



Defence Committee

Oral evidence: The Situation in Iraq and Syria and the threat posed by Islamic State in Iraq and The Levant, HC 690

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Members present: Rory Stewart (Chair); Mr James Gray; Mrs Madeleine Moon; Sir Bob Russell; Ms Gisela Stuart; Derek Twigg

Questions 1-43

Witnesses: **Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi**, Shillman-Ginsburg Fellow at the Middle East Forum, **Professor Toby Dodge**, Director of the Middle East Centre, London School of Economics, and **Joost Hiltermann**, Chief Operating Officer, International Crisis Group, gave evidence.

Q1 Chair: Welcome, everybody. Thank you to our witnesses for joining us. To put it in context for the public who are listening, this is the first of three public evidence sessions that the Defence Committee will be having on the situation in Iraq and Syria. In this first session we will focus on some of the political context and solutions to ISIL. We will then move into our next evidence sessions for more focus on military dimensions. This afternoon we will have something from the special forces; in a week's time we will have testimony from generals, and then from the air force. The idea is for us to get a full picture of the military response and the defence policy towards Iraq and Syria.

We are very lucky today to have three people to inform us. Sitting in front of us we have Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, whose family is originally from Iraq and who has been at Brasenose, Oxford specialising in and studying the current extremism in Iraq; Professor Toby Dodge, who is one of the most distinguished British analysts of Iraq and a very distinguished academic; and Joost Hiltermann, who has spent an enormous amount of time in the region and is now chief operating officer of the International Crisis Group. Thank you all very much for coming.

All colleagues will come in in turn, but as a starter, to get the conversation going, I want to ask: what is the solution? We hear all the time about these two big ideas floating around. One of them seems to be an internal political solution whereby Sunni tribes are somehow flipped against ISIL; and the second idea is a regional solution, where suddenly Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Jordan and so on somehow work together to provide the

context for a solution. Naively, from the perspective of somebody sitting here, both of those things look pretty unlikely. The internal political solution may be unlikely because we tried the same thing in the surge relatively recently, and it did not have a sustainable long-term effect. The problems have come back bigger and nastier. And the regional solution seems a bit implausible, partly because of mistrust between those countries and partly because many of those peoples, as well as worrying about Islamic State, are also worrying about Damascus, or Tehran, or sectarian relations in the region.

I will begin with Joost. We will work our way down for the big picture and then we will focus there.

Joost Hiltermann: Thank you for inviting me here, Mr Stewart. It is a pleasure to testify. We are an independent non-governmental organisation, so if I speak here today it is not to advise the British Government, but to give our analysis and view as to how we see the problem and possible solutions.

You have cast the dilemma very well. We have to look at the internal and the external situation, and we have to look at the political versus the military dimension of this problem. There is no question that whatever solution is going to be brought will have both elements. I would like to start by saying that it will be critically important that the military piece of the matter is not allowed to overtake the political one. We face a serious threat from Islamic State in terms of Iraq's stability and the stability of the region, but it is at heart a political problem. The only long-term solution that could ever work is a political one, although I understand it will have a military dimension.

You asked us to speak about the politics, but the military part is very important because it is rooted in politics. So I just want to say on that issue that there are really no local allies for Western nations to work with on the ground in Iraq, except for the Sunni tribes. Unfortunately, that in itself is a highly problematic thing, and you have already mentioned it. The Shi'a militias, if deployed on behalf of or in concert with Western powers, would likely commit the same types of atrocities that Islamic State stands accused of—it has already shown its hand in that regard—and in any case could never control Sunni territory for any length of time without major conflict; it would inflame the situation rather than douse it.

The Kurdish Peshmerga likewise are highly problematic the moment they move out of Kurdish areas and into areas that are not Kurdish, including the disputed territories between the strictly Kurdish region and the Arab territory, because the local populations do not necessarily support the Kurds. They may seek shelter with the Kurds if attacked directly by Islamic State, as we have seen, but the loyalty is not there towards the Kurdish state. So it is a long-term problem. The further west you go into Arab areas, first of all the Kurds have no appetite to go in there and, secondly, would never be able to hold territory there for any length of time. That is not their strength.

There is the Iraqi army but we have already seen its performance. Granted, that was in Sunni areas where they were functioning more as an occupation army, but put simply, after 2003 and the dismantlement of the Iraqi army by the United States, we have seen no strong Iraqi army arise.

The fall-back has to be the Sunni population itself in the form of whatever military organisation can be brought about. It would have to be based on the tribes, but the tribes are notoriously difficult to unify and to deploy, so that in itself would be a long-term effort, and what would be the inducement? At the moment, they see Islamic State as the lesser of two evils. They have been shut out from power by Baghdad and its allies since 2003. Efforts to bring them back into the political game have not been made in good faith, with the actual absorption of Sunni elements into the Iraqi security forces not having taken place and salaries not paid. Essentially, there has been a continuation of the shutting out through the surge and until June of this year when in many cases they chose the side of Islamic State. To bring them back out is the game and that is a long-term political game and cannot be done fast. Meanwhile Islamic State is on the move, so how do you counter it? You end up with a military solution when in fact you should be pursuing a political one. That is the real dilemma that we face.

I think you are right about the neighbours. All the neighbours agree that Islamic State is the enemy but they are also enemies of each other. As to whether they would chose to work together, I have seen no sign of it. I think that they can all agree that the current Government in Baghdad deserves a shot, but I think that is of short duration, because the Government in Baghdad is just as dysfunctional as the previous one. It may have a different Prime Minister who is more willing to take certain actions, but he is faced with the same structural problems that existed under Mr Maliki.

I am not an optimist at this point. I rarely have been in post-2003 Iraq, but I have never seen it as bad as today. I will end by reiterating the importance of focusing on the politics. If you go for the military solution, you will only inflame the situation much worse than it has been.

Professor Dodge: There is not much to disagree with there or with the initial supposition of your question. If we did start with the surge that I witnessed on the ground in Baghdad, the historian in me is a bit uneasy in using the term “tribe”. What was going on in Anbar before 2006-07 onwards involved a very fluid set of social actors who garbed in themselves in the legitimacy of tribes but some of them were famous car robbers on the Jordan to Baghdad road. We had different groupings switching their allegiance from what was then al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia to the US, because they were being squeezed and hammered between an Iraqi Government that was clearly an active participant in a civil war and al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia who were seen in Anbar at that time as a foreign import that was very radical and had gone against the religious and sociological traditions of the area.

We could see the political outcome of the surge in the elections of 2010, when the Sunni population invested once more in the ballot box and sent their representatives to Baghdad with a great deal of hope. From that moment onwards that political hope was squandered, essentially by the Government of Nouri al-Maliki but also the wider ruling elite of Iraq, who are famous for being sclerotic and corrupt, very much tucked away in the green zone and increasingly reliant on sectarian rhetoric to mobilise their electorates when they cannot deliver.

Against that background, and keeping possibly 2009-10 as a high point, we come through to January-June 2014. What we see, I think, is the final, last gasps of any potential optimism among the vast majority of the Sunni community, turning their back on the politics

of Baghdad. There are a series of triggers for this: the expulsion of Rafi al-Issawi, the well thought of Finance Minister; the widespread popular revolt that came up after that; and the suppression by military force leading in January to the suppression of the final process camp at Ramadi.

Aymenn will speak in much more detail about this, but what we saw in June was I think a widespread rebellion with four or five different groups seeking to mobilise the Sunni population, with Islamic State quickly becoming the dominant one because of its superior force, money and austere ideology. But if we then go back to the so-called success of the surge, what it did, and this is the military lesson that we can take away, was shred Islamic State's precursor, drove it down to under 1,000 members and broadly—this is a difficult term—won militarily, but because they did not deliver a sustainable political settlement, the fertile soil for recruiting to Islamic State threw them back up to where it is now.

If we look primarily at Islamic State as, to begin with, an Iraqi phenomenon that has been directly caused by the abject failure of the political system set up since 2003 and we are forced to look for plausible or possible solutions, it is the reformation of that political system, the attempt to rebuild trust in all the communities. We can look at the Kurdish regional government and the people they represent and say that they have turned their back, or sought to turn their back, on Baghdad, for very good reasons. Then we can look at the revolt through 2014 in the Sunni majority areas as something similar. But then if we go down into the south and look at the Shi'a majority population, there are no great fans of the Government there. The Government, because of its corruption, has squandered its oil wealth and undermined the institutional capacity of the state and is broadly unpopular across the whole of the country. What we see are successful politicians on a national level, such as Nouri al-Maliki, playing to the basest possible political campaigns to mobilise around sectarian fear—fear that Islamic State will overrun the whole country. Although clearly a military aspect to the whole piece is there, what would be needed for a sustainable peace is what was failed to be delivered in 2007 onwards: a representative Government that can rebuild the state institutionally.

