



Defence Committee

Oral evidence: [Afghanistan](#), HC 994

Wednesday 12 March 2014

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 12 March 2014.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- Rt Hon Philip Hammond MP
- Lieutenant-General James Everard CBE

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Members present: Mr James Arbuthnot (Chair); Mr Julian Brazier; Mr James Gray; Mr Dai Havard; Mrs Madeleine Moon; Bob Stewart; Ms Gisela Stuart; Derek Twigg; John Woodcock

Questions 70-203

Witnesses: **Rt Hon Philip Hammond MP**, Secretary of State for Defence, and **Lieutenant-General James Everard CBE**, Deputy Chief of Defence Staff (Military Strategy and Operations), Ministry of Defence, gave evidence.

Q70 Chair: Secretary of State, General Everard, welcome to this session on our inquiry into Afghanistan. Secretary of State, we know that you have diary commitments and I am sure that it would help if we aimed at finishing this evidence session by about 4 o'clock. We may finish a little earlier or, conceivably, a little later. That depends on all of us. If I may begin by asking this: at a strategic level, how successful would you say that the ISAF operation in Afghanistan has been?

Mr Hammond: It has achieved its initial and immediate objective of degrading the ability of international terrorism to operate from the territory of Afghanistan. “Permanent” is a very strong word, but certainly in a long-term sense it has degraded the capability of AQ in Afghanistan. Indeed, it has reduced it to a fraction of its former presence. It has created the conditions in which something approximating to our view of what functioning civil governance means has been able to develop in Afghanistan, a Government that is providing basic public services to its population, transport infrastructure, security and a functioning justice system. It has overseen and provided the conditions for the creation, from scratch, of the Afghan National Security Forces where none existed before—a large and broadly capable organisation, which will be able to continue to resist the insurgency after the ISAF combat presence has ended. So, across a broad swathe of territory, I would say that the ISAF mission has achieved very considerable results.

Chair: Thank you. During the course of this afternoon we will go into the detail of all of those questions, starting with Bob Stewart.

Q71 Bob Stewart: Could you describe your view of the current political situation in Afghanistan, particularly with regard to the presidential elections?

Mr Hammond: Yes. We are definitely in electioneering mode at the moment. Everything that everybody does and says has to be viewed through the prism of elections. Let us not forget the significant achievement that that represents—this country that most people would have described as ungovernable just a few years ago is now conducting democratic elections with a fiercely fought field of candidates representing all the regions and ethnicities in the country. Inevitably, in the heat of an election campaign, sometimes the rhetoric goes beyond what we might wish and some of the messaging from some of the players has not been entirely helpful.

Q72 Bob Stewart: I have two follow-up questions. The first is, how do you think the ANSF will do at providing security? Do you have a feeling about that?

Mr Hammond: Yes, and we discussed it recently. The election will be able to be conducted; the ANSF will be able to ensure that. The vast majority of polling stations will be able to function—not, I suspect, as many as the Afghan authorities are currently predicting will be able to function, but none the less, the vast majority of polling stations. The focus needs to be on ensuring that zombie polling stations are not created. If a polling station is not going to be able to function as a polling station, that needs to be recognised and it needs to be moved or closed down. The worst outcome is lots of polling stations—

Q73 Bob Stewart: You had some evidence that that might happen, did you?

Mr Hammond: There has been some evidence in the past that there have been polling stations that electors are not able to get to in significant numbers. If there is going to be any electoral mischief it is likely to be around that type of polling station that it occurs.

Q74 Bob Stewart: The last question in this part is, how do you think the election will play in relation to our draw-down and our own operations? How will the election impact on British forces and ISAF itself?

Mr Hammond: First, the election seems to me to be a significant factor in the current inability to complete the BSA.

Chair: You will need to translate all your acronyms.

Mr Hammond: I refer to the bilateral security agreement between the United States and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the NATO status of forces agreement that will follow from it. To that extent it has created uncertainty which is deeply unhelpful. If the election produces a clear, decisive first-round result, we will be hopeful that the bilateral

security agreement and the status of forces agreement would then rapidly be completed and the impact on our overall position and our draw-down will be relatively minimal. If, however, the first round of the election is inconclusive and we find ourselves, over the summer, watching a prolonged second round of the Afghan presidential election with the BSA and the SOFA continuing to remain unsigned, then it will have a much greater impact, both in the short term, on our deployments, on our posture in Helmand and on our draw-down, and in the longer term, on what NATO is able to do, even assuming that a BSA does eventually get signed.

Q75 Bob Stewart: Our side, presumably, has it all mapped out. Is there any evidence—perhaps General Everard will know—that they have an outline plan on their side of what they require, that they have started planning for this properly so that they could execute it quite quickly, given the political will?

Mr Hammond: The BSA? The BSA is agreed.

Chair: We will come on to the bilateral security agreement.

Bob Stewart: I am thinking of the status of forces agreement too.

Q76 Chair: We will come on to both those things in due course. We are still on the elections at the moment. What are the prospects, in your mind, of the elections being free and fair? Will they be observed by independent observers?

Mr Hammond: The Afghan electoral commission will certainly be overseeing them—members of the Committee will have a view on how independent the Afghan electoral commission is. “Free” and “fair” are relative terms, I am afraid, in elections. Our perception is that each round of elections in Afghanistan is probably better than the previous one and we would hope that the elections this year will be an advance on the previous presidential elections. I think it is heading in the right direction.

Chair: Okay.

Q77 Mr Brazier: On the bilateral security agreement, although it is clearly very important that you do not make any comment on any candidate in the election, as it would be wholly inappropriate to do so, we are presumably watching. Has it become a hotly contested issue among candidates or does there seem to be a view among the cross-section of most candidates that it is a good thing?

Chair: That is a question about the elections, rather than about the bilateral security agreement. We will come on to that later.

Mr Hammond: The leading candidates—those who currently appear to be leading according to local polling—have generally indicated that they would expect to sign a bilateral security agreement. The planning assumption within NATO and elsewhere is that the BSA

will eventually get signed. The question is around the timing of that. The slippage that is implied by a two-round election is the critical challenge for ISAF.

Q78 Mrs Moon: The *Telegraph* carries a report this morning saying that diplomats are now talking of “transparent, inclusive and credible” elections rather than using the stricter formulation of free and fair. Should we be stepping back from expecting free and fair—should we just accept “transparent, inclusive and credible”?

Mr Hammond: I think “transparent, inclusive and credible” is a very good starting point. We have to be realistic, not just in Afghanistan but across a swathe of the world, about what the democratic process can deliver and what the cultural norms in a society are. We are talking about a society that is organised in a very different way to our own and transparent and inclusive is a very good starting point.

Q79 Mrs Moon: What about the risks to the candidates? We know that there have been daily attacks and daily attempts to assassinate the candidates. Are we doing anything to help protect those candidates or are we leaving it to their own private security teams?

Mr Hammond: General Everard will correct me if I am wrong here, but I think I am right in saying that the Afghan police lead on this issue. We will provide certain levels of enablement to the ANSF in terms of access to intelligence material but they will have the lead. It is very important in these elections that the security enablement for the elections, and specifically the protection for candidates, is seen to be delivered by the Afghan forces. It would present a terrible picture to the Afghan electorate, I think, if the candidates in the election were being protected by foreign troops. That is not the signal we would want to send at all.

Chair: Probably not a vote winner.

Mr Hammond: No, probably not.

Mrs Moon: And also probably not terribly secure.

Q80 Mr Gray: Secretary of State, so far you have been sensibly optimistic or hopeful, with very major caveats—in answer to the question about strategic success, for example, and indeed in your other answers so far. All observers would agree with you that we all hope that it is going to be great, but would have some worries that it might not be. Can I ask, as background, really, how you view the prospects of a long-term, sustainable and real peace settlement? Is that a realistic prospect or not?

Mr Hammond: There will be significant elements of the Taliban and the insurgency who are willing to make a compromise with the existing Government of Afghanistan, and there will be some elements who are not—just as in our own reconciliation process in Northern Ireland, the process consisted of separating the refuseniks from those who were prepared to come inside the political process. The presence of foreign troops is a very sensitive issue for those who support the insurgency, and once the combat mission and the

Afghan presidential elections are completed, I would expect there to be another window of opportunity for reconciliation led by Afghans and brokered between Afghans.

