of how you are trying to influence the interim Administration?

Mr Falconer: I will start with women and girls and then move on to some of the wider sectarian issues we have discussed. Women and girls have suffered disproportionately in Syria; women and girls always suffer disproportionately in a humanitarian crisis. I was very pleased that, last year, 56% of our aid, we think, reached women and girls. It is something we need to remain very vigilant about, and we need to make sure that every effort is taken to ensure that women and girls are targeted by our programmes, because we know how acute the challenges are.

In our work in education and agriculture, which I have mentioned already, there is a real focus on trying to make sure, particularly in our education work, that we are targeting women and girls and making sure that they benefit. I think we can see in the region the deleterious impacts of a failure to focus on those issues.

Moving to some of the sectarian pressures, there has rightly been a lot of focus recently on issues in the north-east, and lots of members of the Committee are rightly focused on those issues. We were pleased that there was a negotiated agreement at the end of January, and I have been closely engaged in that process with Syrian, American and Kurdish colleagues. It is vital that that agreement holds and that it is a success. A new Syria will only be a success if the Kurds, the Alawites, the Druze—the many faces of Syria's diversity—all feel welcome and represented within Syria. There is still progress to be made in Kobani, but the situation in the north-east is very much calmer than it was.

We are, as I said, still providing humanitarian assistance into the area. My hope, as I hope I outlined to Mr Mundell, is that we can shift out of



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the humanitarian mode and focus on wider early-recovery and development priorities. I am cautiously optimistic that further progress is possible. I thought it was very moving, for example, in Davos to see the Syrian Foreign Minister and representatives of the SDF taking meetings together, posing for photographs together. That is very significant progress and it should continue.

- Q23 David Taylor:** On that issue of sectarian risks and sectarian violence, not just in the north-east but across the country, one thing the Syrian British Consortium has told me it thinks would be helpful in that regard is more investment in security sector reform, at both national and local levels, to help the transitional authorities to reduce the threat of sectarian violence, and also for the country's long-term stability. Could you comment on that and on whether, albeit in an era of reduced ODA, there is an opportunity to invest in that going forward?

Mr Falconer: It is vital, and it is one of the reasons why I spent time in the Ministry of Justice and with the Justice Minister. It is a statement of the obvious, but questions around security and justice are at the heart of the tensions in southern Syria, the tensions in the north-east and the tensions in the coastal areas. The Syrian Government had some international involvement in some of those investigations, but the more they can demonstrate credible and serious domestic investigative capacity, and then justice and accountability following those investigations, the better. They have made some welcome steps in that regard, and we are keen to help them demonstrate growing capability to have a justice system that can command some confidence from the Syrian people.

- Q24 Janet Daby:** Minister, in your opening remarks you stated that stabilising Syria is in the Syrian interest as well as in the British interest, and I absolutely agree. In achieving that, in your view, would UK aid and assistance be delivered more effectively if the UK Government were to re-establish a permanent UK presence in Syria? Obviously, that means re-establishing a British embassy.

Mr Falconer: I am very keen to see the rapid re-establishment of the embassy in Syria. We have an excellent envoy, who travels regularly to Damascus, but as I know from my own previous life, there is no substitute for being somewhere permanently. There are some logistical and cost complications. We do have a building in Damascus, but it will require some considerable work to bring it back up to standard, if indeed that is what we choose to do. I am chomping at the bit to get an embassy back in Damascus, but we will have to be slightly driven by the timelines of the Foreign Office process to do that safely, securely and affordably.

- Q25 Janet Daby:** Do you have any timescales in mind for this?

Mr Falconer: I would be only too delighted to report back to Parliament once I do have a timescale, but I do not yet. I can assure you, Janet, that



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probably nobody in the British Government is more impatient about this than I am.

- Q26 **Janet Daby:** Finally, could you say why you think UK aid and assistance would be better delivered or potentially functioning with an embassy in place? What do you think the benefits of that would be?

Mr Falconer: I spent many years of my life overseas and always felt that there is no substitute for living in a place and understanding it well. We have incredibly committed colleagues, one of whom is sitting next to me, who does everything possible to understand the country as well as we possibly can through visits, remote monitoring and relationships with Syrians that can be maintained, without having a presence on the ground. I do not take away for one second from the sophistication and importance of the work that Peter and, indeed, Ann Snow, the envoy for Syria, do. However, I lived in South Sudan for two years, and I do not think I could have understood South Sudan as well as I hope I did by the end if I had not walked the streets of Juba every day. I think there is an ineffable additional value in having a permanent presence.

- Q27 **Monica Harding:** Can I come back to the £5 million? Is that earmarked for north-east Syria?

Mr Falconer: It is.

- Q28 **Monica Harding:** It is for north-east Syria. There is a security risk around the ISIS prisoners in north-east Syria. Are there 12,000 of them, in what is a quite fragile security situation? What is being done about that? What are we doing to secure that risk?

Mr Falconer: As you say, there are a number of camps in north-east Syria that contain ISIS prisoners. It has been a slightly complex and moving picture. Some of those camps are now in the control of the Syrian Government, and some remain with the SDF. A considerable number of those prisoners have now been taken, with the consent of the Iraqi Government, over the border into Iraq to face justice there.

So there are two questions. One is, are we working closely to ensure that the security risk posed by those camps to the region and the UK is managed. We are working closely with regional and international partners on that question. The second question is, are we working to try to make sure that people in those camps, which have many women and children in them as well, are treated humanely. We are working on that question too. I must have discussed this two or three times with the Syrian Foreign Minister and other counterparts over the last few weeks.

- Q29 **Monica Harding:** I think there is a strong feeling that they resisted the ISIS threat for so long that they need to be supported as far as possible from the west, for want of a better term. Is it likely that that money, the £5 million, will increase over time, or is that it for now?