This is not an issue of resources—the Iraqi state's oil production has recently peaked, so it has money. It just does not have the calibre of political parties or politicians or state institutions to deliver those resources in a meaningful way to any of the population and tie them back into the state on the basis of citizenship.

Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi: Thank you very much for having me; it is a pleasure to testify today. I do not have all that much on which to disagree with my colleagues, Joost Hiltermann and Toby Dodge. With regards to internal actors and the concept of a political solution, one problem we really face now—this ties into Toby Dodge's point about the surge—is that there was a political process that the Sunnis broadly tried in 2009 and 2010, but the perception now is that it is a failed process. The insurgent actors we have this time dominating the Sunni insurgent scene in Iraq are very much of a rejectionist type and the inference is made that, "Well, these actors were rejectionists all along; they said that there would be nothing to be gained from a political process and, lo and behold, they were right."

Of course, one group that embodies that is Islamic State, which in its prior incarnations as Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham, and just Islamic State of Iraq, continued fighting despite its decline in power from 2007 onwards with the surge. And then, of course, you also have these other insurgent actors, such as, for example, the Jaysh Rijal at-Tariqa an-

Naqshabandiya, which is also known as the Naqshbandi Army, which is tied to the former Iraqi Ba'ath party and led by Izzat Ibrahim al-Douri. That is another consistently rejectionist actor that all along wanted a return to a wider Sunni-Arab insurgency to accomplish its goal of revolution: overthrowing the central Government in Baghdad and restoring the pre-2003 Iraqi state. In my assessment, and in the assessment of other analysts, this network of the Naqshbandi Army is very much second in overall influence to Islamic State. Again, that embodies a trend towards a more radical insurgency now than, say, during the height of the Iraq war from 2005 to 2007. That is going to be a problem when it comes to trying to find a political solution.

Throughout the course of the summer, we have seen the various Sunni insurgent actors issue statements along revolutionary lines—this idea that there is no point in trying to work within the political system, because it is discriminatory against Sunnis and it is a “Safavid” Government, meaning that they see it as just a stooge of Iran. The result of that is that any scheme that the Government tries to issue now in the hopes of winning over Sunnis to form a wider pushback against Islamic State, analogous to the Sahwa of 2007 onwards, is derided as a mere lackey project for the Safavid Government.

Then you have these reaffirmations of the path to revolution, and the idea of supposedly liberating Baghdad from the control of the central Government. Also representative of that shift towards wider radicalism is the Islamic Army in Iraq, which is another insurgent grouping. It is not as influential as the Naqshbandi Army or Islamic State, but it is there on the ground and needs to be taken seriously. After the US withdrawal, this group set up an activist front called the Sunni Popular Movement—Herak al Sha'abi al Sunni—designed to work within the system to achieve a Sunni federal region. Now, though, since the start of this year there has been a full return to armed insurgency. The rhetoric that you hear from their leaders and their media outlet is the idea that even if they are fighting for a Sunni region, that is only a step towards overthrowing the central Government in Baghdad. One slogan that they have translates as, “Jihad is past, and the region is only a step.”

Q2 Sir Bob Russell: To all three gentlemen, would you therefore agree that, relatively speaking, life was more peaceful under Saddam Hussein?

Professor Dodge: That question is a tad polemical, to be frank. I thought that the invasion was a bad idea. I took a great deal of schadenfreude and pleasure in pointing out that it was going very badly wrong, but the argument that somehow you could go back to pre-2003 strikes me as academic at most. If you take the Ba'athist regime from '68 through to 2003, from '68 through to the late '70s, you have a modernising project of building the state, of literacy and of driving the population into some form of modernity. But it was a modernity underpinned by a vicious tyranny and extreme levels of violence. If you look at what happened in the aftermath of the invasion of Kuwait in 1991, it was the unleashing of hell on the population. In addition, underpinning that overt drive to state building was a clan network that was as insidious and discriminatory as anything we have seen in Iraq since 2003. Was Iraq at points peaceful under Saddam? Yes, it was. What was the cost of that? Tens of thousands of people slaughtered.

Q3 Chair: I had thought that that was an interjection specifically on Aymenn, and I will use my Chairman's prerogative not to put that question to all three witnesses. If you would like to finish briefly, Aymenn, then we will move on to Derek Twigg.

Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi: My point was that these more radical actors within the insurgency in comparison with 2006-07 make the concept of a political solution much harder. Given that there is a perception that it has failed once, there is understandably much scepticism among Sunni locals, who ask why they should re-involve themselves in the political process. I also reinforce Toby Dodge's points about problems of governance more generally that go beyond the sectarianism, the rampant corruption and the fact that this Government does not necessarily appeal all that much to Shi'a locals. The solution fundamentally lies in building a representative Government and stamping out corruption. Those are practices that go beyond just the sectarian relations. Given what a mammoth task that is internally as a solution to this crisis, I am quite sceptical.

Q4 Derek Twigg: Part of the reason you are here is to offer us some advice, information and views about what a political solution could look like. You have talked about how difficult it is, but what would be a good starting point?

Professor Dodge: The starting point would be to bring current and previous representatives of the Sunni community back into Baghdad. The gentleman I mentioned before, Rafi al-Issawi, is still the man who was driven from the Ministry of Finance on false charges of terrorism. He was then driven from Cabinet and is now in a kind of internal exile in Irbil. For my money, and of course opinion polls are very unreliable in Iraq for good reason, I would say he is one of the most legitimate and well thought of Sunni politicians in the country, partly because of the fact that he is not back in Baghdad yet and also because he was born and bred in Anbar, the epicentre of the revolt. So it is about going out and both bringing those Sunnis back into Baghdad and talent-spotting new Sunnis.

We have almost generational waves of Sunni politicians. Those that came back after 2003 were quickly discredited. The Nujayfi brothers—one is Governor in Mosul and his brother is the Speaker of Parliament—have been discredited. What you would be looking for, possibly in the process of new provincial elections and new national elections, is the next wave of Sunni politicians who could stand a chance, as Issawi did, of tying ordinary Sunni populations back into Baghdad and getting resources back into those societies. That is clearly a political solution after some form of order is imposed, but as I tried to indicate earlier, that order will be highly transitory unless something is done to tie that population back.

Q5 Derek Twigg: So we are clear, you have all made points about it being not a military solution but a political solution—I think everything is a political solution in the end, and part of that is, I'm afraid, military action. But are you saying that to get to that stage there has to be a great degree of control brought within the country, which underlines the need to defeat or push back ISIL to an extent that allows that to happen? Can that be done other than by having significant boots on the ground?

Professor Dodge: ISIS need to be contained and rolled back. My great fear is that, as we saw in 2007, the military beginning of a solution that is comparatively—underline

“comparatively”—easy would be done and then dropped. State building, political restructuring and this kind of almost anthropological search for representative members of the population is very difficult and, to be frank, from 2003 to 2011, when the US left, was never done.

Q6 Derek Twigg: So this will be a long-term military involvement as well?

Professor Dodge: This argument for boots on the ground—it is a lovely slogan—but whose boots, and what are they going to be doing?

Derek Twigg: That is what we are trying to tease out.

Professor Dodge: Given the horrendous mistakes that a massive occupation army made in 2007-08 at the peak of American power, when every piece of kit was flying above Iraq and vast amounts of blood and treasure were being spent on the ground, what happened in 2014? All those gains were reworked. If we are to do this in parallel in a realistic time frame, what we are doing is talking about not only rebuilding the civil institutions of the state, but rebuilding the military ones. Any international invention that is being called for—and it is clearly ramping up air power on to special forces and then something else—will be a momentary pause in what needs to be a much more long-term indigenous creation of indigenous institutions and the rebuilding of the Iraqi army.

You can trace the disintegration of the Iraqi army in tandem with the rise of the power of a coterie around the ex-Prime Minister. Nouri al-Maliki, from 2006 onwards, went out of his way to deliberately break the coherence of the army—call it coup-proofing, which is the general term—and then tie key generals to himself. We saw that personified when the two generals fled Mosul in June in ignominy.

In the collapse of the Iraqi army, you have all the problems of the Iraqi state: corruption, political interference and sectarian promotion. You could flood Iraq with foreign soldiers and have a multilateral, multinational military campaign against them, but these problems will not go away. The only solution is indigenous state building.

Q7 Derek Twigg: I am not suggesting the problems will go away; I just want to be clear about the steps. Are you saying that as a step towards finding a political solution, bringing people together and trying to set up new institutions, there has to be a defeat of ISIL—certainly, it must be pushed back, although I am not sure where we would push it back, because Syria is another issue—and that cannot be done by air power alone? Do you agree that there must be a significant ground force, however it is made up, to provide the security to enable that to happen?

Professor Dodge: ISIL certainly needs to be contained. I am uneasy about the notion of defeat, as I was uneasy about the notion of a war against terror. In that sense, ISIL is a symptom, not a cause, and you cannot defeat the cause militarily. Clearly, I agree that the military has to be part of the final solution.