Q81 Mr Gray: So you hope to see talks between the Afghan

Taliban and the then Government, whoever that may be.

Mr Hammond: Yes; I do not believe there is a long-term sustainable future for Afghanistan that does not involve some form of compromise between the Taliban and the rest of Afghan society.

Q82 Mr Gray: Just as, in Northern Ireland, talks began on a covert basis many years before they became apparent, do you think discussions between the Afghan Taliban and the current Government are already occurring?

Mr Hammond: I can't discuss anything that might be happening covertly.

Q83 Mr Gray: I didn't think you would, but that didn't stop me asking. What about Pakistan? What sort of role do you think it will have in achieving a long-term stable peace settlement?

Mr Hammond: At the very least, we need Pakistan to passively acquiesce in a long-term reconciliation. Clearly, because of its control of border areas and areas that harbour those who transit into Afghanistan for nefarious purposes, Pakistan has the ability to destabilise and undermine a reconciliation. At the very least, it needs the passive acquiescence of the Pakistan authorities, and I use the word "authorities" in the plural. Of course, a reconciliation would be greatly facilitated by the active engagement of the Pakistani authorities and the trilateral process that the British Prime Minister has led has been designed precisely to create the atmosphere in which, on both sides of the Afghan-Pakistan border, there is recognition that both countries' best interests are served by stability in the region, and by preventing the passage of insurgents and terrorists across the border in both directions.

Q84 Mr Gray: How keen will the ISI be, and to what degree is it still a split organisation between those who would seek a reasonable negotiation with the Taliban and those who would seek to foment the Taliban?

Mr Hammond: I do not claim to be an expert on the ISI. It is clearly a very important player in the overall Pakistani structure, and sees itself as the guardian of Pakistan's strategic interest. I think our challenge in the trilateral process is to support Pakistani acceptance of the view that Pakistan's strategic interest is best served by stability in Afghanistan. Clearly, in the past there have been those whose instinct has been that Pakistan's strategic interest is served by instability in Afghanistan. That cannot be helpful.

Q85 Mrs Moon: Pakistan has a key role to play in developing its own security and that of Afghanistan in terms of the Taliban. How important will it be for Pakistan to take seriously conversations with its own Taliban—the Pakistani Taliban—and also to refuse to provide safe havens for the Afghan Taliban?

Mr Hammond: As you say, they are two separate organisations, and how the Pakistan Government chooses to engage with the Pakistani Taliban—I think the current approach would best be described as a judicious mixture of carrot and stick—is an issue for them, but to the extent that TTP—

Chair: TTP?

Mr Hammond: The Pakistani Taliban. To the extent that it is able to find safe haven on the Afghan side of the border, it must be clear that moves by the Pakistani authorities, properly co-ordinated to control the ability of Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani Network to operate on the Pakistani side of the border, would make it reasonable to expect those moves to be reciprocated by the Afghan authorities to the benefit of both countries. It is precisely that line of logic that we are seeking to persuade the Pakistanis of. We are making progress, in that it is clear that important parts of the Pakistani security apparatus are now seeing the insurgent terrorist threat to the Pakistani state as a bigger strategic threat than the traditionally viewed big threat from India. That is progress.

Q86 Mr Havard: We visited Pakistan and Afghanistan at the end of November last year. Some of this discussion came up with people there. We saw attempts by the Pakistanis themselves. Various people had negotiated with the Pakistani Taliban and we had seen that unfold. You are right that they have an internal discussion and they need their own internal peace settlement within their own country effectively, as well as one next door in Afghanistan, and then to sequence the two together. That is clearly not easy to do.

Given our role in that, a point that interested me was that the discussion among people in both Governments seemed to be about where both countries are going to be in 2023, and not in 2015. They seem to have discounted a process that was going to see the end of forces and some sort of stabilisation. In terms of what we can do to facilitate those discussions, what is going to happen about the cross-border security enablers to help them to have that stability in future? Are we going to be able to contribute to what comes after 2015?

Mr Hammond: We have already made quite good progress on the ground at cross-border communication and General Everard can talk about that. We will continue with the trilateral process. The Prime Minister is committed to it. Both the Afghans and the Pakistanis acknowledge that we have a unique position in our relationships with both countries. We can perform that role. We are clear that as long as we are in that unique position we have an obligation to try to do it.

Q87 Mr Havard: I know some of the answers to the questions I am asking. It might be useful if you could explain and put something on the record about what might be the case to help us.

Chair: General Everard.

General Everard: In the military sphere, HQ ISAF is establishing an office that will ensure that the co-ordination between the Pakistani and Afghan authorities is constructive, positive and can take place in an ordered fashion. How that construct is then handed on to the Afghans in a post-2014 construct has yet to be decided. Most people assume, as I do, that they will build on the model that they inherit. There is a good dialogue. It is building on a mechanism that has been developed, often at cross-border operations, but getting that back up to a strategic level. I think people are confident that that will endure.

Q88 Mr Havard: So in terms of cross-border control centres and all that structure and architecture that you are alluding to, we have said that we are going to have the trainers in Afghanistan, but there is a whole thing about how we assist any other enablers. Is that one of the areas that we would look to see whether we are going to have practical involvement as well as having set up the concepts and just handed them over?

General Everard: Down on the border there is no intention to have UK force elements enabling this process; nor do we believe that the Afghan Government want that. The co-ordination function back in Kabul, yes, we will help enable, certainly up to 31 December. We will see what will happen after that.

Q89 Chair: General Everard, were you talking about ATU ISAF?

General Everard: Headquarters.

Q90 Chair: HQ. Right. May I just ask one final question about Pakistan, although there might be others later? This is one of the most important regions of the world. Pakistan has significant links to this country. What happens in Pakistan is immediately felt in this country and vice versa. Is there a risk that our withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan might reduce the focus that we give and the attention that we pay after 2014 to Pakistan—a country that is of huge importance to this country? If there is that risk, what can we do to guard against it?

Mr Hammond: I don't think there is that risk, because the importance of Pakistan in the eyes of the system here is largely driven by the perceived threat to the UK from terrorism emanating from the Federally Administered Tribal Areas in north-east Pakistan. That is the key, self-interested reason we have for our focus on Pakistan. We are also, of course, very clear that the successful development of Pakistan as a state and as an economy is important to us because of the huge links that we have, through the Pakistani diaspora in the UK, with Pakistan. I don't think there is any risk of a diminution in focus on Pakistan, but I will say that of course emerging events in Syria slightly dilute the unipolar focus. If you had asked me this question 18 months ago, I would have been able to say without hesitation that the greatest threat of terrorism to the UK emanated from the FATA. It is now much more balanced between the threats we see in Syria and the threats in the traditional area of the FATA.

Q91 Chair: But if we look at it now from the point of view of your National Security Council role, rather than from the point of view of threats, maybe there is an opportunity for the United Kingdom to play a part in dialogue with Pakistan, perhaps in the context of its relations with India, because we have good friendships in both those countries. Would you agree with that?

Mr Hammond: Just for clarity, the National Security Council is very much engaged with looking at threats to the homeland as part of its work.

Q92 Chair: Yes, I know. I was just trying to move the conversation on.

Mr Hammond: Yes, it's an interesting question: could the UK play a proactive role in bringing about greater co-operation and reconciliation between India and Pakistan? There have been some very encouraging signs since the current Pakistani Government took office. Of course, the fact that elections are currently ongoing in India means that that process is effectively on hold until after the Indian elections.

We would always want to do everything we could to support and encourage dialogue between two such important, and nuclear-armed, countries, but I think we should be cautious about expecting that we can play a very significant role. These are two countries that will have to work together to make this work. We have good relationships with both countries and we have a deep-rooted relationship with the security organisations in Pakistan, but our relationships with the Indians are of a different type, and I think it would be presumptuous of us to think that we could play a major role in, as it were, bringing India and Pakistan to the table together.

Chair: I see. Thank you.

Q93 Derek Twigg: Secretary of State, how would you describe the security situation in Helmand compared with the rest of Afghanistan at present?

Mr Hammond: Some of the central and northern Helmand districts are among the most kinetic in the country and have been for a long time, so on an absolute basis, Helmand is still a dangerous place in the Afghan context, but over time the situation has become much more secure, much safer. Opinion polling of the population shows that people feel much safer now. The number of enemy-initiated incidents is down. The security situation, in objective terms, is better than it has been for many years, but Helmand is still a dangerous part of the country compared with the rest of Afghanistan.