Mr Falconer: On your first point, the communities in north-east Syria and the wider region faced brutality of the worst possible order from ISIS. They fought incredibly bravely. They were instrumental in ensuring



that ISIS was eradicated as the country-threatening force that it once was. They have also shouldered the burden of these detainees for a long period of time. We are incredibly grateful and appreciative of everything that people in the region did. We were proud to support them in that battle against ISIS, and we all owe them a debt, and the British Government have not forgotten that.

As for the numbers going up and down, it is very important to me that we are rapid and effective when Syrians need our help, particularly in the north-east, where there were pressures this year. Whether or not that number will go up or down will depend on wider circumstances. Broadly, development work is cheaper than humanitarian work. It would be better to support the hospital in Kobani in a steady-state way, rather than in a humanitarian surge way, which is obviously much more expensive. That is why—in answer to Mr Mundell's question—I am quite keen to see the slider shift away from hugely humanitarian to more development and less humanitarian, not least because if we get that slider all the way from over here to over there, we are going to be delivering much more effectively for the Syrian people.

Q30 Brian Mathew: An intriguing question: is the old embassy in Damascus still in British hands? What has happened to it?

Mr Falconer: It is still in British hands. I have not visited it, but my colleagues who have say that it has been maintained by incredibly committed local staff, to whom we owe an enormous debt. It does not sound like it would get a great Tripadvisor review at the moment, so there is some work to be done before we work out what we do next.

Chair: Minister, we really appreciate this session and what you are doing in the region. Peter, you have briefed us many times, and we are most grateful for your dedication. Thank you both very much for making time for us today.

Mr Falconer: Thank you.

Examination of witness

Witness: Dr Ahmed Ekzayez.

Chair: We will now move straight on to our next session, with the Deputy Minister. Minister Ekzayez, can you see and hear us?

Dr Ekzayez: Well and clear.

Chair: Lovely. Thank you so much for making time to speak to us today. Could you tell the Committee what your title is and the remit of your work?

Dr Ekzayez: Thank you very much, Chair, and thank you for the opportunity to be with you today. My name is Ahmed Ekzayez. I am the Deputy Minister of Emergency and Disaster Management, which is a new Ministry that has been established within the new Government.



Chair: Thank you. Minister, each Committee member has different questions for you, and I am going to hand over to my colleague Tracy for the first one.

Q31 **Tracy Gilbert:** Thank you for joining us, Minister. Could you give us a bit of an overview of your role in the newly established Department that you are running, and tell us about the main challenges you are facing?

Dr Ekzayez: Thank you for the question. The Ministry of Emergency and Disaster Management is a newly emerged Ministry. It has been established to deal with multiple programmes and challenges in Syria. We inherited a very bad and dirty legacy from the old regime, the al-Assad regime, the al-Assad family. There are lots of crises around Syria.

We have two main branches in our Ministry: emergency and disaster management. In disaster management, we have five directorates. We have disaster risk reduction, and safety protection, safety and security. We are also dealing with community resilience and relief management. We are the Government entity responsible for managing and co-ordinating all the relief support—like in the south—across the country. We also have one directorate dealing with recovery and risk assessment.

Currently, we are reviewing the risk matrix. You can imagine that since 2016 there has been no development or progress for the risk matrix. We are also developing the first ever national disaster risk reduction plan. We are co-ordinating with the various stakeholders to come up with the first national disaster risk reduction plan.

Moreover, one of the key milestones for us is to establish a multi-sectoral, multi-hazard early-warning system. Syria has a very important geographical location, with a lot of crises and hazards around us, but unfortunately we do not have a multi-sectoral early-warning system. We have some fragmented early-warning systems, like one for agriculture, one for waterborne disease and one for environment, but we do not have one that can combine all hazards. Our Ministry is now working hard to establish a multi-sectoral, early-warning system. Moreover, in order to ensure safety for investors, we are developing a coding system for all buildings, particularly relating to fires and earthquakes.

Under our Ministry, we are also supervising three national centres. The national mine action centre is very important and a crucial national centre for the Government, given the level of contamination with landmines in Syria. This mine action centre is considered one of the critical elements of our Ministry, and we are working hard to support the mine action centre.

The second national centre is the national climate and weather forecasting centre, which deals with all the historical climate data and forecasting, as well as the weather aspect.

The third national centre is the earthquake monitoring centre. Syria is located in what is considered to be an active earthquake area. Therefore, this centre is monitoring for all the earthquakes in our area.



Moreover, we have an emergency department dealing with all the search and rescue and firefighting issues related to quick emergency support—like what happened last summer in the forest fire areas. Unfortunately, we lost more than 26,000 hectares because of widespread forest fires. Our Ministry did a remarkable job with limited resources to counter that loss.

I will move now to the second part of the question, about the challenges. We have a lot of challenges, to be frank. One of these challenges is about the equipment and tools that are necessary to function well. In emergency and disaster management, it is very important to be very efficient and sometimes to be proactive rather than reactive. Therefore, we need advanced tools and equipment. Our firefighting vehicles were exhausted with the last wildfire, and to be honest, based on my discussion with His Excellency yesterday, we are now working to renew some of our fire vehicles and all their accessories, to be prepared for next summer. Equipment and tools are one of the key challenges we face.

Of course, there is the financial aspect, which is cross-cutting with multiple issues. In terms of capacities and human resources, our main asset is human resources. Yes, we are very proud to say we were White Helmets before, and now we are transforming to be a part of the Government, working hard to cover all the emergency and disaster management across Syria. Before, we were working in a small area in the north-west, but now we are expanding to the whole of Syria, so new centres, new equipment and new trained staff are needed. So we are working hard on training, capacity building and capacity development. I cannot maybe classify it as a challenge, but we are putting a plan ahead of us to increase the number of qualified staff working with us.