Joost Hiltermann: I completely subscribe to what Toby Dodge just said. The key problem in post-conflict societies—or a society post the transition of 2003—is a lack of trust. The people in power today in Baghdad are paranoid that the former powers will come back. Lo and behold, the people who support Islamic State—the Naqshbandi army, for example—are, in fact, officers of the former regime’s army, and especially Republican Guards. They are still there, and they have great military skills. Therefore, the fear is based in reality. Those people certainly seek to come back; they are desperate, and they might come back.

They will probably not be able to make peace between them, but the top priority should be to separate them off from the Sunni politicians and others in the Sunni areas. But they also lack trust, because from Baghdad’s perspective—the Shi’a-dominated Government’s perspective—none of those people can be relied upon not to side with Islamic State. In fact, they showed themselves to side with Islamic State when it came in in June. So they cannot trust them, but that trust can be restored.

If there is anything western Governments can do with their diplomatic power and expertise, it is to bring the parties together and integrate some of the Sunni actors back into the political system. We now have a nominally inclusive Government with Sunnis, Sh’ia and Kurds in it, but it is basically the same Government as before—it is just musical chairs—although there is a different Prime Minister who may be able to move some things along.

I am worried that the hard work of bringing the Sunnis back has not even started yet. That is something you could push. Inclusive Government is step one, and inclusive governance is step two. You need to provide services on an equitable basis, which is longer-term. Bringing military officers back into the security structure is something that could start pretty soon if there is an inclusive Government. Decentralisation is a long-term process.

Q8 Derek Twigg: If the Government do not want to be inclusive, what do we do then?

Joost Hiltermann: Then we are really stuck. If the Government are going to be a Government backed by Iran, based on Shi’ite Islamist parties that do not want to make peace with the Sunni population and its leaders and representatives, then we have a long-term conflict on our hands.

Q9 Derek Twigg: All that will take time. In the meantime, do we do nothing about containing ISIL other than bombing it?

Joost Hiltermann: You can try to contain it, but you mentioned defeat.

Derek Twigg: When I say defeat, I mean in terms of—

Joost Hiltermann: You may be able to contain it. If Islamic State chooses not to attack Baghdad and does not try to go into Erbil, which I do not think it aspires to do, you can try to start pushing it back. Of course, Islamic State has already shown that when you squeeze it on the one hand, it opens another front, as it did between Syria and Iraq. What is to prevent Islamic State from going into Jordan or Saudi Arabia? That would change the ballpark again. We have a very serious long-term problem here. We will need to work on many different

fronts, but I would certainly emphasise the importance of trying to repair the damage in Baghdad as an area of focus.

Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi: On the issue of trust, there is a massive gulf. Decentralisation was mentioned and, in the long term, that is what we are getting at politically—this concept of decentralisation, more equitable distribution of resources, more autonomy for security forces and not so much top-down centralisation. The problem is that you have the Sunni insurgent groups responding to this by saying, “Federalism is part of a scheme to divide Iraq and destroy Iraq’s unity, and it should be rejected.” We have seen statements from the army, for example. That, fundamentally, is a problem coming back to us about the radicalism within the Sunni insurgency this time around, because of the perceived failure of the political process.

When it comes to solutions, I think it depends on change from within. The Shi’a Islamist parties were mentioned earlier, and they are also problematic in that they are not willing to ponder things like decentralisation or reforms to de-Ba’athification just yet. You saw that in April 2013 when de-Ba’athification reform was put to the Parliament in response to the Sunni Arab protests in Iraq and was struck down, foremost, by Nouri al-Maliki’s Shi’a Islamist rivals. Whatever differences they had with Nouri al-Maliki, one real problem when it comes to the issue of Sunni-Shi’a relations in the country is that they are even more hard-line on issues like reforming de-Ba’athification.

When it comes to solutions and a change of mindsets from within, the Sunni insurgents and their local support do have to first realise the futility of this concept of revolution and trying to overthrow the Government in central Baghdad. In turn, the Shi’a Islamist parties need to realise that they cannot just reject the idea of compromise in terms of decentralisation and reform to de-Ba’athification. Militarily, you would then need some boots on the ground. If there is a third-party actor who local Sunnis, in particular, could turn to and help co-ordinate offences against—

Q10 Derek Twigg: What about Jordan? Who are the third-party actors you are talking about?

Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi: The problem with countries like Jordan is whether they would be willing to deploy ground troops.

Q11 Derek Twigg: Do they not have good connections with the Sunni tribes?

Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi: That remains to be seen. One problem is that western ground troops, with the lessons of the surge and so on, are most familiar with what is needed for effective counter-insurgency and trying to build local trust, to help push back against the Islamic State.

Q12 Derek Twigg: So is the west the only real solution?

Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi: Yes, unless they want to give lessons in counter-insurgency to regional actors.

Chair: Thank you so much. This is obviously an incredibly complicated issue, but we are unfortunately quite short of time, so I ask witnesses to give quite short answers.

Q13 Mrs Moon: I want to focus my questions on men, money and ideology. Where were Sunni fighters coming from? We are aware that many of the Sunni tribes in Iraq have joined. There seem to be Chechens there. Where else are the ISIL fighters coming from? Is it just Syria or are they in fact coming from Saudi Arabia and across the Levant?

Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi: The transmission route of foreign fighters to join Islamic State is through Syria first. You will not have foreign fighters going to Baghdad airport and feigning the purposes of their trip to then go out and join Islamic State. The main transmission route is still through the Turkish border into Syria, and then comes from Syria into Iraq if they are intending to fight for Islamic State's campaign within the Iraqi scene.

As far as nationality goes, most of the foreign fighters in Islamic State are from the Arab world, disproportionately from Tunisia in particular. That is linked to the fact that we saw a broad surge in foreign fighters across 2013, mostly swelling the ranks of Islamic State within Syria. Then they started coming into Iraq around the autumn of 2013. In the case of Tunisia, this is explained by the fact that the Salafi jihadi networks in Tunisia were pro-Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham, or pro-ISIS. In fact a senior member of Ansar al-Sharia, which is one of these jihadi networks, put out a tract saying that it was obligatory on people in Jabhat al-Nusrah to join ISIS.

Libya was linked to local pro-ISIS sentiment on the ground, which, again, translates to a disproportionate number of Libyan fighters in Islamic State. The Gulf areas are also an important source for Islamic State's foreign fighter component. At the same time, though, you have to recognise with Islamic State that over time there is a nativisation trend. That goes on now particularly in Syria, with a swelling of local manpower as the group has increased its territorial control and the rebels in Syria perceive Islamic State to be the winning horse that they should join.

Q14 Mrs Moon: There is a great deal of concern in the West about people going back. Particularly in the UK, there has been lots of anxiety about people coming back and bringing jihad here and causing terrorism attacks in the UK. Is that equally a nervous concern across Tunisia, Libya and the Gulf states, or is it just something that the West is nervous about? Do those states also have a buy-in to the idea of preventing their young people joining IS?

Joost Hiltermann: It is a huge concern, but it is also a huge dilemma for them, because if they try to prevent people from going, internal pressures are building up. Sometimes it is easier to export your problem, but that problem may end up biting you in the back. Of course, that is the experience with the Afghan Arabs—the people who went to fight in Afghanistan against the Soviet occupation ended up coming home and making lots of trouble in Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Somalia and other places. So it is very much on everybody's minds that of the people who have gone out to fight, those who do not die either as suicide bombers or in fighting will in fact come back. It is a big problem that Islamic State seems to have quite a bit of popularity across the region. For these regimes, especially some of the old, crusty regimes that lost legitimacy a long time ago, that is a very dangerous threat. If we talk

about fighters coming back to Western countries, that is certainly a concern here, but if some of these countries were to fall to Islamic State, the problem would be magnified by several orders.

Professor Dodge: It would be possible to make a distinction between the evolution of the revolt in Syria, where there was a vast amount of deeply-felt anger towards the Syrian regime and a lot of encouragement for forces going to fight in Syria, the rise of Islamic State and the explosion of violence in Iraq. If, for example, we take the Saudi regime, they have moved very muscularly and demonstrated a deep worry about blowback into Saudi. They have moved to try and stop the flow of funds and recruits. In that sense, the Afghan issue looms large, but there is also a clear recognition that this is their backyard and Islamic State is as great a threat to them as it would be to us in Europe.

Q15 Mrs Moon: We know where the men are coming from, but where is the money coming from? I know that they have managed to take lots of money from banks in cities that they have captured; we know that they have got armaments from places they have captured. We also know that they are selling a lot of oil. Where is the money coming from that will continue the fuelling of ISIS?

Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi: With regard to your first point about seizure of money from banks, although it was claimed when Islamic State moved into Mosul that they had seized all the money from the banks and that had enriched them by hundreds of millions of dollars, that is not quite what happened. Instead they allow the transactions to continue but take a slice from them. That is also true of another means by which they collect money. The Government in Baghdad still pays some salaries to Government employees within areas that have fallen outside the Government's control. That is true in Anbar, parts of Saladin and Kirkuk governate, and even part of Anah. Islamic State can exploit that and take it as virtual taxation, because Islamic State is vested in this image of itself as being an actual state and not a mere group or organisation which has fundamentally thought their dispute has been with al-Qaeda.

There is also oil smuggling. That is not only providing fuel to locals within Iraq and Syria but some of that oil also might be smuggled out, in particular to Turkey. I am sure revenue is being made from the black market sale of fuel there.

Professor Dodge: There has been some press reporting looking for the hidden hand of Gulf funding of Islamic State. I have seen no sustained proof of that. As you said, because of the seizure of oilfields in Syria, the smuggling of antiquities from Syria before that and the taxation of local populations, my understanding is that Islamic State is fairly self-sufficient.

As Aymenn was saying, they are adopting the positions and policies of a nation state: keeping the price of fuel and bread low, trading off their imposition of order along with all the other violent impositions that they are doing. If we were looking for the main font of their wealth it would be in the Syrian oilfields.

Q16 Mrs Moon: Where is the ideology coming from that is feeding the movement? Is it Wahhabism? Is it something that we need to alter? You have talked about political and

military solutions. What about religious authority to say that this is not jihad, this is not Islamic? Where are the voices and are there voices that would carry any authority? Is anything being done to motivate those voices?

Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi: Islamic State's ideology is foremost rooted in the narrative that the Islamic world has been in decline because there has been no caliphate with full implementation of Islamic law as a way of life and a political system. Of course that narrative is not only promoted by Islamic State; it just happens to be the most direct and extreme incarnation of it. That is really problematic in terms of combating the ideology.

In the wider Muslim world in general there is an over-romanticisation of the past with the caliphates of past eras and the fact that the Islamic world was ahead of Europe in human development in the high middle ages. Groups such as Islamic State take that better state of affairs from the past and create this narrative around it that says it was due to the complete implementation of Islamic law, which is not true. It then says that foreign influences have corrupted the Islamic world.

There does need to be some soul-searching within the wider Muslim world on how far you go in idealising the past, trying to accept that the Muslim world's past is not different from other civilisations. There was plenty of violence but plenty to celebrate as well. On the other hand, the idea of saying that it is not Islamic and not jihad, or doing what Islamic State does—which is called takfiri—and declaring other Muslims who profess to be Muslim as not so, is not a helpful approach.

Professor Dodge: Sunni Islam is very decentralised. The idea of looking for one or two senior religious figures who can almost issue a global fatwa against Islamic State is to misunderstand the nature of Sunni Islam. The decentred nature of Sunni Islam is exactly what Islamic State is trying to work against, to try to centralise it under its neo-caliphate. As Aymenn was saying, it is a grab bag and hodge-podge. Takfiri allows it to rework Islamic doctrines to kill Muslims because they are not good Muslims. To trace it through one lineage would be a mistake, given where Islamic State came from. It was born within the aftermath of the invasion of Iraq—the civil war and then the counter-insurgency. So what you have is a core of very battle-hardened fighters—some of them, like Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, with some religious education—who have melded this very aggressive reworking of Islam with a very effective military organisation. That would be the better way of understanding it.

Joost Hiltermann: There is an additional point. I agree with all of that, but this is not necessarily driven by religious ideology. That particular narrative feeds on a much deeper narrative, which is one of Sunni or Islamic Muslim victimisation. From their perspective, it is a Sunni Muslim victimisation. Look at what happened with everybody ganging up on the Sunnis in Syria—supporting the regime, or not effectively supporting the opposition. In Iraq, the same thing—supporting a Government that is supported by Iran. Look at Gaza, and look at the fallout from the Arab spring generally where many countries have gone into civil war and the West stands by. This is the perception. This is what drives the allegiance that many people show to an ideology that is actually a distortion of mainstream Islam. So I think it is not that that matters so much as what we do about the wider problem of a large population group that feels it is being targeted by others, be it Israel, Iran or the United States. It doesn't matter—it's by others.

Q17 Mrs Moon: We constantly hear stories that the Khorasan Group is an even greater threat to the West than IS. Have you any comments on that?

Q18 Chair: Perhaps you can explain what the Khorasan Group is.

Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi: Khorasan refers broadly to the Afghanistan and Pakistan area. There is this idea of an al-Qaeda cell within Syria intending to plot attacks against the West. In reality, the Khorasan Group is not distinct from Jabhat al-Nusra. If al-Qaeda people go out from Khorasan to Syria, they will embed with al-Qaeda's official affiliate in Syria, which is Jabhat al-Nusra, and you see that that translated into air strikes against Jabhat al-Nusra bases in Idlib province, for example.

As to whether they actually constitute a threat, there is one question that I and other analysts try to assess in terms of the relationship between al-Qaeda and Islamic State, which are competing for support from the global Islamic community. It is possible that al-Qaeda perceives itself as being in decline and that one way it can try to reverse that is to try to carry out a mass attack on the West to regain credibility. I am not sure whether that really is the case. You saw from the aftermath of those strikes that there was some backtracking and saying, "No, there was no plot. It was just an aspiration or idea."

Certainly the threat cannot be ruled out. Al-Qaeda is still a viable brand in the Muslim world. All three—al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, and al-Shabaab in Somalia—maintain their loyalty to Ayman al-Zawahiri of al-Qaeda Central, as we use that term. I do not think it was quite the imminent threat that it was made out to be, but it certainly has to be borne in mind that one way al-Qaeda might try to boost its credibility in competing with Islamic State is to carry out an attack on the West.

Q19 Ms Stuart: Following on from those questions, the purpose of our session today is to guide our actions as to what we think a British Government should do in this situation. We are calling this session "The situation in Iraq and Syria". One of the key elements of the debate in September when the House of Commons voted for military action, albeit in relation to Iraq, and one of the key arguments that the Prime Minister kept making was about creating functioning nation states that can act on their own behalf. Trying to bring those three strands together, my first question to all of you is that if you look at the whole region in a post-Ottoman empire collapse view and say "Where do we go from here?" are there only three actors—Iran, Israel and Turkey—that are nation states with both the means and the political structures to actually do anything? What are those three doing?

The second question is: are we right to talk about Syria and Iraq as if the answer to both is the same or should we be more nuanced?

The third point, which Joost Hiltermann made, almost seemed to suggest that we have now gone so far down the road that the only power of the West is the power to convene. If that is so, what should a British Government be doing? It is a wide question, but I mean what can a British Government do given that there are things that are urgent and things that are

important? Forget about the urgent ones for the moment and just tell me what things you think are important for us to do to get to a place that is sustainable.

Joost Hiltermann: I am happy to address your last point, since you addressed it directly to me. The power to convene—I do not know if it is the only thing, but it is certainly the best thing that could be done. We have already talked about the Sunni part in terms of bringing back some of the Sunni actors into the political game in Baghdad. That was tried before with western help and it can be tried again. We have now learnt a lesson that if you do not do it right, the problem comes back in a worse way later, so it has to be done the right way.

The second part of that is on a regional level. There used to be such a thing as a regional security conference that involved the Ministers of Foreign Affairs and the Ministers of the Interior from Iraq's neighbouring states—Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and others—and it could be revived. That would be one way of lessening some of the tensions and I certainly think that Western nations could help to facilitate and encourage that. That requires good diplomacy and that is certainly something that you have great experience in.

I would certainly not equate Iran and Iraq. Having spent a lot time in Iraq—

Ms Gisela Stuart: Iraq and Syria. If I said Iraq and Iran, forgive me. Our enquiry is about action in Iraq and Syria.

Joost Hiltermann: What was the question specifically on Iraq and Syria?

Professor Dodge: Are they separate?

Joost Hiltermann: They are related of course, but the approach has to be different for the simple reason that in Iraq at least you find the neighbouring states unified on the question of Iraq's territorial integrity, which they, until today, support. That is an important common ground that should be built on. The United States and Iran essentially support the kind of set-up in Baghdad that we have seen over the past few years, whereas in Syria the United States and Iran are on opposite sides of the picture, so that requires a different solution. In my dreams, I sometimes think of a nuclear accord between the United States and Iran that could lead the way towards some accommodation in Syria as well. Of course there is also the Russian component, which is very complicated for reasons you know. In terms of containing the Islamic State, if it is easy in Iraq, and I am not suggesting it is, it is going to be harder in Syria because of that structural problem that I identified, so I will leave it at that.

As for the role of the nation states, Israel would do well to stay out of all of this. It could only make matters worse. Iran has its view: it wants Iraq as strategic depth, as it uses Syria as well, and it is going to continue to keep a finger in it. Whether that means that it will not allow for truly inclusive governance to arise in Iraq is the big question for me. If they think strategically and if the right people in Iran gain the upper hand, or continue to have the upper hand, then I think there is that possibility. Otherwise there is not.