Q94 Derek Twigg: Are the numbers of Afghan security force personnel killed and wounded in the past 12 months higher or lower compared with the previous 12 months?

Mr Hammond: Do you have the figures for that? It is higher, I am sure.

General Everard: I do. The number of Afghan army personnel killed between 2012 and 2013 is 49% higher. Of course, they have gone into the lead in security whereas they were not in the lead before.

Q95 Derek Twigg: What are the actual numbers of killed and wounded?

General Everard: Actual numbers killed in 2012 were just under 1,300, so about 2% of the total attrition rate is killed in action.

Q96 Derek Twigg: And what was it in 2013?

General Everard: I have got the rolling data for 2013, which show that to date, over the past two months, the ANA actual monthly attrition rate is 2.2%.

Derek Twigg: That is similar.

General Everard: Yes.

Derek Twigg: So despite the security situation, we have previously had a high attrition rate—

Mr Hammond: Just to put that in context, I think I am right in saying that expressed as a percentage of the total force, this is still broadly comparable to or even lower than the ISAF killed in action rate at the height of the campaign.

General Everard: Correct.

Q97 Derek Twigg: May I just continue with the security situation? We had an exchange on the Floor of the House about Sangin and whether the stories about the Afghan security forces patrolling jointly with the insurgents—the “Taliban”—were true, and I think your answer was that we have had no definitive evidence of that. That raises two questions. First, is that still your view? If it is, unless you can rule such action out completely, does it not worry you that local commanders on the ground do not have a handle on what is going on?

Mr Hammond: Okay. I think I said in my quarterly statement in February that senior Afghan commanders and political leaders do not recognise any arrangement such as joint patrols, and that they have taken steps to ensure that nothing that could be misinterpreted as a joint arrangement on the ground will happen in future. Where anything that looks as though it might be interpreted in that way has occurred, they have taken action to stop it.

Q98 Derek Twigg: So that means that it did happen, then?

Mr Hammond: I do not know. I cannot answer that question.

Q99 Derek Twigg: You just said that they took action to stop anything that might have looked like that.

Mr Hammond: What I am saying is that there is no senior-level condoning or supporting of anything of this kind. Junior commanders are being made aware that they must not do anything that might be construed or misrepresented as any kind of collaborative or joint patrolling behaviour, and where anything is happening that might be construed in that way, I am told, action is being taken to ensure that it stops.

Q100 Derek Twigg: So actually there is no definitive answer that it did not take place. What you have said is that they are looking at ensuring that anything that could be construed—what could be construed as being joint patrolling between insurgents and Afghan security force personnel?

Mr Hammond: We are talking about a part of Afghanistan where there are no British forces regularly present, such as Sangin. I am reporting to you the response of senior Afghans to the challenge, “It has been reported that something that looks like a joint patrol may have occurred.” The answer is, “We do not condone it. We will not allow it. We have given clear instructions that it must not happen—not just the fact of it but anything that might give rise to the impression.”

Q101 Derek Twigg: So were they asked to investigate it and see whether it did happen?

Mr Hammond: As far as I am aware, they have investigated the reported incident.

Q102 Derek Twigg: And they found?

Mr Hammond: As far as I am aware, there is no evidence that this incident occurred, but the senior Afghan authorities are clear that they are not condoning it and they have given instructions to make sure that nothing that could be construed in that way happens.

Q103 Derek Twigg: So you are fairly confident that it never happened?

Mr Hammond: Look, I am not there; I am here.

Q104 Derek Twigg: That is why I am asking you the question. These are quite important issues.

Mr Hammond: I have seen no evidence.

Q105 Derek Twigg: In terms of future security, I have two questions. First, do you have any evidence that the insurgency might want to step up their actions in the remaining nine months of this year on the basis that they want to make sure that it looks very much like the British and Americans were driven out? Therefore, stepping up their kinetic activity in whatever form might be part of the strategy during the next nine months. Please reassure me if not, but if so, are you fairly confident that that can be dealt with?

Mr Hammond: I think in your question you said “might want”—that they “might want to”. I am sure they would want to. I think the issue is their capability. We think that they are doing what they can. We have had repeated reports of edicts from Quetta telling people to step up the pace and increase the pressure. The evidence is that they have not been able to do that on a sustained basis. What we can expect is that the capability that the Taliban does have is being focused towards disrupting the election process at the moment. Once the elections are out of the way, we can expect that the full force of that will be directed back at ISAF forces.

Q106 Derek Twigg: My second question on this point, before I come back to the agreement, is this. In terms of your confidence and what your intelligence tells you, are you confident that, post 2014, we will not see a significant increase in the area of Helmand that the Taliban insurgency control over what they control now?

Mr Hammond: I think I have said to this Committee, and I have certainly said in the House before, that the Afghans will have a different set of priorities and a different approach to doing their business than ISAF has. Their sense of what is strategically important will be different from ours and they may deploy their resources differently. They may apply pressure in places that we have regarded as not being areas where we want to expend heavy resources. They may focus less on some areas that we have sought to hold. I cannot say that the pattern on the ground won't change. I can be pretty confident that things will be done in a different way post 2014. We look at a range of outcomes, obviously, but I think the central expectation is that the ANSF will hold the insurgency in check, albeit in a different way from the way ISAF in the past has held it in check. The pattern on the ground will be broadly the same, with the Government controlling the important population centres, the important economic infrastructure and the main land routes within the country.

Q107 Derek Twigg: I think what I take from the start of your answer is that you do not believe that they will put as much effort into controlling Helmand, or certain parts of Helmand, as is currently the case. That is what you said.

General Everard: I think the point on prioritising is a very good one, but for the deployed Afghan army corps there at the moment, they are investing their resources for the long haul. Regional hospitals are being constructed. All the infrastructure going there indicates that, as far as they are concerned, they are staying and they are holding that territory. I agree with the Secretary of State that post 2014 they will be faced with strategic choices and their Government will decide where they want their forces to concentrate effort.

Mr Hammond: I think you've got to remember that the complication in Helmand is that it is an economically very important area, but it is economically important at least in

significant part because of an illegal trade which involves huge amounts of money. We are not just dealing with an insurgency. We are dealing with a complex, criminal mafia and the way in which the Afghans deal with that complex interaction of political insurgency and vast cash-generating criminal activity will be different from the way that we have dealt with it in the past.

Q108 Ms Stuart: I want to return to these joint patrols. You are quite right, proving a negative is really difficult, and you are also absolutely right when you say that you are here, not there. But it was the *Daily Mirror* on 21 December which had a picture, and the caption of that picture said: “Not over yet: Afghan National Army (ANA) soldiers and Taliban jointly patrol areas in the Sangin district of southern Helmand province.” If you say you have exhausted all the means by which you could prove that negative—that it did not happen—it would be useful for us to tell us how you did that. Did you challenge that newspaper report?

Mr Hammond: First of all, I wouldn’t believe everything you read in the *Daily Mirror*.

Q109 Ms Stuart: It is a picture. It is a serious story, which I think requires a serious response.

Mr Hammond: Okay. What do you mean by joint patrolling? What does joint patrolling mean? What is the picture?

Q110 Ms Stuart: Well, the picture shows some Afghan National Army soldiers and Taliban, and they are holding some pretty interesting-looking equipment, which looks pretty dangerous to me, very closely together.

Mr Hammond: How do we know they are Taliban? This is an area with all sorts of criminal elements operating in it.

Q111 Ms Stuart: I am asking you, if we are concerned, if you are clear that this is something that should not happen, could we—

Mr Hammond: We are absolutely clear it is something which should not happen, and we have—

Q112 Ms Stuart: So in order to remedy that, it is important to establish the baseline. If the baseline is, “It was reported, but we have no evidence,” I would just like one or two more sentences on how you satisfied yourself it was a negative. However, if the baseline is that it did happen and you had to put a stop to it, I would have thought it would have required a slightly more robust response.

Mr Hammond: I think the problem is this. This was reported to have happened in an area which we do not control; there is no British presence on the ground. Because of the reports that we received, we took this up with the Afghan authorities. It was investigated, and the conclusion was that they could not be sure that it had happened, as I understand it. It was inconclusive.

General Everard: I think the response was that if it had happened, it had been localised.