I will just give very brief numbers in terms of the challenges. For instance, we need in Syria—

Chair: Minister, could I stop you there, because we do have some other questions? David, I think you particularly wanted to come in on White Helmets.

Q32 David Taylor: Yes, thank you. Minister, I am getting quite emotional listening to you speak, because I never thought I would see the day when the White Helmets were part of the Syrian Government, and I know that everyone around the table will feel the same. We have all supported the White Helmets over many years of suffering, and it is fantastic to hear you speak with such passion about the future.

I do want to ask a couple of questions related to the past because I want to get some of your reflections on what did happen. You will know that Jo Cox was a fantastic supporter of the White Helmets when she was alive, and I want to ask two questions about that. First, she advocated, and I supported her with that advocacy, for a no-fly zone over northern Syria on many occasions. Could you tell us why you think that would have made a difference if it had been implemented by the west?



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For my second question, I want to give you the opportunity to talk about the disinformation campaigns that were set against the White Helmets and the impact that that had, but also perhaps about some of the lessons going forward in other contexts that you might be able to share. I am afraid to say that even very sensible MPs were influenced by that disinformation campaign. I know of one who would not meet the White Helmets when they were in town because they had been affected by some of this disinformation.

So there are two questions there. One is, what impact do you think a no-fly zone would have had? And the second is, are there any lessons for other contexts from the disinformation campaigns against the White Helmets?

Dr Ekzayez: Thanks very much for the questions. Actually, let me first mention how very grateful we are to the British Government and FCDO for their excellent and great support over these 10 years in establishing White Helmets. We are always saying that, with the great support from FCDO and other international donors, we were able to bring about some stability in north-west Syria, to support the victims and civilians inside Syria, especially in the north-west. We also had a lot of capacity to transfer in terms of being part of the Government—a lot of resources and materials. In terms of firefighting, there are the helmets we got from international donor groups, and the new Government are using them now. So, big thanks for all the great support in the last 10 years.

To address your first question, one of the big challenges was the daily shelling and the targeting from the air and from the army, from the Assad regime and its allies. It was a nightmare. Communities and civilians said to us every day, "Please stop all this targeting and shelling." We were asking for no-fly zone areas because this was the main challenge for development, safety and security in the region.

One of the biggest challenges for the White Helmets was dealing with search and rescue. After some time, the regime developed a new strategy of targeting and shelling, with double-tap shelling: targeting and then doing it a second time to maximise the impact on the victims and the casualties. Therefore, it was very necessary, it was very important, to get this no-fly zone, so that civilians could have a sort of stability, especially vulnerable groups—women, children and the elderly.

For the second part of the question—sorry, could you just remind me?

Q33 **David Taylor:** Could you reflect on the disinformation campaigns that targeted the White Helmets, and perhaps on what lessons there might be for other conflicts going on in the world? At the root of it, I think it meant that you were not listened to as much as you should have been.

Dr Ekzayez: Absolutely. We were the only organisation, the only volunteer recruits, who could provide evidence on all the criminals of the Assad regime. We had our helmets with the camera, and we recorded everything. Therefore, the regime was crazy about us. We started to hear



all this disinformation, because we were the only one who could provide evidence. No one can deny this evidence.

In terms of the lessons learned about how to avoid that, I think we learned a very good lesson about connection with international groups, and being part of and close to communities, and starting to speak out. Again, very many thanks to the FCDO and many thanks to the British Government for supporting us with that—for speaking out and going to the public to say, “Look, this is the evidence,” and that what was said against us was completely wrong.

I would like to add one more thing. After 8 December, we started to work on awareness sessions with the communities in Tartus, in Latakia, in Damascus, in regime-controlled areas. We discovered three segments of population. The first one knows about us, and they heard a lot of bad things about us. They were afraid of us—that we were coming as a terrorist group. When they listened to us, and heard what we were doing in terms of the history, they changed their minds completely. To counter that, the lesson learned is to go directly to the communities, speak with your evidence, with your impact, and show what you did.

We lost more than 10% of our staff, and all over the globe people know that. The White Helmets lost more than 10% of our staff because of the targeting and shelling. They sacrificed their lives to rescue people in north-west Syria, which was very noble work and they did it.

Therefore, again, connect with global communities and go directly to the communities to provide evidence about what we are doing and what has been done. This is very important to counter all this disinformation.

David Taylor: Thank you.

Q34 **Brian Mathew:** Minister, thank you. Your enthusiasm tells a wonderful tale and it is wonderful to see you in post—I would say you are the right man in the right place at the moment.

Just as an aside, and this is something that has occurred to me as we were speaking, perhaps other crises in the world today could benefit from the experience of the White Helmets. I am thinking perhaps even about Sudan, but I will leave that in the air for now.

My question is: can you describe the current scale and nature of the humanitarian crises in Syria?

Dr Ekzayez: We still have a big humanitarian crisis. The needs are immense, and some pockets still need a lot of humanitarian aid. I think more focus now is on north-east Syria, al-Raqqa, al-Hasakah and so on. I completely agree that there is a need for humanitarian assistance there.

However, some international communities are not very aware about what is going on still in north-west Syria. We still have a 1.5 million IDPs living in camps in great hardship. Do you know how many floods have happened recently? This year, we had a lot of rain, thanks to God, but it was a disaster for them. This is something we have to think about. We



still have 1,555 camps in Syria. However, our President issued a new decree establishing a committee led by His Excellency, Mr Raed al-Saleh, the Minister of Emergency and Disaster Management, in order to put forward a clear plan and vision to close all the camps in Syria, hopefully by the end of next year. By the end of this year, at least we can close all the tents, but in terms of the camps, hopefully it will be by next year.