Turkey is playing a difficult game. It seems to have chosen, not in favour of Islamic State, but at least against the Kurds, if it has to make a choice between the two. That is

complicating matters, because of the transit of jihadists through Turkey and the participation of Turkey in any coalition confronting Islamic State.

Professor Dodge: The first question is really quite intriguing. You may not have meant this, but there is an assumption that the only three coherent states in the region are Iran, Israel and Turkey. I look at that list and I think that even those three have profound problems—especially Iran’s economy. You could argue that Israel stepped from the postponed clutch of the Ottoman empire. Iran did not, but Turkey did.

The state structures that were built in the aftermath of the first world war have gone through waves of successive change, to the point at which I would say—I argued this in a recently published piece—that the first world war has little or nothing to do with explaining the situation today. It is what I call the Sykes-Picot delusion. The idea that states that were created in the 1920s, as a vast number of states across the world were, somehow have not escaped that 100 years down the line is very difficult to sustain. A state such as Jordan, which has its own problems, seems to be sustainable. We have just had the possibility of the Jordanian army taking a more regional role. Some within the senior echelons of the Jordanian Government would like that if they were paid well enough. There are different levels of institutional capacity. As Joost said, internal to Turkey there is a somewhat schizophrenic attitude to its neighbourhood.

I would argue that, yes, Syria and Iraq are different conflicts, but with a conjoined bridge via Islamic State. In Syria, you have a majority Sunni population revolting against a long-standing, father-to-son regime that is fighting for its life with the backing of Iran. The Iraqi conflict comes directly out of the mistakes made after 2003. As Joost was saying, the Iranian influence in Iraq has contributed to the current crisis. They were very late in dropping Nouri al-Maliki, and I think they have encouraged some of the worst sectarian policies of this Government. I am less benign about Iran’s ability to back an inclusive Government. I think they would not, because they would see it as a revolution against their victory after 2003. I will leave it there.

On the power of the West to intervene, I think convening was a great way of putting it. I would say that the British Government especially should pursue training and extended diplomacy. I would be very careful with the weapons. Where in the world does the international community flood a sub-state entity—I am talking about the Kurdish Regional Government—in dispute with its capital with weapons? Although this was an emergency issue—the Kurdish Regional Government, let us not forget, in June expanded its territory by 40%, not through negotiation but through force of arms—pumping weapons into Erbil, whatever Erbil’s enemy, does not strike me as a stable policy.

I don’t dream about American-Iranian nuclear agreements. I dream about the diplomatic community in Baghdad, which is still substantial and is now growing because Baghdad is so strategically important and is speaking with a united, if not a single, voice. The international community, because of the unilateral nature of the invasion of Iraq in 2003, has been fractured. The UN, although it is doing very good work in Baghdad, has always been underpowered. A multilateral compact in Baghdad would do a great deal to put pressure on the Iraqi Government. As you said, what if they say no? Then they are faced with a coherent multilateral answer saying, “No, you can’t say that.” I think multilateral co-ordination and

diplomatic engagement in Baghdad would do a lot to shrink the room for manoeuvre that the Iraqi Government have at the moment.

Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi: I am very sceptical about ideas of multilateralism at this point because too many regional actors have different priorities. It was mentioned that Iran is contributing to the current crisis, which is certainly true. Right now, what they are doing in Iraq does not help, in my view, because you have a militiafication of the pro-Government forces in Iraq. Besides the already existing networks—the Iranian proxy militia networks like Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq, Kata’ib Hezbollah, and the Badr organisation, all of which contributed fighters to the Syrian conflict aid regime forces—you also have the springing up of these other brands, such as Saraya al-Khorasani and Harakat al-Nujaba. That is really a problem particularly when it comes to this idea of how regional powers help to contribute to rebuild the Iraqi security forces. You have this militiafication trend which helps build even further Iranian influence within Iraq. It is very difficult to counteract that, I feel.

Turkey was mentioned. Turkey seems to have its own priorities regarding the Syrian conflict that might be at odds with Jordan, for example. I don’t think Jordan is so invested in this idea of overthrowing the Assad regime because that would have sparked a new flood of refugees into Jordan. In contrast, Turkey is still committed to this policy and that is one reason also for its hostility towards the Kurdish democratic union party or the PYD which is trying to hold off Islamic State from taking Ayn al-Arab, also known as Kobani. Multilateral security agreements sound like a nice idea. I am just very sceptical of their coming about or the West being able to exercise leverage to bring that about.

Q20 Ms Stuart: Just a very quick question, and tell me to mind my own business if you want to, but you are Iraqi born?

Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi: No, I was born in the UK but my parents are from Iraq—were born there.

Q21 Ms Stuart: How do you feel about us sitting here round the table talking about all the things that we think we need to do to Iraq, assuming that Iraq seems to be singularly incapable of doing them itself? Do you feel it is a bit patronising? Don’t you feel like saying, “We are quite capable if you give us the right framework”? Tell me to mind my own business, but it just occurs to me—

Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi: As I outlined earlier, I feel that foremost in terms of talking about solutions, it has to come from within. You had these polarising mindsets of the path of revolution against the central Government in Iraq, which have shifted the framework of the overall Sunni insurgency, and then there was the Shi’a political spectrum’s unwillingness to meet Sunni demands that might work within the system. There was talk about decentralisation. I like to have a view of the region. I place foremost emphasis on local actors. In that respect that limits what outsiders can accomplish. You could put large numbers of troops on the ground and help to rebuild and push back Islamic State through years of sustained defences in ground troops, but if there is no change from within, local mindsets changing, then I don’t see much hope down that line.

Chair: Briefly, Sir Bob Russell.

Q22 Sir Bob Russell: Chair, you say “briefly”. We are now in the 68th minute of a one-hour session and you are asking me to be brief on an important subject like this. If you had started here I would not have hogged the proceedings for about half an hour. We are the Defence Select Committee of the British Parliament. We have barely touched on Britain and the UK’s involvement. So I am going to re-enact three questions and leave it there. I think it is an absolute disgrace that we have experts here and we have not even put to them the question of Britain’s involvement or not. I should point out that I represent a garrison town. Not all the soldiers in that garrison town returned from the Blair-Bush illegal war. So you can imagine where my emotions are on this. So the three very quick questions are quite simple: what role should the UK play in the current crisis in the Middle East? What threat does Islamic State pose to the UK? Do you believe that the UK should join the US and its allies in carrying out air strikes on Syria? Those are my three questions and I will leave it there.

Chair: Thank you, Sir Bob. Could witnesses briefly answer those three questions, please.

Professor Dodge: I don’t think the UK should put troops on the ground. I don’t think there should be an extended deployment of foreign troops to Iraq or, indeed, Syria because, as you indicated, I have watched the mistakes those foreign troops made after 2003 in Iraq. There is clearly a threat from Islamic State because of the returnees. Getting to Syria via Turkey is very quick but, of course, there is a contradiction that by ramping up military action, we exacerbate that threat; that is a balance. The threat of Islamic State is primarily to the populations of Syria and Iraq. I am sceptical, as has been seen since this started, of air strikes having much utility on the ground. Against that background, I wonder what the point is beyond an already familiar diplomatic and decent drapery behind which American action would shelter if we joined. I do not think that American action is having much of an effect either.

Joost Hiltermann: I share those sentiments. First, I am not a British subject. I do not work for a British organisation, but for an international one, so I will not give specific advice to Britain. I will capture our general advice to the world. Islamic State is first and foremost a threat to the integrity of Iraq and Syria and to the people living there. It is very much still an internal issue for those two countries and the solutions have to come from inside, but Western nations, other outside nations and Arab states can help.

To the extent this is military assistance, as I started out saying today, the risk is that it will inflame the situation more than it will resolve it. The effort has to be political. We already mentioned the need for what Ms Stuart called the power to convene. That is a very helpful approach—a diplomatic, political approach with, almost inevitably, a military dimension. I would urge the states who engage in that, including my country, the Netherlands, to be as precise as possible in targeting because any mistake or mission creep that ended up leading to casualties well beyond the specific group of Islamic State, will simply drive the population in those areas into each others’ arms and will defeat the very purpose of separating Islamic State from the population on which it has foisted itself.

Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi: With regard to involvement of ground troops, that could help with rebuilding and help with constituting a new local force to push back against Islamic State particularly in Iraq, but that only works in the context of the shift in mindset that I discussed earlier. Until then, I do not see much point in it. In the long run if there is no mindset towards a political solution, it is only a temporary respite and you just risk relapsing into the same chaotic situation.

Regarding air strikes, it is a question of how you want to define the objectives. If you want to contain Islamic State from advancing further within Syria and Iraq, try to pinpoint places where Islamic State offences are going on like in the Ain al-Arab area; then I do not see any problems in joining in the air strikes. I have seen that some of the air strikes target Islamic State positions, for example around Mosul where there is no nearby local force in any sense to help push back against Islamic State. I do not see the efficacy of that.