Q113 Ms Stuart: So it would have been the equivalent of the Scottish “not proven”, but that is not as much as saying it did not happen.

Mr Hammond: The point is that the situation on the ground—

Q114 Chair: I don’t think you have ever said that it didn’t happen; you have said that you had no evidence.

Mr Hammond: We focused instead—we have tried to—you know, to be honest, Afghanistan is not Britain or Scotland. We are talking about a much more confused situation on the ground at local level, and we have focused on getting the assurance, first of all, that there is no endorsement of this kind of activity. I remember when this story first broke, the spin that was put on it was, “Are the Afghans doing deals with the Taliban?” We needed to be reassured that that was not the case—that there was no endorsement of any kind of local arrangements or anything like that. We got that reassurance. We got a reassurance that any incidents of the nature reported here, if they were identified, would be dealt with robustly, and that the word would go out to commanders that there would be no tolerance of any kind of relaxation at local level in any way. I think since that incident I have heard nothing further reported of anything that was interpreted by anybody as any kind of joint patrolling or local compromises.

Q115 Ms Stuart: Did your press office pick up the phone, ring up the *Daily Mirror* and say, “Look, you have juxtaposed just two photographs here. You have run a headline that is pretty incendiary. Could you kindly desist from running speculative stories of this type?” If so, what was their response?

Mr Hammond: Do we pick up the phone and say to the *Daily Mirror*, “Would you please desist from running speculative stories?”

Q116 Ms Stuart: Secretary of State, it is a legitimate question.

Mr Hammond: I’m not sure whether we did or not, but—

Q117 Ms Stuart: So it is a legitimate question. So you took the story; you could not prove that it did not happen; you hope it didn't; and you took a robust response to this, whatever the circumstances. Is that fair?

Mr Hammond: I have to be clear. This is something that is alleged to have happened in a district in which there is no British presence, for which we have no responsibility.

Q118 Derek Twigg: Secretary of State, the problem, which you seem to be completely ignoring, is that so many of our personnel were killed and wounded there. It matters a lot to the people of this country.

Mr Hammond: Indeed, but—

Q119 Derek Twigg: You just said it is not our responsibility any more.

Mr Hammond: Well, we have taken it up with the Afghan authorities, as I have made clear, and we have got the assurances we wanted from them. But trying to go back in history in Afghanistan to establish what happened on a certain day in the past—you have been there; you know what it is like. This is not a question of going and checking the records in the local police station. Who are we going to ask?

Q120 Derek Twigg: You are saying that you know it is not happening today. You are confident it is not happening today?

Mr Hammond: I have heard no further reports of anything that is even capable of being presented as a possible recurrence of anything like this.

General Everard: We have just had the war game for the elections and had people out at all these places. There are definitely no deals like that going on.

Chair: I think we want to move on to the bilateral security agreement, which we have been meaning to ask questions about all the time.

Q121 Derek Twigg: Secretary of State, you made the valid point that clearly, while it is not signed, there is a degree of uncertainty and that is a problem. What impact is that uncertainty having on our involvement and our future commitment?

Mr Hammond: At the moment, it is not having any direct impact, though clearly nobody likes uncertainty. Because our expected presence post-2014 is well defined and based in the vicinity of Kabul, primarily at the Afghan national officer academy, the impact on us at the moment is limited. Where the impact is more significant is on those nations that are proposing to provide troops for the so-called hub and four-spoke model of Operation Resolute Support—the mission, post 2014, where the scenario of an inconclusive first round, and possibly no definitive president emerging until perhaps as late as September or October, presents them with very real challenges. If a BSA were not signed, they would then have a

very short period of time to get what would still be quite significant numbers of troops out of the country before 31 December.

Q122 Derek Twigg: I think you said that you were fairly confident that, if a new Government is voted in first time, whoever the president will be, they will sign the agreement fairly quickly. Why do you feel so confident that that will happen?

Mr Hammond: Because, first of all, there is a broad degree of consensus in Afghanistan around this bilateral security agreement. It has been endorsed by a Loya Jirga, which was called last October/November, and all the leading presidential candidates have indicated that they think it is in Afghanistan's interests to sign it.

Q123 Derek Twigg: We are talking about Afghanistan here and nothing else?

Mr Hammond: We are.

Q124 Derek Twigg: But you remain confident because there are clear indications that they will sign it if they are elected?

Mr Hammond: The working assumption of all the ISAF nations is that it will be signed, but we recognise that that is not a certainty. That is our central planning assumption, but we are also planning for alternative outcomes.

Q125 Derek Twigg: My final question follows on from that. You know the history of Afghanistan and Governments. The Russians did it and then left after five or six years. Then they collapse and we have a whole new insurgency situation. How long do you see us being involved in Afghanistan in terms of providing support after 2017 and so forth? How would you see us involved in supporting Afghanistan and its Government to remain stable and keep away the insurgency?

Mr Hammond: I think the lesson of history is that it is the withdrawal of funding that prompted the collapse.

Q126 Derek Twigg: I am talking about resources, yes.

Mr Hammond: So I think the commitments that have been made by the international community to fund, particularly the maintenance of the ANSF after 2014 and to continue to provide economic assistance and development aid, are the crucial ones. So long as those commitments remain in place, so long as there is a willingness by the international community to support the Afghan Government, they will be able to maintain—

Q127 Derek Twigg: How long do you feel—

Mr Hammond: That will depend on what happens.

Q128 Derek Twigg: Have you got any dates?

Mr Hammond: Look, if there is continued progress in Afghanistan—obviously, if there is reconciliation or the beginnings of reconciliation, there will be, I would imagine, a strong willingness on the part of the international community to support that. If there is progress in developing the Afghan economy, if there is continued progress in developing human rights, in particular if there is no regressive tendency in relation to women's rights after the end of 2014, all of these things make it more likely that the international community will be willing and able to continue its involvement in Afghanistan. Clearly, a failure by the Afghans to live up to the commitments they have made to the international community will make that more difficult.

Q129 Chair: Do those commitments include respecting and honouring the rights of women?

Mr Hammond: They do, as guaranteed by the Afghan constitution.

Q130 Chair: Before we move off this subject, does anybody have further questions about the bilateral security agreement? I have one or two. The bilateral security agreement is bilateral between the United States and the Afghan Government. Am I right in thinking—let us be absolutely clear—that if there is no bilateral security agreement between those two countries, there will be no academy helped by the British forces?

Mr Hammond: There will be no British forces on the ground in Afghanistan if there is no bilateral security agreement.

Q131 Chair: Okay. How soon would you expect decisions to be made about that, as the decisions on the bilateral security agreement go forward? How soon would you expect there to be a complete pulling of the plug on all British forces on the ground?

Mr Hammond: If I may say so, the question is the other way around.

Q132 Chair: It is a bit vague, I admit.

Mr Hammond: What is the latest date? How long can we wait for a BSA before we have to assume that there won't be one? That is probably the question.

Q133 Chair: That is much better phrased. Why don't you come and join us?

Mr Hammond: This is a moving feast. It is something that the military are very focused on, and clearly, as we have run into this current challenge, with the current President making it look increasingly unlikely that he will sign a BSA before the election, military planners have gone into overdrive to push back as far as possible the point at which we have to assume there won't be a BSA.

Q134 Chair: How far back have they got it?

Mr Hammond: If you don't mind, Chairman, I do not want to be precise, but we are definitely beyond the summer, to the point which we think is the latest realistic time—the worst realistic case for a victor emerging from a two-stage presidential electoral process, which is probably some time in September.

Q135 Chair: Okay. So we have a bilateral security agreement; let us assume that that happens. How soon after that would a status of forces agreement between the Afghan Government and the remainder of ISAF happen?

Mr Hammond: I think something between one minute and one week later. We expect it to be pretty much simultaneous.

Q136 Chair: Is the wording already agreed between the Afghan Government and ISAF forces?

General Everard: Because it is not signed, it would not surprise me if it were changed, but there are drafts that people have accepted for both the BSA and the SOFA.

Q137 Chair: Would it be right to think that, if there were any significant disparity between the bilateral security agreement and the status of forces agreement, that would be a game changer?

Mr Hammond: No, I do not think that is right. The bilateral security agreement covers territory that the status of forces agreement will not cover. The United States will be seeking permissions in its bilateral agreement to do things that NATO forces will not want to do as part of Resolute Support. So the United States will continue to have a US-only mission in Afghanistan, alongside its contribution to Resolute Support after 31 December 2014, and they will need permissions for those activities in the BSA.