Still we have a humanitarian aspect in north-west Syria, with a large population who were not able to go back home, for different reasons. One reason is that their areas are still contaminated with mines. Syria is ranked second globally in terms of contamination from landmines. So, people are not able to go back. They are also not able to go back, because their fields are contaminated and they cannot practise agriculture; they cannot get their livelihood from their land, because of the mine aspects. Moreover, some of these IDPs are not able to go back because their houses have been partially or completely destroyed.

Now we are communicating with global donors to get more funding, collaboration and support to create a clear vision. That is what we are now working on. We have a meeting today, in three hours, with the different Ministries to discuss the plan for us, for this committee, and to give a clear vision and strategic objective for this committee, so that we can close the camps. The strategy is almost finalised. It has been divided into four phases, and we need humanitarian and recovery and development to join hands to close the camps. Closing the camps not only requires a humanitarian perspective and effort, but it also needs development actors and efforts to join with the humanitarian.

Lastly, there is the issue with Suwayda. Our Ministry has been co-ordinating all the humanitarian support in Suwayda, inside Suwayda and outside Suwayda, because we still have a significant number of IDPs in different locations. From a political point of view, our Government are working in a good direction to hopefully solve these issues and to have one, unified Syria.

Inclusivity and stability are really key milestones for our Government. We need a Syria for all Syrians. We need all Syrians to be part of this Government and to rebuild Syria. Believe me, we have a golden opportunity now, after five decades of al-Assad, to build an inclusive and stable Syria. That is the task not only for the current Government, but for all Syrians, and all Syrians should work hard to achieve this task.

Q35 Brian Mathew: Lastly, what impact has the Israel-US-Iran war had so far on the humanitarian situation in Syria?

Dr Ekzayez: It might not be a direct impact, but it could be an indirect impact. In terms of the indirect impact, our airport has been closed, so we are not able to receive any international groups, and we are not able to travel as well. So it has been a little bit indirect.

Moreover, in terms of the direct one, we unfortunately have some children and other Syrians who have been killed or injured as result of rockets dropped in Syria, especially in Daraa and Suwayda as well. It is



also an issue, sticking with the logistic aspect, of fuels and energy. That is the same for all the region, actually, not only for Syria, but Syria has been impacted.

So, it is directly, because some rockets have been dropped, and then indirectly, with the logistics aspect, the fuel and the gas, as well as with our aerospace being closed.

Q36 Brian Mathew: Were these rockets Israeli rockets or Iranian rockets?

Dr Ekzayez: I think it is the Iranian ones.

Q37 James Naish: Just thinking about the neighbouring countries to Syria, what are the key challenges for those neighbouring states around supporting refugees and around those refugees returning to Syria?

Dr Ekzayez: When we are discussing returning refugees, in particular, it is Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon. As you maybe heard, we are observing quite a large number of Syrians coming back from Lebanon as a consequence of the issues now happening in Lebanon between Israel and Hezbollah. So I think there are a lot of Syrians coming back, and our—

Q38 James Naish: Sorry to jump in there. Are there any numbers that you could put on the change you have seen in the last couple of weeks?

Dr Ekzayez: I think that we have received 105,000 Syrians back from Turkey just within these 10 days or two weeks.

Q39 James Naish: The 10 days before that, how would that have compared?

Dr Ekzayez: It was a normal process, with very low numbers of Syrians or Lebanese coming to Syria, but now it has increased. As I mentioned, we have three border crossing stations on a daily basis. They are receiving their almost maximum. We have received within the past 10 days almost more than 105,000.

Our Ministry is in co-ordination with other Ministries—the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of Social Affairs, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Also, we have now created a committee to organise the interests of the Syrians and to put in place some scenarios for the coming future. If any scale-up happened, then the response should be done from our side. Scenarios are being planned and put in, as well as the response in the border. The numbers are being managed by our Ministry in co-ordination with other Ministries as well.

Q40 James Naish: Given the complexity of the situation on the ground, within Syria itself, how are you managing that balance between refugees that are returning and the humanitarian aspects, but also that investment into long-term development, which is obviously going to be key for the country as a whole to be able to move forward?

Dr Ekzayez: Exactly. I might not have the accurate numbers of refugees that came back from Europe, Turkey, Jordan and other places, but as far as I know, it is a significant number. Let me be frank with you: when it



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comes to infrastructure and local services—electricity, water and basic services—I think we still need more support in order to be able to absorb a large number of refugees.

Let me tell you something. My brother has UK nationality and he was a professor at King's College. He decided to come back to Syria and he is now working with one of the organisations. He has now been in Syria for one year, but unfortunately he is thinking to go back to London. The infrastructure is not conducive for refugees to come back consistently. We still need support with electricity, water, infrastructure and the key basic services.

In addition, we need more support with the macro project—for investment and other things. I was speaking about one case, about my brother, but a wide range of refugees who came to Syria found some difficulties in dealing with basic services—as I mentioned, roads, electricity, infrastructure, water and sanitation. The Government are working very hard to pave the way and carry out this big project, but still we are seeing hesitation from Government to make more investment and to do a lot of work to make this infrastructure conducive for a lot of refugees to go back to Syria.

Q41 David Taylor: I just want to ask specifically about Hezbollah, with this offensive going on at the moment. Do you have a particular worry that Hezbollah fighters fleeing the Israeli offensive might try their luck and try to come into Syria? I imagine, given the horrendous role they played in backing Assad, that you do not want to see them in your country.

Dr Ekzayez: Absolutely, we don't want to see them in our country. Therefore, we are working very closely on this, and the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Defence have their own plan, their own scenarios and their own preparation to ensure that, in any case where this scales up and there is mass movement coming from Lebanon to Syria, we are able to manage all the security perspectives. This is something that is essential for us.