Chair: Thank you all very much indeed. That was a fantastic scene-setter. It was wonderful to have that much information. I disagree with some of what Sir Bob said but I agree with him that 68 minutes is a very short time for expertise of your sorts so thank you very much indeed for sharing your time with us.

Witness: **Lieutenant Colonel (retired) Richard Williams**, gave evidence.

Q23 Chair: We are very lucky to have Lieutenant Colonel Richard Williams with us today. Richard Williams commanded 22 SAS from 2005 to 2008. He has served in military operations in Northern Ireland, Bosnia, South America, Kosovo, Macedonia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, west Africa and the horn of Africa, as well as numerous UK mainland-based counter-terrorist operations. He is highly decorated. He retired from the Army in 2008. He won a military cross leading his squadron on offensive operations in Afghanistan in 2001. He is with us today as the first of a series of military witnesses who will be testifying on different aspects of UK military operations in Iraq and Syria. We have had the political background set out by our experts earlier; what is your response to what you heard?

Lieutenant Colonel Williams: Thank you, Mr Chairman. It is a great honour and pleasure to be here and I will try to be as pithy as I can in my answers. The first point that is clear from your previous speakers, with respect to ISIL in Iraq—I will keep it at that for the moment—is that the key thing is political. From one's experience between 2005 and 2007 in particular, what changed the nature of the conflict in Iraq at the time, vis-à-vis al-Qaeda in Iraq, was the Sunni awakening. That was a political action, not a military action. People are looking at the moment for something similar; indeed, it would be ideal if something similar could happen—the previous speakers outlined how complex that is, given the influences of Iran, Shi'a groupings and others within the Sunni community to counter it.

Things are clearly different now from how they were in 2005 to 2007. We were an occupying force that had been there since 2003, and although the British elements were concentrated in Basra, the Special Forces elements were concentrated all over Iraq. Our understanding by 2005, when al-Qaeda in Iraq emerged as a significant threat to the future of

Iraq, was significant because of the intelligence and the operations that had been conducted by the Americans over the whole area for that period of time. That intelligence and understanding evolved from 2005 onwards through military and non-military efforts. So the first thing is that we knew a lot more in 2005 than we know now.

The second thing is that you did not have Syria alongside it, which, in all respects, is a failed, ungoverned area that is providing terrorism into Iraq. We did not have to think about that at the time, from a military perspective. Thirdly, we controlled the Government. With respect to how military force was being applied and how that was being geared to political outreaches, we effectively had the power of veto over what could happen.

There is a view at the moment that we could replicate what we did between 2005 and 2007: go in and knock ISIL—such as it is—for six, and it would be removed. There are many challenges associated with that. Technically, could you deploy the forces over a long period of time to achieve that militarily? I think technically you could, if you were prepared to spend the money, take the casualties and deal with all the political consequences within the region, at home and elsewhere.

But one has heard other speakers say, and one has said oneself, that—with respect to defeating a paramilitary or military capability such as ISIL within Iraq—the force of choice would be some form of Iraqi military or paramilitary capability, which is not particularly effective or well led right now. It is dispersed, and it is hard to confirm whether it is Kurdish, Shi'a, Sunni and so on. Friends of mine within the region and the Sunni area tell me that the Iraqi army is as feared, in terms of what they could do to the Sunnis at the moment, as a backlash from ISIL should the Sunnis go over to it. There is a real capability gap there that needs to be filled, and there will presumably be questions about whether we can assist in doing that. An army is an instrument of the state, as you well know. If the state does not exist and we do not have a vision for what the state is going to be, it is quite hard to describe what the army is going to be that we are going to train and put into the field.

Toby made a very good point about the Peshmerga at the moment. That is a military force of convenience right now, but as he also outlined, they have taken a fair bit of territory without the approval of Baghdad, and it's going to be interesting to see how that changes over time.

With respect to military capabilities, if you ask me, “Is it possible to defeat ISIL militarily?”—in other words, they are no longer capable of holding territory within Iraq and being a significant strategic threat in Iraq—it is, if we committed all our resources. I am convinced that's the case. However, is that affordable politically and militarily? The answer is “Probably not”, hence when we are looking at, say, UK involvement, we are looking at what the UK can do in a military sense that can bolster a political effort or, aside from that completely, contribute to a counter-terrorism effort that allows upstream disruption of terrorist threats that may be emerging within that area of Iraq and within the region, such that they don't come and visit us back here or our citizens overseas.

We then end up in the difficulties, in terms of parallel operations, that people criticised the Americans for—I have, as you've outlined, some experience of this in Afghanistan, in the military and subsequently—whereby you had a counter-terrorist mission that was focused on dealing with Osama bin Laden and his groupings and wasn't necessarily

geared to nation building with respect to what NATO was doing. There was some friction between those two missions, and some would outline that actually you can't conduct a unified nation-building mission if those two things aren't working together. But again I would outline that this is a different set of circumstances. The military, be they Special Forces or conventional military in support of special efforts deployed overseas on a counter-terrorist mission in Iraq right now, may need to conduct actions that are, because of the importance of defending UK interests and people, counter, on a moment-by-moment basis, to the idea of forming a unified Iraq. That needs some form of command gearing to ensure it's effective.

Mr Chairman, if I haven't rambled on too long, and just to give some food for thought, I would summarise it by saying this. Getting the politics right is vital first. That is going to involve considerable effort, and I would be delighted to have the opportunity to discuss my view on that. But if the politics is right, by which I mean Sunni engagement within a wider Iraq and regional support for such an effort—some form of decentralisation, change to constitutions, change to oil laws and so on—the military effort to support that will be complex and ideally involve the Iraqis. But separate to that, here in the UK we must not, in my view, discount to zero the utility of deploying certain types of military force overseas into a region such as this in order to counter directly threats to the UK.

Q24 Ms Stuart: Let's go on to the military effort. Yes, it won't be easy; yes, it will be complicated. Is it possible in a situation in which Turkey just sits there, sits on its hands, and is doing nothing?

Lieutenant Colonel Williams: Yes, I think it is. I think where Turkey would be difficult militarily would be if they denied us any form of logistics transit through Turkey, as happened before in, say, 2003. The Turkish pressure on ISIL as part of a coalition would make the coalition—military coalition—much more effective. They've got basing, capability, understanding and insight. But if Turkey opted out of it, would it conceptually, technically be possible to build a force that could counter ISIS within Iraq, with the support of the Iraqis? Again, if resources and political constraints were no issue, technically it would be possible. But if Turkey did what they did before, in 2003, and stopped the logistics chain, it's just going to be slightly harder.

Q25 Ms Stuart: Harder but not impossible?

Lieutenant Colonel Williams: Yes.

Q26 Ms Stuart: And if Turkey plays ball and goes in with us?

Lieutenant Colonel Williams: With respect to the resources, the insight and the relationships they have, it will make it a lot easier. Again, these are relative terms. Nothing is going to be easy, but it would make it, relatively speaking, less costly for us, and I'm speaking purely in a military sense.

Q27 Ms Stuart: Syria and Iraq—make the differentiation.

Lieutenant Colonel Williams: Okay, Syria and Iraq. One question that's often asked of me is: can you defeat ISIL without conducting airstrikes into Syria? Again, it depends on the nature of defeat. What we are doing is trying to ensure, presumably, that ISIL is not a threat to the Iraqi state in ways that cause a break-up. To repeat myself, the primary lever for achieving that is some kind of arrangement with the Sunni. I would—not as a political player—envisage some form of decentralisation of powers like the Kurds have got, and an agreement on inter-regional boundaries, oil resources and so on. That is the dominant thing that will ensure that Iraq achieves its territorial integrity, and in some respects it has nothing to do with Syria whatsoever.

Where Syria becomes challenging, of course, in a military sense, is that it provides a logistics base through which foreign fighters can come. However, again, that logistics base will provide foreign fighters that can be interdicted in Iraq. In itself that follow-on terrorism will not necessarily bring down Iraq. So you will have an enduring problem. We should also recognise that in my understanding of it—people often do comparisons with Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia versus Vietnam and so on—Syria is not a free battle space for the terrorist, if we call ISIL the terrorist. He is having to deal with a whole bunch of offensives against him at the moment, and that is very different from Laos, Cambodia and other examples.

It comes down to what you are prepared to do. If resources and political boundaries were not limited, and if you could commit yourself over a considerable amount of time to dealing with Syria at the same time as Iraq and build the right things—all sorts of assumptions are being made here—it would, arguably, make what you are doing in Iraq militarily easier. The political complications of doing that would probably price the military option out, however. I, for one, do not contend that you have to be involved in Syria in order to deal with what you are doing in Iraq. I do not see that that is an absolute fact.