Q138 Chair: Will the indemnities for British forces be as strong as the indemnities for United States forces?

Mr Hammond: Yes, because it will not be indemnities so much as specific ceding of jurisdiction over British forces to the NATO or British authorities.

Q139 Mr Havard: The status of forces agreement will be with ISAF. Currently, we have a situation—

Mr Hammond: It will be with NATO.

Q140 Mr Havard: Exactly. This was part of my question. Originally, all of this came out of UN resolutions and all the rest. Let me be clear that we would have the bilateral agreement with the US—

Mr Hammond: The Afghans will have a bilateral agreement.

Q141 Mr Havard: That is their issue. If their bilateral is established, the others will follow, and the NATO agreement will follow. That would presumably be underpinned legally in terms of the law and effectiveness. Does it mean an agreement between NATO and Afghanistan? Because the ISAF coalition is broader than NATO.

Mr Hammond: It is, and I had this discussion with my Australian counterpart yesterday. He confirmed that Australia will expect to be a signatory to the NATO status of forces agreement, so it will be available to the NATO partner nations as well.

Q142 Mr Havard: That is very helpful because the last time we had a discussion with President Karzai about this there were lots of bilaterals. Is there going to be a British bilateral as well?

Mr Hammond: I don't believe we intend to have bilateral agreements.

Q143 Mr Havard: So the only agreement that we will have will be part of the NATO status of forces agreement?

Mr Hammond: Everything that we require is included in the status of forces agreement.

Q144 Mr Havard: So it is encapsulated in that, right. That is very helpful. Thank you. The timing of what you have just described seems to take us towards the NATO summit in September at a time at which a lot of decisions will have to be made. The planning assumptions and work can go on. The countries that are going to submit forces to the fielded force, or whatever it is called, the hub and spoke element of it, have more difficulty than we do, quite clearly. We said that earlier. They are going to need some certainty by then presumably. The significance of all of this for the NATO summit is very important, is it not?

Mr Hammond: It is, and Afghanistan will clearly be an important subject at the NATO summit. Depending on the outcome of the presidential election and the progress in completing the bilateral security agreement and the status of forces agreement, that will of course set the tone for the NATO summit.

I think there is something else that I should draw the Committee's attention to. When President Obama spoke a few weeks ago about the delay in completing the BSA, he also said, importantly, that the longer it is delayed, the smaller the number of US troops available is likely to be. That in itself will have an impact on the hub and four spokes.

There is a possible outcome, which is not the zero option with no SOFA and no BSA, but a BSA and a SOFA concluded so late that the number of troops committed by the United States effectively dictates an alternative posture to the hub and four spokes. That would raise some questions for some of the intending troop-contributing countries, who are very focused on providing one of the spokes—Germany and Italy in particular.

Q145 Mr Havard: Well, quite, and then there is the whole question about future arrangements for falling back and pooling and sharing in NATO that would extend from that for other activities.

Mr Hammond: Yes.

Q146 Mrs Moon: You talked about September as probably being an end date for something to be signed.

Mr Hammond: Worst case.

Q147 Mrs Moon: Yes, but President Karzai has now indicated that his hands will be prised off the presidential seal, but he intends to stay on in a handover capacity, possibly until as late as November. Do you see that duality about who is going to be running Afghanistan going on as late as November as adding to the difficulties of getting any agreement signed? What is the current view of the legality of that?

Mr Hammond: Well, I was going to start with that. I am not an expert on the Afghan constitution, but I am not aware of a provision for any transitional hand-holding role for the ex-President. To answer your question, self-evidently if there were two people seeking to exercise power simultaneously that could only complicate the situation. I am not aware of any provision that would make that legal. I have no doubt that President Karzai sees himself as having some figurehead role in the nation beyond the presidential election and will expect to continue to be a figure of some considerable, if informal, influence.

Chair: Moving on to the issue of narcotics, John Woodcock.

Q148 John Woodcock: What is the Government's current assessment of the narcotics trade in the country?

Mr Hammond: As you will know, the crop figures from Helmand have been disappointing in the most recent season—disappointing from the point of view of counter-narcotics, not from the point of view of Helmand poppy farmers—so we have to acknowledge that the poppy trade is alive and well in Afghanistan.

Q149 John Woodcock: Is it fair to say that this part of the mission was well-intentioned, but has turned out to be an abject failure?

Mr Hammond: I do not think that I would describe it as an abject failure. Progress has been made, but in the last year there was slippage in the erosion of the crop. Clearly there have been different demands for the focus of resources. If there is a resolution to the insurgency and some kind of reconciliation in Afghanistan, it will then, I think, be easier to tackle the poppy problem.

Q150 John Woodcock: But if we are saying that it is not a complete failure, General Everard, on a technical level, is there anything you can point towards to say that it could be worse than it is?

General Everard: I think it could be worse.

Q151 John Woodcock: In what way?

General Everard: There is now an Afghan institution capable of dealing with it in its own way. Last time I came, the main problem was the fact that there are no alternative livelihoods. If you are trying to combat an insurgency in the rural areas and you seek to remove their livelihood, you are simply adding to the numbers who join the insurgency, so I think it is a sequencing problem.

Q152 John Woodcock: We all understand the difficulty of this, but it is important.

Mr Hammond: There is a counter-narcotics operation going on and we provide enabling support to the Afghan-led counter-narcotics operation. Clearly things would be worse if there was not a counter-narcotics operation

Q153 John Woodcock: Not clearly, though. You have to state that—it would be useful if you could provide some evidence—but it is not the case that it could clearly be worse.

Mr Hammond: Okay, let me see what evidence we could provide. The only evidence that I think we could provide is around the results of counter-narcotic activity in terms of arrests, detentions, crop destructions and so on. I am not sure what the classification of that material is. Let me have a look to see if there is anything that we could provide. I am not arguing that this is a perfect outcome. There is too much poppy being grown and too much poppy is surviving, but it seems to me that the level of counter-narcotics activity must be making a positive impact from what would be a far worse problem if that activity was not going on.

Q154 John Woodcock: Okay, thank you. The US inspector general for Afghanistan reconstruction has made it clear that the potential for Afghanistan to fall into the status of narco-state could undo all the progress that has been made on these other issues. Is that an assessment that you accept?

Mr Hammond: I certainly do not want to criticise or contradict someone who has probably studied this in more much depth than me. I have already drawn attention to the complex relationship between criminal activity and political insurgency activity in Afghanistan. Clearly the availability of large sums of illegal money, which require protection and patronage to be realised, always creates the risk of the state being undermined.

Q155 John Woodcock: But you will understand that we have a picture of you saying in this evidence session that the Afghans' priorities may be different and that our priorities have been inhibiting the trade in narcotics, but their priorities may be less so. You have admitted that it has been, at best, disappointing and you have not yet been able to provide evidence of any level of success. You have the expert on the ground saying that if this situation continues, everything will fail. That is a pretty bleak picture, isn't it?

Mr Hammond: I don't think that is quite the quote that you read out, but there is a risk.

Q156 John Woodcock: A risk.

Mr Hammond: There is a risk; that is self-evidently true. There is a risk. There are lots of risks in Afghanistan. One of the things that the international community will be very clear about is that if it is going to support the Afghan Government financially, it will expect that Government to pursue a robust counter-narcotics strategy.

Q157 John Woodcock: Yes, but as a final point, this is summarised as: it is not doing well at the moment; there is going to be less priority, so it is going to get worse; and the experts say that that could be a disaster. Yet you say that you are optimistic for the future situation in Helmand.

Mr Hammond: I did not say that there was going to be less priority on narcotics; I said that the Afghans will set their own priorities. It is partly for us as aid donors to shape the priority that they place on things that are important to us, including counter-narcotics.

Q158 Chair: Do you think that the withdrawal of tens of thousands of ISAF troops will make it easier or more difficult for the Afghan Government to get on top of the narcotics problem?

General Everard: Harder for the Taliban. Part of the Taliban's narrative has been fighting Western forces. Once we have gone, that narrative disappears and it is much more difficult for them to carry the fight in the way they have against the current Government. I

hope that one of the things we will see as Western forces leave is a drop in support for the Taliban across the country.