Yesterday, we had a meeting with the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of Interior. After the meeting, I felt very confident that we have really strong security measures in place to counter the issues as much as possible. Hopefully, this will be moving in the right direction.

Chair: That is very reassuring, Minister.

Q42 David Mundell: What engagement, Minister, would you like to see from the UK Government and the FCDO on humanitarian issues going forward?

Dr Ekzayez: Thanks for the question. Of course, the funding aspect is essential, but funding is not the only thing we need. As I mentioned, training and capacity development for our staff are essential. In terms of planning, we are now working on putting in place our strategy for recovery, for development. Designing our strategies and policies is very important, because this goes beyond funding; when you have good



funding, but you don't have a good strategy and good policy, it will be a loss of funding.

First, we need to have the right policy, the right strategies and the right people in terms of the capacity, and then we can move forward with funding. So it is about capacity development, participating in planning, designing our strategies and then funding, as well as convincing international donors, especially the United Nations, to work in an accelerated manner and to have more development activities in Syria. I still see hesitation and big bureaucracy with the United Nations when it comes to some humanitarian and recovery programmes. We are now piloting the early-warning system in Latakia to avoid any disasters with the next wildfire, but working with the United Nations is still very slow.

Secondly, we need the UK to give a push to all actors, especially the United Nations and INGOs, to implement the reality of localisation. When we say localisation, that is supporting local government, supporting authorities. Let's have direct funds for the Government. Why are we still using a third party to fund some projects? I can assure you that we have capacity as the Syrian Government to receive funds. We have capacity as the Syrian Government to implement, to monitor, to provide reporting and to do what should be done in terms of higher standards. So let's have direct funding for the Syrian Government, and implement the reality of actual, genuine localisation. This is very important.

We need support from the UK to get global attention so that some very important programmes in Syria—especially on the climate, early warning and mine actions—can be implemented and so that we can join recovery with development, which is essential, as I mentioned. We have golden opportunities to join hands and implement the actual HDP—humanitarian, development and peace—nexus in Syria.

Q43 David Mundell: You see that there is a role for the UK in strengthening wider governance and accountability mechanisms in Syria going forward.

Dr Ekzayez: I think it is a crucial, significant role. It is not a normal role; it is a significant role. We are now working to build good governance—peaceful and democratic governance. I think the experience of the UK playing a significant and crucial role is very much appreciated and needed.

Chair: Minister, it is so reassuring to see you in your post and to hear what you are saying. I think I speak for the Committee when I say, "All power to you." I cannot believe the rapid transformation that there has been in your country. Thank you to you and all your colleagues for keeping the faith and now being in a position where you can actually influence a positive outcome for the people of Syria.

I think you will also be heartened when you listen back to the Minister who spoke before you, who does seem to be very long-term committed to Syria and the region. I am really pleased with this session. Thank you



so much, and please keep in touch.

I will now ask the panels to change over, but please do stay if you want to listen in, Minister. Thank you so much for your time.

Dr Ekzayez: Thank you so much. I appreciate it, and thanks for giving us the opportunity.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Najat El Hamri and Andrew Moore.

Chair: We now have a hybrid panel. Andrew Moore is here in person. Najat, can you hear and see us?

Najat El Hamri: Yes, I can see you and hear you.

Chair: Lovely. Najat, could you introduce yourself and your organisation for us, please?

Najat El Hamri: My name is Najat El Hamri. I am the regional director for the middle east region in MAG, known as the Mines Advisory Group. MAG has been working across the middle east region since 1992, and is currently delivering programmes in Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine.

For those who don't know MAG, we are a humanitarian organisation. We are addressing the causes and the consequences of conflict in 45 countries across the globe. We enable communities to build their future and their lives after conflict, and we work extremely closely in partnerships with national authorities to promote sustainable development.

Q44 **Chair:** Thank you very much for that introduction. This Committee has always been a fan of both MAG and HALO, and it is a constant source of irritation that you do not get more funding and support. Literally, unless you go in and clear these spaces, there is no future for a lot of these communities, so thank you for all the risks that your people take.

Andrew, could you introduce yourself and HALO?

Andrew Moore: Thank you. I am Andrew Moore from the HALO Trust. I am the regional director for the middle east, north Africa and Afghanistan. Our programmes in the region comprise Libya, Yemen, Iraq, Syria, the west bank, Gaza and Afghanistan.

We essentially conduct broadly the same activities as MAG, and thank you for your kind comments, Chair, on the work of both organisations. We are combined British centres of excellence and an arm of British soft power, as well as humanitarian and developmental assistance. More than 60% of the world's anti-personnel mines that were cleared last year were cleared by HALO and MAG.

Q45 **Tracy Gilbert:** Thank you both for joining us. What are the main



challenges for humanitarian organisations in delivering humanitarian assistance in Syria?

Andrew Moore: First of all, we face a huge challenge with both landmine clearance and unexploded ordnance in towns and cities as well. The scale is enormous. You heard from the Minister the desire and the capabilities within the Syrian Government, and those capabilities need to be built over time and should take over. We see ourselves as a surge capacity to enable people to safely return to their homes—we need to remember that there are 7 million people internally displaced in Syria, as well as externally displaced people—to rebuild, to farm the land and to rebuild infrastructure such as schools and hospitals.

The principal challenge we face is that there is just not enough money at the moment, and we all know the reasons for that: western budgets are constrained. Another constraint is that the funding that we have received has not necessarily allowed us to act strategically. There is lots of money coming through pooled funds. It is hard to get a strategic sense of the landmine and explosive problem in Syria at the moment, and those funds tend to offer short-term funding in six-month or one-year cycles at the most. So we can't really plan. The mine action organisations in Syria have distributed themselves quite well. We have regional responsibility de facto under the Government. We know what the challenge is, but we just do not have the means to implement things in a systematic way. That, I would say, is the biggest challenge.