Q28 Chair: Just to clarify, you keep saying that, if resources and political commitment were unlimited, you could do that. Basically, you are talking about almost impossible levels of resources and political commitment. Am I right? You are talking about trillions of dollars and decades of investment. You are talking about something bigger than the surge.

Lieutenant Colonel Williams: I think that that is the scale in which we are talking, Mr Chairman, yes. Again, I deliberately say, “If resources are unlimited,” because we must remind ourselves that bad strategy is that which we cannot afford. If you simply do not have unlimited resources, whether you can generate it or not, one is talking in a fantastic situation. The reason I mention it like that is just to emphasise the point that, without a political solution, the resources to achieve what you want to do will be limitless, infinite and more expensive than we can afford.

Q29 Chair: To put it in very blunt terms, on the surge, the United States and its allies spent \$130 billion a year and about 130,000 troops were deployed in pursuit of a counter-insurgency strategy. Is that the kind of thing that we are talking about? Presumably, that is what you are ruling out. You are saying that there is some alternative strategy, which does not look like a Petraeus counter-insurgency strategy.

Lieutenant Colonel Williams: The comparison between 2005 and 2007 and now is sometimes unhelpful, because we had been there since 2003 and we ran the Government.

Q30 Chair: But that, presumably, means that it was easier in 2005, and it would be even more difficult today.

Lieutenant Colonel Williams: It would be even harder now.

Q31 Chair: Okay. Given its cost, and given that it is even harder for all the reasons that you have outlined, we are going to rule that out. So, the alternative model?

Lieutenant Colonel Williams: In terms of military intervention at the moment? If you are asking me whether there is a way in which we can use an international coalition to defeat ISIL in the absence of a political settlement, my view at the moment is no. On the international efforts to support the Iraqi military during the process of a political settlement being brokered and developed, you are into a business where the amount of force required relative to your objectives will be less. Secondly, and much more importantly, so I should have put it right at the front, is the fact that you have a much clearer definition of what Iraq will be like, and so you have a much clearer definition of what those military forces—Peshmerga, Sunni Iraqi, Shi'a Iraqi—are, and how they operate together in order to deliver a change to the conflict.

Q32 Chair: Is there a Special Forces counter-terrorist strategy that could work on the narrow objective of protecting the United Kingdom against terrorist attack—in other words, preventing Iraq from being a base for terrorist training camps from which people mount attacks against the United Kingdom? What would that look like? What resources would be required? How would it be conducted, and over what kind of time frame?

Lieutenant Colonel Williams: Mr Chairman, you will understand the sensitivities associated with describing all this. In principles terms, if we believe the assumption that ISIL has declared itself an enemy of the United Kingdom and that it is going to conduct terrorist strikes against our citizens abroad or here, or our interests connected thereafter, there is a clear requirement to understand ISIL and be able to disrupt those threats. Ideology, arguments and so on are but one part of it. Over the long term, a political adjustment to their position is what we are trying to achieve, but in the very short term, there will be paramilitary/terrorist capabilities coming out of that region to visit themselves upon us.

It is perfectly possible to deploy within the region, on the assumption that you have got the right basing, the right partners and a counter-terrorist capability that could help to physically disrupt those threats when they are identified. The only caveat would be, how are you going to identify those threats? I have listened to the other speakers in this room from other Government Departments, who outlined that electronic intelligence is exceedingly significant in this regard. However, one's experience of 2005 and 2007 is that electronic intelligence provided so much, but actually getting on the ground, detaining people and gathering intelligence from the ground was another exceedingly important part of this. You

can do that only if you have two things. First, you must have the legal basis to operate within a country, or you are prepared to take risks against that. The status of forces agreements that were not signed in 2011 are an example of that. Secondly, you must have the ability to detain individuals under some form of law and process those detainees in ways that suit what we would be content with here in the United Kingdom. Those complex issues have to be resolved and considered way ahead of deciding whether you are going to deploy special operations to conduct raids, bombing raids or whatever else it might be against these threats.

Counter-terrorism strategy is by definition more discreet, more precise and far more politically geared, because of the consequences of what it does, and, importantly, what it does not do—visiting risk back here on the nation—than a conventional operation. I assume—an assumption based on ignorance—that such operations are either being conducted now or are being considered, given ISIL’s stated aims.

Q33 Sir Bob Russell: Colonel Williams, the size of Her Majesty’s armed forces has been significantly reduced since the Iraq war, and structural changes are continuing. In your professional opinion, are the UK’s current force structures able to cope with a crisis such as the current one in the Middle East?

Lieutenant Colonel Williams: Thank you very much. It comes down to the question associated with how urgently or seriously you take this threat. I judge that it is not at the moment a war of necessity. We do not have to deal with ISIL in order to preserve our way of life and our country. Counter-terrorism is something below that. Terrorism is a strategic threat to the UK, but by deploying the instruments of state as I have outlined and beyond, it can be contained to the point at which it does not bring down either a Government or a system.

With respect to the fact that we have 82,000 Regular forces in the Army, and other elements—the Navy, the Air Force and so on—supporting them, could Britain on its own, with nobody else involved, deal with ISIL in support of Iraq? The Chairman has outlined the number of forces that would be required to do that, and the answer is no. However, I don’t think that Britain at this moment is looking to do anything other than be part of an alliance. Consequently, my view is that if Britain were to be involved in something like this, conceptually—say we had a political settlement and an Iraqi military that was geared to that, and we put trainers in and capabilities to support it—I do not think that it would take 82,000 British troops to do that. It would take considerably fewer and it would be what we could afford and what we could sustain as part of a coalition. At the same time as being engaged there—again, this is just my point of view—it is important to remain balanced in looking at other threats that may or may not emerge, and Afghanistan is a key one.

Q34 Sir Bob Russell: You are ahead of me—my next question was that we live in a troubled world and, while we hope that Afghanistan goes the right way, I had more in mind the possibility of further developments in Eastern Europe, which required UK forces as part of a NATO mission, or further troops being required in response, for example, to the Ebola crisis. With all those additional pressures, should we be looking at the size of Her Majesty’s armed

forces afresh, in the light of not only the Middle East, but the other possible scenarios I have just mentioned?

Lieutenant Colonel Williams: Yes, I think you should. The incoming Strategic Defence Review presumably provides an opportunity to do that and to see what situations have changed. My perspective is that, when looking at the threat in Iraq, the future of Afghanistan and other areas, it may be that investment in non-military Departments—intelligence, Foreign Office, diplomacy and so on—gets a better return for the UK buck than military forces. Hence, as you know, there is always this conflict about allocating resources one way or the other. As an ex-soldier, I think if you were designing an army, you would take as many resources as you could get, so it is a question of ensuring—an obvious point—that the resources you have are geared as best as possible to the most likely outcomes. It is my understanding that our security has been delivered primarily through alliances, so we are looking to ensure that our contributions to those alliances are what they need to be.

Q35 Mrs Moon: Many people have complained that we were slow in dealing with the threat of IS; that it became so powerful and strong, both militarily, in terms of the equipment it was able to steal, and financially and that, in a sense, we have allowed the problem to grow. What could we have done to prevent that? What should we be doing to prevent that from growing elsewhere, where we have taken our eye off the ball? What are we doing wrong?

Lieutenant Colonel Williams: That connects to the other question. ISIL appeared out of nowhere as far as a general observer such as myself is concerned, and I am surprised by that. I assume that intelligence and diplomatic effort was such that ISIL had been identified earlier, or, if it had not, perhaps intelligence and diplomatic efforts were not focused on that area in the right way. Perhaps the reason is that, when the status of forces agreement was not signed with Nouri al-Maliki, and we decided to withdraw our efforts to a low level, it was not a sufficiently high priority for us to identify the threat. Perhaps Syria and other areas were distracting us. The question is, what could we have done really early? Bearing in mind that ISIL was coming within Syria, and we decided not to be involved in Syria, the probability is, not very much.

However, we could have, and probably should have—maybe we tried—been in the business of identifying the link-up with the Iraqi Sunni population that came from the deterioration of political relations between Baghdad and the Iraqi Sunnis as a strategic threat that was emerging. It would be interesting to investigate whether that strategic threat had been identified early and whether anything could have been done. It goes back to the point that all this is about some kind of political discussion being set up between Baghdad and the Sunnis. We have contact groups for the Palestinians because that is a strategic threat to the region. What we are seeing with ISIL and Baghdad is something similar that requires—the previous speakers mentioned this—international, regional and global contact political meetings and arrangements of some sort. What could have been done and could we have seen it? I do not know. I suspect, and in my experience, intelligence tends to go where the highest priorities are. The nature of the world at the moment, although in some respects it is not altogether different from what it was 30 years ago when there were a million Iranians 30 years ago fighting a war against Iraq and at that moment we were not particularly concerned about it in a strategic sense, is different now. Resourcing intelligence and diplomatic efforts in these areas is probably the primary thing. Special operations and stuff are different, but

with respect to conventional energies, that is best delivered by alliances. Us working out precisely what it is that we can contribute rather than lead on is the way forward.