Mr Hammond: On the specifics of narcotics, we do provide support and enablement to the specialist Afghan units that are targeted at the narcotics trade and that are becoming, notwithstanding the evidence of continued substantial illegal trade, increasingly effective. We will hope and expect that, by the time we leave, they will have acquired the skills and experience necessary to carry on that work.

Q159 Mr Gray: Do you not accept that this was part of the mission—if it was part of the mission—that was doomed to failure from the start? The growing has been a central part of the Afghan economy for hundreds—probably thousands—of years. The likelihood of us or anybody else ever eliminating it in the way that at one stage we thought we were going to was daft. Even if we had eliminated it by some magic—if we had napalmed the whole of southern Afghanistan—all that would have happened would have been that the supply would have come from China, Thailand or somewhere else, so it would not actually reduce the number of people in south London taking heroin. Was it not a diversion from our main mission in the first place?

Mr Hammond: I think that is a slightly different question from the prevalence of heroin in south London.

Mr Gray: It is.

Mr Hammond: Again, I am not an expert. The International Development Secretary could probably give a lot more useful information about this. My understanding is that most of the poppy is grown outside the legally irrigated areas in Helmand—in illegally irrigated areas—and there is therefore an irrigation infrastructure on which this crop is dependent, so it isn't just about destroying crops; it is about destroying and disrupting the infrastructure that supports them. I suspect that that makes it a slightly more manageable challenge than in countries where irrigation is natural and the destruction of the actual crop itself is required annually.

Q160 Mrs Moon: Talking about the irrigation infrastructure, it was very helpful that Camp Bastion had an irrigation infrastructure that allowed water to drain off the base to provide a poppy field right up to the actual fence, which the Taliban were able to cut their way through to get into the base. Would you not agree that we were sending mixed messages, given our lead on the eradication of poppy, by allowing poppy fields to grow right up to the very edge of our base?

Mr Hammond: I think we have already acknowledged that, with the benefit of hindsight, allowing any kind of cover—whether settlements or crops—up to the fence was not good practice. I believe they were eradicated shortly after that weakness was identified.

Q161 Mrs Moon: But we did have—and we sought—the lead on poppy eradication.

General Everard: We had it initially and then we—

Q162 Chair: We did, and then I think we tried to get rid of it as quickly as possible.

Mr Hammond: But I am clear that it is now an Afghan lead. It is the provincial governor's lead and it is something that he takes a great interest in. I have discussed it directly with him. He has produced his own plan for eradication, or at least reduction, in the province.

Q163 Mrs Moon: On a scale of one to 10, with one being absolutely useless and 10 being absolutely fantastic, how effective do you think the ANSF have been in actually ensuring security in Afghanistan since they took over?

Mr Hammond: I think they have been pretty good and they are getting better. Asking my opinion is probably not the best test; the best test is to look at the polling data of Afghan citizens, particularly those in Helmand. Some 70% of Afghans feel safe going out in the daytime, and 80% of Helmandis.

General Everard: There has been a groundswell of support for what the security forces are doing. I think—I genuinely mean this—from what we initially expected them to do in terms of getting momentum when they first took over control for security to where they are now has impressed us all, not just with ground operations, but with their fledgling air capability. You can look at the tempo of operations that they are running out to shape for the elections. Our chief of joint operations came back from theatre the other day to say that Com ISAF had himself stood up and said that this surpassed anything he had expected to see, so I think they are doing an excellent job.

In terms of the polling, confidence in the performance of the ANSF now sits at 88%, and even the ANA is at 88%. Confidence in the police sits at 72%, which is lower, but that is up 5% from last year, so they are going in the right direction.

Mr Hammond: And they are leading 97% of all operations, which is a quite significant achievement.

Q164 Mrs Moon: General Everard, can you tell me how you would place them on that scale of one to 10?

General Everard: I think I would place them, on our expectations, at about a seven at the moment.

Q165 Mrs Moon: What are the challenges that they are going to still face?

Mr Hammond: She is definitely looking at you.

Mrs Moon: That doesn't mean my eyes can't switch.

General Everard: They have two challenges. One is that their attrition rates are too high, and we have talked a bit about that. The army has a total strength of 170,000—they are slightly over that strength at the moment—but their attrition rate should be 16%. It is sitting at about 32% at the moment, so they are turning over 58,000 people a year, which is far too high. Every Western army has a turnover of about 10% to 14%, but 32% is too high. We have talked a bit about that. It is not a problem of killed or wounded in action; it is a problem of retaining the core when they go on leave and so on. People are working very hard on that.

The other area, which I think is less of a problem than we thought it was going to be, is closing the capability gap in those key enabler areas, such as intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition, medical and logistics. We had expected to maintain logistic support through to our brigade in southern Helmand until we left. We have stopped doing it because they have reached a level of proficiency that no longer requires it.

I also think—I think I said this last time—what we have learned is that Afghans operating in Afghanistan, who speak the language, do not require the same level of sophisticated ISTAR that we ourselves have used, and their human intelligence pick-up and feed is wholly better than ours ever was, which allows them to do operations in a different way, but with the same effect.

Q166 Mrs Moon: If I can go back to my scale of one to 10—I will ask you both—how confident do you feel that they will be able to maintain security after we pull out, and where is it now?

Mr Hammond: As I have already said, I think where it is now can be slightly misleading. It can make it a slightly misleading question, because they may choose a different profile from the one that they are currently operating post the election. If there are moves to reconciliation, that may change the posture and the profile yet again. In the short term, so looking at 2015, I would feel confident—seven to eight on your scale—that they will be able to maintain security. Clearly the further out we go, the lower that confidence must become, because there are more imponderables and unknowns that will affect it, but in the period immediately after our withdrawal, I would expect them to be able to continue to deliver security much as it is delivered now.

Q167 Mrs Moon: But do you see that capacity declining as time goes on?

Mr Hammond: You asked about the level of confidence, not their capacity. Clearly I have a better insight into what the situation is likely to be in January 2015 than I do in January 2016, so my level of confidence must decline about anything over time, simply because I cannot see into the future. But looking at the near term, there is no sense—I get this very much from talking to our military colleagues—that there is any risk of a cliff edge when we complete our combat mission. There will be a relatively smooth transition. They will do things differently but, as General Everard said, to the same broad effect.

Q168 Mrs Moon: You would agree with that.

General Everard: I would absolutely agree with that. I think we will see tactical setbacks, but I think that they have shown the resilience to overcome those and I think we will see a solid level of security. You see this certainly in the fact that the Taliban are nervous about this. They don't believe they can over-match this army, so they are having to rethink their tactics.

Q169 Mrs Moon: We have taken evidence from other people, particularly previous ambassadors to Afghanistan—

Mr Hammond: Previous ambassadors?

Mrs Moon: Yes, former ambassadors, who have placed the possibility of the country's descent into civil war as extremely high. Do we take it that you are confident that there will not be a descent into civil war?

Mr Hammond: I personally would not expect that. There is already a robust insurgency; I don't see anything that would indicate that the insurgency would be able to move that up to civil war. They will have lost the recruiting sergeant of infidel troops, which has been an important one for them. We already believe they are throwing everything they have got at this in repeated attempts at surges. They have no reserves, as far as we can see, and their message becomes more difficult to deliver when they are inviting insurgency against Afghan forces under the control of a democratically elected Afghan Government. So, no, I don't see that being the outcome.

Q170 Mrs Moon: General Everard, you commented that there had been improvements in terms of support and enablers such as medical evacuation, air cover and so on. What is your assessment of the civilian Government's capacity to maintain the key enablers such as pay? There was a period at the end of last year and the beginning of this where the Afghan police were not paid for two months. The money was in the country; they just did not have a bureaucracy.

General Everard: When we had the Afghan Defence Minister across, I think about six months ago, he talked about two priorities. One was working on attrition rates and instilling this as a central core of leadership, which they have done with their structure across battalion, brigade and corps level which focuses on attrition. The other one was simple administration and ensuring that they got the pay to the person at the right time. So I am absolutely reassured that at the highest levels of the Afghan MOD and Government, they recognise that if you don't get this right, soldiers will not continue to soldier, and that could be an Achilles heel. I am pretty confident that they will focus effort on it.