You asked the Minister earlier about import restrictions. The impact of the sanctions, even though they have now gone, still lingers in many respects.

Q46 **Chair:** In what way?

Andrew Moore: For example, we have recently had an issue with delays in shipping metal detectors from an Australian manufacturer, while the manufacturer sought explicit reassurance from the Australian Government that they were permitted to ship them. We have a container of drones from the UK, which are vital for surveying minefields as quickly as possible, that is delayed, not because of the restrictions, but because of the due diligence of the shipping agent and the company doing the shipping. They are still uncertain of the environment. There are many more examples of this. Of course, we are not just constrained by UK sanctions; we are constrained by the sanctions that are imposed across the world.

Q47 **Janet Daby:** Andrew, you said the funding has not allowed you to act strategically, and you mentioned the six months' or year's funding. What funding would enable you to act to work strategically, and what would "strategic" look like?

Andrew Moore: The other thing is that when we receive money from pooled funds, it is often targeted and directed, so we have to fulfil specific tasks. It would be ideal if we had arrangements with donors—even if it is



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one year's funding, but ideally it would be multiple years' funding—whereby we could talk to those donors jointly about where the priorities lie, so that we can then build a project together and target that funding based on our assessment of the issues in the areas we are working in. That would be optimal.

I should also say that we are working with other organisations. You often hear talk of the triple nexus. It is quite hard to achieve for mine action organisations, because organisations in other sectors often do not want to share their resources, but we are essential to agricultural projects, health projects and the rehabilitation of schools. We have started partnerships with the UNDP, and we are talking to UNICEF, and they have recognised that the rehabilitation of schools needs explosive arms disposal specialists to enable it. We have devised a project, not funded as yet, with UNFAO. These projects do help, but it is about funding where we can guide donors in terms of how it is targeted and what the needs are.

Q48 Janet Daby: Are you able to talk to those funders about what more could be achieved with that oversight and strategic approach?

Andrew Moore: We do, but they face competing priorities.

Q49 Tracy Gilbert: Najat, what impact have escalating regional tensions had on the ability of humanitarian actors to deliver aid? Andrew just touched on the fact that shipping equipment is problematic, but I do not know if that is due to the current escalation or just a general problem.

Najat El Hamri: Regionally, as Andrew mentioned, sanctions have been an issue across a lot of humanitarian organisations in terms of shipping items—equipment, detectors. As you know, we are working with dual-use items, so it has been a major challenge for us to be able to implement our work on the ground.

Looking at the regional escalations, as Dr Ahmed mentioned earlier, we have seen large displacement of people, with more than 100,000 refugees going into Syria and trying to seek refuge and look for safety. As you know, they do not know the danger they face when they go into Syria due to the contamination that the country faces with at the moment. That is what we have been facing in trying to operate effectively.

Security has been a major constraint as well. As you know, in north-east Syria, there have recently been some escalations. Again, there is displacement in north-east Syria, and also in Aleppo. To manage our security constraints, sometimes we have to suspend our operations, because we cannot operate effectively until we are able to operate safely. That is the challenge we have been faced with at the moment.

Tracy Gilbert: Thank you. Andrew, is there anything you would like to add to the same question?



Andrew Moore: No, I would just echo Najat's points.

Q50 **David Mundell:** I should just place on the record that HALO is based in my constituency, near Thornhill, and the wider community is very supportive of its activities. Andrew, can you describe the challenges that contamination, guns and ammunition stockpiles present for rebuilding and recovery efforts in Syria?

Andrew Moore: I think it is a simplification, but I would characterise two broad issues in Syria. You have landmines, and in that I also include—they are not across the country, but they are in certain areas—improvised explosive devices used like landmines. Then you have the problem of unexploded ordnance. They are similar, but they are distinct.

There are minefields across the country and IED belts, but in particular there is huge contamination on the former frontlines in the north-west of the country, where we are seeing a particular concentration of accidents, as farmers try to cultivate their land. Those mines were laid by the forces of the Assad regime as they faced, in trench lines and bund lines, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and its allies.

The scale is enormous. Just in terms of a broad estimate of the area we need to survey, it is around 400 sq km just in the north-west, so that is a huge task in itself. That is why I mentioned that we are using drones, and we are looking to use artificial intelligence to help refine the survey before we actually put boots on the ground and to further target. That allows people, first, to know where they can work safely and where they can cultivate their land, but also where they can't and to start assessing the clearance problem.

The second issue is unexploded ordnance. That exists across the country as well. We are talking about hand grenades, artillery rounds, mortars and bombs that have not exploded as intended. They are particularly devastating in towns, villages and cities. Again, there is a bit of a concentration on the former frontlines. All the towns and cities there were flattened, and the populations were completely evacuated. You also see it in the suburbs of Damascus, in central Aleppo, and in the suburbs of Homs, Hama and Daraa. That is a problem of needing explosive specialists to deal quickly with explosive ordnance as it is found, so that individuals do not take matters into their own hands and risk injury or death, and also so that that wider reconstruction effort is not held up. Those are broadly the two challenges.

Q51 **David Mundell:** What is the scale of the casualties you are seeing? You mentioned farmers, but in other places children have been particularly badly affected by such incidents.

Andrew Moore: The first thing I will say is that there is not a complete picture on reporting, so we do not know accurately. We believe that there is huge under-reporting. Anecdotal information captured by MAG would suggest very strongly that the figures that we have are on the low side.



We do know that since the fall of the Assad regime, at least 1,900 people have been killed or injured by landmines, and 40% of those are children. It is a huge problem, and this is ongoing—it continues. The Minister described the level of the tragedy, and as more people return and move, we will just see this continue. We urgently need the means to start addressing this problem at the scale required.