Q36 Derek Twigg: May I come back to the issue of ground forces? I understand clearly what you mean about putting in a division size force or whatever you want to call it on the ground, with all the costs, political difficulties and everything else involved in doing that, but we are talking about a coalition. The argument could be that most of our ground force, if we had one, would come from around the region if they were sufficiently interested in doing so. I mentioned Jordan in my question before and its connections with Sunni tribes, but we have had a number of our former senior generals say in recent weeks that air strikes are not enough and we need ground forces. You have not exactly stipulated what that is, but if some of our most senior ex-generals are saying we need ground forces, surely they must be right?

Lieutenant Colonel Williams: Again, I am not disagreeing with them. If you are going to conduct a military action against ISIL and you want to have a military chance of success, you are going to have to have a ground element; air will not do it all. Again, it is slightly theoretical because if it is not connected to a vision of what you want Iraq to be in a political settlement, you are setting yourself up for much bigger problems downstream. Just imagine a Shi'a dominated Iraqi army trained by ourselves going into occupy Sunni dominated areas before a political arrangement had been done. It simply would not work. When I was at staff college, I had an Israeli tank commander friend who arrived in Beirut as part of "Peace for Galilee". It is quite easy to get to Beirut. There is a lot of fighting to be done, but the problems start when you are there. You would be simply providing the same problems as, say, Israel has in Gaza or they had in Lebanon at the time. Asking for ground troops makes sense militarily, but if it is not geared to a political solution, it does not make sense because you cannot be sure who you are fighting.

Q37 Derek Twigg: Doesn't the same rationale apply to just having air strikes?

Lieutenant Colonel Williams: As I understand what is happening at the moment, and I am a non-informed observer, air strikes change the balance of power at the tactical level for what essentially appear to be Iraqi militias, Peshmerga or otherwise, fighting ISIL militias in very local areas. These are company actions, they are not very large. However, a few very expensive bombs delivered the right way can change the balance of efforts in that particular area and help to contain.

The second thing that air strikes do, and they have freedoms to use air strikes, is connect to the counter-terrorist mission and elsewhere. If suddenly a target, through electronic means, pops up that is a threat to the UK, you have already got the freedoms to drop a bomb on it. So it achieves the effect of allowing you to conduct counter-terrorism within what is essentially a counter-ISIL containment mission, which is pretty handy. But air strikes in themselves are not going to bring down the force you were opposing. They did not in 2005 or 2007, nor did they in Afghanistan in 2001, and I was involved in that too. It required other efforts.

Q38 Derek Twigg: So in summary, what I gather from what you are saying is that if we know what we want to achieve politically and what needs to be done to achieve that, but we need to use military force, it has to include both ground troops and air power?

Lieutenant Colonel Williams: It will, and the entity, if I may say, that should be leading that is an Iraqi entity. The Iraqi entity, as we have outlined and described, needs to be developed and that can take some time.

Chair: Could we just pull you out on that a little bit more. The Iraqi entity is presumably some kind of new model Iraqi army that includes a strong Sunni contingent. Obviously we have heard from the previous witnesses that in reality at the moment, we do not really have a functioning Iraqi army. It is highly sectarian and corrupt. The real fighting done by the Shi'a is being done by these weird militia groups allied to Iran, the Badr brigades. The fighting being done by the Peshmerga does not really involve anyone who wants to get into Mosul or the Sunni areas at all. Although again, theoretically, we have a picture here of boots on the ground, and it sounds a bit more palatable because it is Iraqi boots on the ground rather than foreign boots on the ground, in practice we are a very long way from anything that looks like that—we do not even know what those boots on the ground look like. Presumably, from your description, they are Sunni boots on the ground, because if they were Shi'a boots on the ground then they are occupying someone else's territory. So we have to make a whole Sunni army, when there is not a Sunni army in existence—that is a Sunni Iraqi army, is that right?

Lieutenant Colonel Williams: Yes. It is perfectly possible to have an Iraqi army that is dominated by the Shi'a operating effectively in a Sunni area if there is a political arrangement and that army is trusted, but it will take quite a long time for that to happen. In campaign planning terms, I suppose you need to gear your expectations in terms of time and that force generation to what you are trying to achieve.

If what you are trying to achieve is to contain the spread of ISIL such that it cannot threaten Baghdad in a territorial sense—it is threatening now with suicide bombs going off very regularly, as happened in the past—then you potentially have time to build and transform that Iraqi force, as long as there is the political will so to do. That is an important part of this. If what you want to do is to knock ISIL back territorially, and Iraqis are unable to do that, you have got formal Iraqis and the opportunities to use tribal elements or any of the little, complicated groupings that exist there potentially, which is very good on an area-by-area, tribe-by-tribe basis. It sounds exotic, and it can work, but again you need to know an awful lot about it and I doubt that it is universal across the whole area. Alternatively, you bring in some form of international force that does it.

If you bring in an international force that does it, and I have heard talk about getting air assault divisions to knock these guys back, who are you then going to hand over to, and on what basis are you going to hand it over? Because if you knock them all back, which militarily and tactically is fine, and if you do not then hand it over to something that does not have the support of the Sunni population, you are just handing over an insurgency to someone who cannot contain it and you are there forever. It goes back to what I think your point is, which is that getting the Iraqi military institution to a point at which it could be useful is a key part of any strategy, preceded, boringly, as I have mentioned a number of times, by some form of political settlement beforehand.

Q39 Chair: Before I go to James Gray, very quickly, presumably you are not saying Sunni militia groups of the Sunni Awakening sort, Sunni tribal militias; you are talking about creating something that is a more formal part of the Iraqi state, a more formal part of the Iraqi army, with a strong Sunni component. Am I right?

Lieutenant Colonel Williams: Not quite, Chair. I am saying that in order to ensure that the military representative of the Iraqi state, its army, can be effective in policing a Sunni area, it needs to earn the trust of the Sunnis, which at the moment I doubt very much that it has. It is perfectly possible to build an Iraqi army that can do that, but only if there is a political solution.

In the short term, people talk about the Sunni Awakening—tribes from part of Anbar, or Ramadi, or Fallujah will rise up against ISIL. Locally, that may be possible, but it is not going to be across the whole of Anbar until such a time as they are offered some form of political deal that is convincing enough to ensure a counter to what ISIL is offering. You will get snapshots, and probably have some now, of Sunni tribes fighting against ISIL or crowds supporting a counter-ISIL action—I get that from friends—and then going quiet. But they are not going to hold the ground or change anything because they are not an instrument of state. That is the thing that needs to change.

Q40 Mr Gray: Briefly, what is going to happen in Afghanistan?

Lieutenant Colonel Williams: In a broad sense?

Mr Gray: Yes. It is a separate issue, but—

Lieutenant Colonel Williams: Okay. The first thing in Afghanistan that we should welcome is the fact that the new Government have signed the bilateral security arrangement, so there will be an enduring military presence there for a period of time that will help to bolster the security institutions of the state. It also ensures that there is an enduring presence of our own intelligence and related communities, such that they can assist in identifying threats to both that state and ourselves over the long term. If that bilateral security thing had not been signed, we would be in a very risky position. That is one point. The second point is that the new Government of Afghanistan has many complications embedded in it because it is an extraordinary coalition that has been pulled together and its ability to do decision making is yet to be tested and so on.

I will bring up two other elements about Afghanistan, given my experience there over the past few years as a civilian. The Taliban is often regarded as a single entity—how do we reach out to them and bring them in the tent? They are not a single entity but the probability of a Government such as that run by Ashraf Ghani now conducting the type of engagement with Taliban plus however we are going to define this thing is probably better than it was a year ago, so there is a source for optimism there. Underpinning all this—I say this as someone who has been involved in the commercial sector in Afghanistan for four years or so now—is that you must recognise that although politics and security challenges are paramount, Afghanistan's fundamental problem is that it cannot sustain itself or engage economically with the international community because of years of underdevelopment

created by wars. My understanding, from discussions with Afghan leaders—recently appointed and others—is that this is clearly one of their priorities. How they are going to ensure that they get the international economic effort that will support them is pretty high up. Without that, it is in trouble.

Chair: Thank you very much. This now brings to an end the public sitting. Could Lieutenant Colonel Williams stay for just five minutes of the private sitting? Thank you very much to all members of the public who attended.

Resolved, That the Committee should sit in private. The witnesses gave oral evidence. Asterisks denote that part of the oral evidence, which, for security reasons, has not been reported at the request of the witness and with the agreement of the Committee.

Q41 Chair: ***

Lieutenant Colonel Williams: ***

Q42 Derek Twigg: ***

Lieutenant Colonel Williams: ***

Q43 Chair: ***

Lieutenant Colonel Williams: ***