To return to your previous point, I recognise those ambassadorial comments, but I think Afghanistan is genuinely a country where what was true yesterday is not true today. I think the growth in the Afghan national security forces has been greater than anyone would have imagined over the course of the last eight months. They are a different beast from those that many of those ambassadors would have seen.

Q171 Derek Twigg: To follow on from Madeleine, could you update us on your view? When we went to Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bastion and talked to a senior army leader there about casualties affecting attrition rates, one thing we discussed was the lack of protective vehicles—a large number of the casualties are hit by IEDs and so on—and also the change in support and the amount of air strike capability that can be delivered. Can you update us on what is happening there? It is quite important because they are key enablers for the Afghan forces.

General Everard: Again, I think I will have to come back to you on paper on what the Afghans are providing in terms of mobile protected vehicles. Interestingly enough, they are much more static in the way that they operate: they work out of fixed bases and often out of what we call technicals, light vehicles, and then patrol. It is entirely against their instinct to sit in metal boxes and drive out and do what we do. I do not get the feel from them that they want the same level of technical force protection that we have, first, because they do not believe they will be able to maintain it and, secondly, because it negates their greatest strength, which is the ability to operate among the population. I know that the Afghans have plans for a limited number of technical vehicles. I do not have those details here and would have to put them on paper for you, if that would be useful.

Q172 Derek Twigg: And in terms of air strikes and the ability for that to happen?

General Everard: The Tucano force comes on stream in 2016—

Mr Hammond: 2017.

General Everard: 2017, and through that point the Americans will continue to provide in emergency close air support.

Derek Twigg: Certainly on a much lower scale than it is today.

Q173 Mr Havard: That is assuming that they get a forces agreement, of course. Sorry, I am being mischievous.

We visited these places, as my colleague has just said. I spoke the other weekend to some people from 203 Welsh Field Hospital. They had just come back and were getting their campaign medals—they had done a great job again. It was interesting to see how they were helping to build the Afghan hospital there. We met General Nazim and at that point, last November, it was still being put up. They reported to me that they are now doing vascular surgery, blood transfusions and the capability is leaping forward. They have got CASEVAC and all of those things.

While that capability is currently coming forward, the question that neither you nor I can answer is about the sustainability of that process after the election. In terms of the general politics of how the new Government of Afghanistan deploys its resources and in the same way as we are monitoring what we are doing with their development in civic society and

elsewhere, what arrangements are we making to try to help to ensure that sustainability of this stuff is maintained?

Mr Hammond: You are right that the Afghans are building these regional military hospitals, but the key to making them sustainable will be being able to attract competent surgeons to go and do a tour of duty in them. The Afghans recognise that as a challenge. What we are doing, can do and will continue to do is provide advice, mentoring and support at ministry level. We expect to insert British advisers into a number of security-related ministries to help them to address some of these strategic questions and to work out how to manage some of these challenges. We can't do it for them.

Q174 Mr Havard: Might some of those be military reservists? A lot of our medical staff are provided by reservists—203 Field is. Would some of that possibly be military reservists who could assist in that process? It is a military hospital process that they have set up.

Mr Hammond: The Afghans do not have, as far as I am aware, a military reserve.

Q175 Mr Havard: No, I meant from us.

Mr Hammond: No, we have no plans to deploy medical reservists into the regional military hospitals. Those are Afghan facilities. They are already operating, I think, at a higher level than we expected. We had a week recently when we received no category B Afghan injuries in Bastion in the role 3 hospital, because they were all able to be treated in the Afghan regional military hospital. That is a major step forward and the Afghans will continue to make progress, but we cannot do it for them.

The process over the last two years of deciding to lift off and challenging the Afghans to do things for themselves has been characterised throughout by people saying, "Are we sure we can do this? Are we sure we should leave them? Are they up to it?", and in every case they have demonstrated that they are. Sometimes they are prepared to take a bit of a hit in the transition, but they are determined to do these things for themselves. In every case, whatever hiccup there may have been at the point of transition, they are now doing them for themselves. I think we can expect that the same will be true of providing medical support to their deployed forces.

Q176 Mr Brazier: Is there any progress on support arrangements for Afghan counter-IED equipment? It is an item that comes up again and again on visits.

General Everard: One of our programmes is counter-IED training in-theatre. The battle we are fighting at the moment is that the IED equipment that we have will probably not be sustainable under Afghan lead. They are, I know, looking for alternatives. I do not think that programme has yet come to a conclusion.

Q177 Mr Brazier: We were told that it requires specialist help just to change the batteries every couple of weeks, so they are going to have to go for something less capable.

General Everard: It is interesting. I was looking at the most recent operation they did, which was a corps-level operation, clearing a number of villages. Over a 10-day period, the Afghan bomb disposal teams cleared 250 IEDs, using dogs that we had given them, in large part, to locate these bombs and their own training to defuse them.

Q178 Chair: We have watched Afghans using dogs for mine clearance and it is most impressive.

General Everard: It shows there is a level of capability there already. I agree with the Secretary of State: you cannot leave them equipment that needs to be maintained by a specialist, because within a week it will be broken.

Q179 Mr Brazier: So that exercise was done with dogs, not using any of our specialist equipment.

General Everard: It was done with no support from us at all.

Mr Hammond: And that will be the principle on gifting equipment across the piece. We will gift equipment that we are confident is sustainable in an Afghan environment. Equipment which has been sustained for ISAF forces by contractors at great cost is not sustainable for the Afghans.

Chair: Moving on to withdrawal, Dai Havard.

Q180 Mr Havard: Can I ask you some questions about the practical process of withdrawal? We have had reports before about some of the movement of containers full, and numbers and volume, and so on, which is significant. Could you say something about how the co-ordination of all this with our ISAF allies is progressing? Also, could you talk to us about the method of withdrawal? I mean by that the fact that some vehicles being taken into the middle eastern area will not necessarily come back to the UK. Could you give us something on the shape of how that withdrawal is happening?

Mr Hammond: First of all, I think I have already said in the House that all armoured vehicles that are not damaged beyond economic repair will be brought back to the UK. That is our clear intention and that is the basis on which we are proceeding. At the moment, to date, we have repatriated or withdrawn from theatre just over 50% of our total equipment—vehicles and major equipments and containers of other materials. About two thirds of that has come out by air and about a quarter has come out by the multimodal route, which primarily means being flown to the Gulf and then brought back by sea.

Q181 Mr Havard: Right. We are not planning to leave anything in the Gulf, then.

Mr Hammond: That is not our current plan.

Q182 Mr Havard: Okay, right, thank you for that.

Mr Hammond: I should probably just elaborate on that. The level of rehabilitation of equipment that is done in-theatre is rehabilitation that is required to make it fit for shipment back to the UK—the removal of explosive ordnance that is trapped behind plates of armour, and things like that. To put these vehicles back into corps will require further work when we get them here. If we were going to deploy vehicles anywhere in the world for any purpose, we would want them to be in that condition before we deployed them.

Q183 Mr Havard: Okay. That is very interesting. There is a question about how this is happening. We have had reports of various uncertainties on the routes out, whether it is through Kazakhstan or alternatives. None of those more vulnerable exit strategies are currently necessary. Is that essentially where we are?

Mr Hammond: At the present time, 1% of the materiel coming out has gone via the northern line of communication, so that probably answers your question. Remember that the big driver for securing the northern lines of communication was during a period when the ground route through Pakistan was closed. Clearly, we want to have resilience; we want to have as many different options as possible, both to deal with congestion in the broader NATO lines of communication and to deal with the risks of closure or, indeed, cost escalation on any one particular route.

Q184 Mr Havard: I have a question that is not necessarily about the physical kit but about the protection of personnel throughout the withdrawal process. Could you say a little more about how that is being organised? What assurances do we have about adequate protection in the withdrawal process?

Mr Hammond: We will maintain in-theatre the forces that are required in order to provide appropriate protection to the very end of the withdrawal process, but clearly I do not want to go into the detail of how we will do that. A great deal of thought has gone into how to protect the rump, if you like, of the force as it draws down.

Q185 Mr Havard: I understand there is then a reserve capacity through Cyprus. Is that right?

General Everard: The theatre reserve battalion still operates in Cyprus should that be required. Inside theatre they have their own quite strong manoeuvre battle group that acts as a localised reserve.