Q52 David Mundell: Najat, do you want to add anything on each of those issues?

Najat El Hamri: Andrew summarised it quite well. It is true that the casualty rate is quite high. If you look at Syria specifically, in 2024 it represented 30% of the total casualties across 51 states according to the Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor. That is a huge number. As of today, UNMAS has estimated that 15 million people are at risk from unexploded ordnances.

As Andrew mentioned, we need to do those surveys. It is difficult at this moment in time to really say what the contamination is. We know in north-east Syria, because we were there, and we had a good co-ordination mechanism, but the new escalation is adding to the existing contamination. It needs time and co-ordination for us to develop those baselines and understand the scale of contamination. All we have is those casualty rates and, as I said, they keep increasing day after day across the whole country.

Q53 Brian Mathew: I have a question for both of you. Apart from yourselves—MAG and the HALO Trust—who else is involved in dealing with demining and unexploded ordnance? Is that part of the Syrian military's job? What is the split?

Najat El Hamri: At the moment, there are quite a few international humanitarian mine action organisations. We are a handful, I would say, of those organisations; as Andrew mentioned, HALO and MAG are very much specialised just in the field of clearance. Other operators are double-hatted, and do humanitarian mine action but also other activities, like livelihood. I would say that MAG and HALO are just specialised in that area in the country at the moment. We have very few operators on the ground. As you can see, the map of Syria is very large, so in terms of who is operating what and where, it is quite challenging. Just so you know, the needs are immense: we are getting endless requests from community members and various stakeholders to respond.

Then you obviously have UNMAS—the United Nations Mine Action Service—which is trying to do some co-ordination. Then you also have the national mine action centre, as explained earlier by Dr Ahmed, which is a very newly established entity and which is trying to co-ordinate. The national mine action centre needs support; we need to support them. HALO and MAG have been engaging with them constantly to understand their needs and how we can prioritise to provide institutional support and



support capacity development, as we have been doing in other parts of the globe.

We are here today. We do not know what the future is; we want to develop capacity locally so they can run the show when, at some point, we withdraw because there is enough capacity and we are confident that they are able to respond. However, as of now, we have very few operators on the ground. As Andrew mentioned, we are facing challenges in bringing in equipment. At the moment, MAG maybe has a unique advantage because we were working in north-east Syria, and we were able to bring in a lot of equipment, which makes things potentially easy. But in the long run, it is going to get even more challenging for many of us to bring in more equipment and to be able to deliver.

So the needs are big, the operators are small and the financial support is little. That is where we are at the moment.

Andrew Moore: Najat is right: the vast majority of this work is being done by the handful of international NGOs currently in Syria. There is a need to build that capacity and a desire to have it built in the national mine action centre, through the Ministry of Emergency and Disaster Management.

The worrying thing is that a lot of people are filling this void as private individuals and setting themselves up with no prior expertise to clear mines and dispose of explosives. That has the inevitable consequence not only that they are injuring and killing themselves, but that the people who are paying them to do this work are often being killed or injured in the process, or the work is not being done thoroughly and accidents are happening subsequently. I do not necessarily blame people for doing that; they are filling a void, a need and a desperate desire to rebuild houses, rebuild homes or get back on the land.

Q54 **Brian Mathew:** I remember from Mozambique that they were using intelligent rats, for example, to look for mines. Has there been any use of animals like that in this case?

Andrew Moore: Not so far, no. I think there is a huge amount of work to do on just quantifying the scale of the problem first.

Q55 **David Taylor:** I have a very quick question. Najat, you said Syria account for 30% of the casualty rate last year. Roughly, what is that in actual numbers? I am not aware of the overall casualty number.

Najat El Hamri: To give you the exact figure, as of now, since the fall of the regime, there have been 1,000 accidents, and that has resulted, as Andrew mentioned, in 1,900 casualties. That is people being killed or injured. I mentioned the landmine monitor, which is where countries track how they have been supporting work on landmines and report progress around landmines clearance. When you look at the figure in the landmine monitor report, in 2023-2024, across the 51 states that are



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reporting back, 30% of the global total of casualties—I do not have the exact number—were reported in Syria specifically.

David Taylor: Thank you.

Q56 **Chair:** Andrew, what is the average price of these things?

Andrew Moore: I will be honest, I do not know these days, but we always used to say it was a few pounds. They are very cheap to produce still, and the Assad regime did use them with abandon.

Q57 **Janet Daby:** Dr Ahmed, the Deputy Minister for Emergency and Disaster Management, said there are 1,555 camps in Syria, and the UN estimates that around 7.4 million people are internally displaced, with 3.7 million Syrian refugees remaining in neighbouring countries. Could you give me some information on what the impact is of the presence of unexploded ordnances—mines and bombs—on dealing with returning and internally displaced refugees?

Najat El Hamri: The risk, as Andrew mentioned at the beginning, is that people are not aware of the contamination. Some are quite desperate to go back. I do not want to give you random figures, but we have seen a lot of people trying to return to their home. They want to rebuild their life, they want to access their land, they want to engage in agricultural activities, and unfortunately they do not know the risk. They try themselves to disarm bombs, and we know that this is where we have those casualties.

Very often people returning to their homeland, or even in their house, are not aware of the risk of contamination. That is why MAG and HALO play that role of delivering risk education to the population, so that they really understand that if you come across unexploded ordnances, make sure you do not touch them. You need to report them, and then organisations like MAG and others will come in and clear them.

At the moment, it is a massive risk for the population who are not aware of these things, but also for those now crossing into Syria—those who are returning to Syria. Dr Ahmed mentioned his brother, and we are seeing a lot of people returning to the country. Maybe a few months after the fall of the regime, we met UNHCR in Amman, and we were told that one reason why people were frightened to go back to Syria was unexploded ordnances. They had heard that bombs were laid on the frontline and so on, so they were scared to come across those items.