Mr Gray: The place where they are doing the vehicles up is in my constituency, as you know. I was lucky enough to visit it with one of your junior Ministers the other day, and it is an absolutely magnificent facility. The work being done is superb. Perhaps we ought to

visit some time, but seeing hundreds of vehicles being brought back to scratch was a superb sight. Sorry, that was off subject, but it is interesting.

Q186 Ms Stuart: On Ukraine and what is happening in that part of the world, are you making contingency plans for escalation? Even if you say it is only 1% or 15%, some of them are still coming through that northern route.

Mr Hammond: The majority of the 1% that has gone through that route has been directed that way in order to prove the concept—proof of principle. We do not believe that the Russian bloc will be closed to us, but if it was, we do not believe that that would have any material impact on the speed of our draw-down. As I said, half the equipment, vehicles and supplies are already out. A tiny fraction is going through Russia, and if we needed to reroute it, we could.

Chair: The final set of questions is by no means the least important. You could say that, at his stage of the campaign, these questions are the most important because they are about lessons and history.

Q187 Mr Brazier: In your response to our last report, you assured us that you will always seek to learn and capture lessons from current operations. What plans do you have for a comprehensive review of our involvement in Afghanistan?

Mr Hammond: First of all, as I think we said when we discussed this before, the military constantly seeks to learn lessons. As has become clear from the review of the Bastion attack, lessons are learned through a variety of methods. Some of those methods are designed to deliver very quick and dirty conclusions that can be acted on pretty much immediately; and other methods are longer processes that are designed to deliver medium-term solutions and responses. Once the campaign is over, it will clearly be appropriate to look at a strategic level across the campaign as a whole to see what lessons need to be learned in addition to those thrown up by the short-term and medium-term processes. I would expect that we would do that, but the time to do it will be when the campaign is completed.

Q188 Mr Brazier: Understood. I will come back in a second to the short to medium-term stuff. The Chilcot inquiry has been looking in Iraq at the question of how we got the story about weapons of mass destruction. Looking for a moment at the strategic level and the decision to go into Helmand, are we actually going to ask whether there really was an al-Qaeda threat when we went in? We see all these allegations from some very well-informed sources that the main source of manpower for the Taliban were the people who worked for the governor whom we sacked when we arrived.

In an earlier report, we commented on the curious way in which we went, in 2006, from a relatively modest involvement in a campaign which appeared to have been a success—it certainly got rid of the immediate Taliban presence in the capital and surroundings—to suddenly a major war on the ground in a province for which we clearly

were not equipped or trained. You were not Secretary of State then, but are we going to be looking at the big picture? Will we be asking the difficult questions on this?

Mr Hammond: We have not yet, unless someone tells me to the contrary, scoped any terms of reference for any future review of the campaign. This would be a matter that needed to be scoped as terms of reference.

Q189 Mr Brazier: Do you think that we will look at what happened in 2006 and how we got involved in the fighting in Helmand?

Mr Hammond: Can I suggest that perhaps the Committee might like to make recommendations about what it thinks should be covered in a post-campaign review? I am sure that such recommendations would be very much welcomed.

Mr Brazier: Thank you. That is a constructive point. Coming on to—

Q190 Chair: Before you do, why do you think it is inappropriate to learn lessons or to set in place a mechanism for learning lessons as you go along?

Mr Hammond: I don't. We have mechanisms for learning lessons as we go along, both very short, reactive lessons—post the Bastion attack and things that can be done in a matter of days—and more medium-term lesson learning from the campaign as it is in progress. I thought the question I was being asked was whether we have a plan for a more strategic, Chilcot-style review of the big strategic decisions that took place in the campaign. My answer to that is that no decision has been made, but I assume that we will want to look at those things, and the scope of exactly what we will look at has not yet been defined.

General Everard: The operational and tactical level lessons-learned process is probably the best in the world at the moment. We are consistently visited by people who look at our Operational Training and Advisory Group. Company A is not trained the same way as company B six months later, because you learn the lessons from that tour and implement them.

Q191 Mr Brazier: I was going to come on to the more immediate-term stuff. We touched on this several times in previous hearings, but it would be very helpful to know what you see as the main two or three risk focuses for this and how they connect together in the lessons-learned apparatus. Clearly, everybody from Sandhurst through to the individual capability centres is doing stuff, but what is the main strand of your thinking on it?

General Everard: Every brigade and every battalion produces an operational learning account as they go through their tour. That is not just at the end; they do it as it evolves. That goes back to Headquarters, Army and down to the Operational Training and Advisory Group and the Land Warfare Centre.

Q192 Mr Brazier: Where are those institutions based?

General Everard: One is based in Warminster, and one down at Lydd, on the coast. Those lessons are looked at by virtually everybody who works there. They have been in theatre themselves, so they understand it. Therefore, the training that is put in place for those troops training to go is as up to date and current as it can be. It comes, in addition, with some very good publications out of the doctrine centre and elsewhere, designed to go right down to 2 Commando, which tell people, literally in encyclopaedic detail, what they are going to expect—almost e-learning as well. So it is hugely sophisticated, and I make the point that when I was Assistant Chief of the General Staff, probably over half the visits I hosted were people that came to the UK to understand our lessons-learned process.

Q193 Mr Brazier: So those two institutions have the main ownership of what is going on in the wider forces—

General Everard: For the Army, yes.

Q194 Mr Brazier: They are single service. Where do they plug into a joint arrangement?

General Everard: Into the joint doctrine centre.

Q195 Mr Brazier: Which is where?

General Everard: Which is based in Shrivenham.

Q196 Mr Brazier: Right. So they have ownership of this. Is there a historical element in there? Do they look further back?

General Everard: They can do. All services have their own historical research branches. I think the operational record keeping that we have drilled into our units is now of a quality that you can go back and drill into individual incidents right down to a very low level. So, yes, they do have reach back. You see that in some of the recommendations they make.

Q197 Mr Brazier: Sorry. That's helpful. I am trying to get at a particular point. One of the criticisms made of the Americans in Vietnam was that the people writing the manuals for the US marines were wholly unaware of some really good stuff that had been produced a generation earlier, before the Second World War. What I am trying to ask is, is the historical branch tied into the—

General Everard: The lessons that we learn today are absolutely tied into lessons that we have learnt in the past. One of the interesting statements that I saw the other day was that people talk about this as the campaign of the IED. Of course, in North Africa, the one thing that you used to fear most when you advanced was the raft of IEDs that were going to be left. Perhaps there are no new lessons here; you just have to relearn them.

Q198 Mr Brazier: Final question to follow up, in order to translate that into how it fits into the wiring diagram: who do these various institutions report to? Who do the historical branches report to, and who do the single Army and the tri-service organisations you mentioned report to?

General Everard: For the Army, of course, the Chief of the General Staff has ownership of all these organisations. Down at the level that you are talking about—training and preparing forces to go on operations—it is Commander Land Forces, who works through his divisional commanders to prepare forces for operations. They are supported by the agencies that I have mentioned.

Q199 Mr Brazier: Including the historical branches?

General Everard: Yes, and of course now, with an increasing role across the joint force, with the Joint Forces Commander, General Barrons. They set the theatre entry standard for all troops going on operations. They tell you, based on their knowledge working with PGHQ—which has a heavy role in this as well—what you need to do. There is a wiring diagram. It exists in one of our doctrine textbooks. I can send it to you.

Q200 Mr Brazier: Could we have that? That would be very helpful.

General Everard: It sounds very confused, but it is not.

Q201 Chair: If we could have that, that would be great.

So, then, there will be an official history of the campaign—yes?

Mr Hammond: Well, I don't know that that decision has been taken, but it is customary for official histories to be written after campaigns.

Q202 Chair: It would be an awful pity if custom were departed from. Do you not agree?

Mr Hammond: I am sure that you will make that point in your report, and I am sure that it will be duly noted. If I may say so, because we have had this exchange in previous sessions, I think that there is potentially a slight gap in expectation about the time lag. I think I am right in saying that the official history of the Falklands campaign was written 15 years or so after the campaign was over. I don't think it is customary for official histories to be written immediately after the campaign. I think it is normally regarded as appropriate to allow some proper historical context before the definitive campaign history is written.

Q203 Chair: Yes, but by asking you these questions now, we are giving you the opportunity to ensure that it is written while everything is still fresh in your minds.

Mr Hammond: But not to bind a future successor, I suspect.

Chair: Are there any further questions? Secretary of State, General, thank you very much indeed.