Honestly, there are a lot in clinics at the moment, where people are having their legs amputated. That is because they simply do not know the risk of those contaminations. With people moving, it is really essential for us to give that message. As soon as people start moving, this is where we come in with EORE and leaflets.

Let's not forget international organisations. We are working with other humanitarian organisations for them to understand that there are



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contaminations; we also deliver that explosive ordnance risk education to them.

So it is basically a full package. You have the populations, but you also have those who are delivering humanitarian aid who are faced with these challenges with contamination. It is essential for the community to know the risk, and then for us to come and respond. Like I said, the demand has been really huge, and I just wish we could spread ourselves everywhere. If we had the funding, of course, we could have teams across the whole country, but at the moment we have some limitations, as Andrew mentioned. Over to you, Andrew, if you want to add anything.

Chair: Very briefly, please, Andrew.

Andrew Moore: Najat has described it generally very well. Specifically, if we think about the former frontlines of the north-west, everybody who is there now was displaced. There are lots of people who have not come back yet. From early after the fall of the regime, we have had families coming back. I can think of a particular story where a father took his daughter to collect firewood from their field and both were killed by a landmine. These stories have recurred.

I think of the town of Saraqib, which was bang on the frontline, where we are clearing mines. You can see exploded tractors everywhere, where people have tried to cultivate. Just around one village, in the middle of last year, I counted seven or eight tractors that had exploded—and there will have been more since. That is the impact: people being killed and injured as they return, but this is also a factor in keeping people away, as Najat describes.

Q58 **Janet Daby:** Is it a challenge to get the information to these families or to people returning to make them aware of the dangers?

Andrew Moore: That is just a question of scale. We have to remember that people who have been through hell have a somewhat different risk threshold to us. They are desperate to cultivate their land, and they will bear a risk that we perhaps would not.

Q59 **Chair:** We did a report last year, I think it was, on the deaths of aid and humanitarian workers, and one thing that came up was how difficult it was for funders to incorporate the costs of insurance and of protection and security for the people they were commissioning to do the work. Is that something you have come up against?

Andrew Moore: Not generally around the world. We have specific instances in some countries that are considered by our insurers to be particularly high risk. HALO and MAG have long track records in this work, and we have a long track record with our insurers as well. Of course, the costs are not low, but they are not prohibitive in most instances.

Q60 **Sam Rushworth:** I should draw attention to my entry in the register of



interests, having had the opportunity to be up front in Sri Lanka with the HALO Trust. The Government of Syria have set up this national mine action centre. Do you have a sense of how the FCDO could meaningfully engage and support them with that work?

Andrew Moore: I think the Minister described it really well in terms of capacity development and helping with strategy and funding. I wish that some of those organisations tasked with supporting NMAC had similar clarity, to be honest. It is a small department right now, with seven staff; they are funded, but it is going to need to be much bigger just to co-ordinate and prioritise the huge problem in Syria. That is before you start building the Syrian capacity to actually do this work in due course.

Bearing in mind those three points, I would take the last of those. It is about being a friend to Syria on the first two, but—it is not for me to determine where the Syrian Government ask for their funding priorities to be placed—I think that the national mine action centre needs a lot more staff and needs to be much bigger. I hope that donor Governments would support it directly, as well as supporting implementing partners in doing the work that HALO and MAG do currently.

Q61 **Sam Rushworth:** Is there any technical assistance that the UK could or should be providing?

Andrew Moore: Yes, there is a lot of expertise, not just in mine action but generally, that the UK could provide.

Q62 **Sam Rushworth:** Is that at the level of the FCDO, or are you suggesting working through partners like the HALO Trust and MAG?

Andrew Moore: And also the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining, and the UN as well. I think all of those should be working together, but right now it does not seem joined up.

Q63 **Sam Rushworth:** Your assessment is that there is a gap between the support needed and the support being given.

Andrew Moore: Someone needs to first grip the issue—

Q64 **Chair:** Where is that gap coming from? Is that from the Syrian Government or from the international community?

Andrew Moore: No, I think the Syrian Government are building a Government from scratch across all Departments and need all the support they can get from supporting Governments.

Q65 **Chair:** Is that a leadership role that the FCDO could step into?

Andrew Moore: I personally think so, yes. The bodies that would otherwise do it—the UN, the Geneva centre, NGOs—are a little too fragmented. A group of donors—there is the Mine Action Support Group, of international donors to mine action—could come together and provide some leadership on this issue.



Q66 **Sam Rushworth:** That is useful to know. My final question is about the degree to which the level of unexploded ordnance needs to be incorporated into humanitarian action in Syria. In terms of humanitarian programming, to what extent do actors need to take account of unexploded ordnance?

Chair: If the FCDO is doing an agriculture project, does it take into account unexploded ordinances in commissioning that project?

Najat El Hamri: Unfortunately, not always. Recently, there were some discussions with the FCDO during work on the development impact bond, where they were linking mine action with development, but that was one project in Syria. I am not sure of the status of that at the moment.

What we know historically is that, for mine action specifically, there used to be funding called GMAP—the General Mine Action Programme—for mine activities. Unfortunately, over the past year, many countries in the middle east have not been part of GMAP, including Syria at the moment. We would really like the UK Government and the FCDO to bring back GMAP and bring Syria back into this funding. This is where the gaps are at the moment.

Chair: We will ask that question. Thank you very much. Are there any more questions from Members? No? Najat and Andrew, thank you so much for all you do. Can you also pass on our appreciation to all your workers and volunteers around the world, who are literally risking their lives so that others can have a livelihood? We really appreciate what you do. Thank you very much.