



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; Mr Dai Havard; Mrs Madeleine Moon; Sir Bob Russell; Ms Gisela Stuart; Derek Twigg; John Woodcock

Questions 153-186

Witness: **Emma Sky**, Senior Fellow, Jackson Institute, Yale University, gave evidence.

[This evidence was taken by video conference]

Q153 Chair: Hello Emma, can you hear us?

Emma Sky: I can hear you loud and clear.

Chair: That's brilliant. The miracles of modern technology. Welcome, everybody, to our session. This is the Defence Committee's session on the situation in Iraq and Syria and the threat posed by Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant. We are fortunate today to have Emma Sky, who is currently a professor at Yale University, but spent a great deal of her working career in Iraq and before that was a Middle Eastern specialist. She has written a great deal on the subject and specialises particularly in the Kurds and Sunni Arabs, whom she worked with closely in Baghdad and Kirkuk and with General Petraeus.

Welcome, Emma Sky. We are going to work round the Committee but I am going to start with a brief question. I am afraid that time is quite limited so we will encourage short answers to questions. I am sure that colleagues will have a lot of questions. Could you give us an overview of what you see as the main problem on the ground in Iraq and Syria and what you make of the solutions that are currently being proposed to that problem?

Emma Sky: I think the main problem is the regimes in these countries. We tend to have our focus on Islamic State and Daesh, but I think it is more useful to view Islamic State as a symptom of a bigger problem. That problem is these regimes, which have failed to deliver

public services to their people, have failed to be inclusive and have hence caused a backlash against people who feel disfranchised.

Q154 Derek Twigg: Do you think there is a clear political strategy to deal with the current situation and its aftermath?

Emma Sky: No, I don't think there is. Syria and Iraq are two different countries but suffer from similar problems. The strategy in Iraq seems to be very different from the strategy in Syria.

Q155 Derek Twigg: What about the coalition strategy? We have instigated military action; do you think there is any real political strategy and an endgame to get to here? Given your criticisms of the post-2003 situation, are we any further along the line in learning our lessons?

Emma Sky: These are very, very difficult problems and there are no quick options. We are where we are. At the end of the day we have to look at how we help achieve political solutions in both Iraq and Syria. The coalition strategy for Iraq is more logical but for Syria there really does not seem to be a logical strategy. These airstrikes are very much focused on Islamic State and while the bombings of Islamic State go on, Assad is using the opportunity to bomb what we would regard as the moderate opposition. And so it seems that the regime is getting stronger.

Q156 Derek Twigg: I just want to be clear: is there or isn't there a political plan that the coalition have that could be put into being, say post-ISIL, or can ISIL be pushed back further?

Emma Sky: I don't see a political strategy at all in Syria. The strategy seems to be focused on airstrikes, on degrading the capacity of ISIS. It does not seem to be focused on trying to help broker ceasefires between the regime and the moderate opposition. It does not seem focused on helping set conditions for any sort of political solution afterwards. The strategy for Iraq is more coherent.

Q157 Derek Twigg: Can we have one without the other, given that ISIL straddle the boulders and borders?

Emma Sky: We need an overall coherent strategy of where we are trying to go. The Iraq strategy is based on a lot of assumptions, one being that the new Iraqi Government will be fair and inclusive and deliver services to all. Yes, the new Iraqi Government has got a new Prime Minister, and that seems very positive, but the problem is that it has also got exactly the same faces that have been on the Iraqi political scene since 2003 and we are hoping that they will miraculously change their behaviour.

Also, on the ground in Iraq, you can see that Shi'a militias are very active. The Iraqi Army has bolted in the wake of Islamic State's push, so it is the Shi'a militias who are the most effective fighters. There are also Iranian advisers there on the ground with them.

With US and coalition airstrikes and with Shi'a militias supported by Iran on the ground, the danger is that that will cause a whole new set of problems for the future. The only way to destroy Islamic State is for the Sunnis who live in the areas controlled by Islamic State to turn against them. That requires a different set of conditions.

Q158 Derek Twigg: If you could advise the UK, the US or the coalition of three things that they should do to bring about a political solution, what would they be?

Emma Sky: If you accept the premise that the Sunnis living in these communities are the only ones who are really capable of rejecting Islamic State, then your focus has to be on how to get to those conditions. When you look at Iraq in 2007-08, those tribes turned against Islamic State.

With what happened after 2010, the discriminatory practices of Nouri al-Maliki, these tribes fought to contain Islamic State. So how do you get them to change their approach one more time? They need to know that Islamic State cannot win. Islamic State is not going to deliver better governance and security, so they need to see a better option. It cannot be either Islamic State or a discriminatory regime under someone like Assad and supported by Iran.

They also need help. So you need people who are mediators who could help flip the Sunni tribes and work out where the clearages are, who would be prepared to turn against Islamic State and what support can be given to them.

Q159 Sir Bob Russell: There have been very strong criticisms of the Iraqi armed forces for their collapse in Mosul. Was that down to poor training, low morale, a lack of support from the civilian population or perhaps a combination of all three?

Emma Sky: I think it is a combination of all of those, plus other factors. This is a military that receives significant amounts of training and equipment from the coalition forces, and from the US in particular. It is quite easy to train anyone to be a soldier; it is much harder to get the leadership in place, to get the right people promoted to get a proper chain of command.

After the US forces left, Prime Minister Maliki totally undermined the chain of command. He was removing competent, senior leaders and replacing them with people on temporary promotions loyal to himself. He was deploying or moving forces by text message, so he was not going through any chain of command. You then had commanders who were paying large amounts of money for their posts. They were using money that was supposed to buy food for their soldiers for themselves. Soldiers were not turning up to their units, and they were paying their commanders not to turn up. So there is lots of corruption and poor morale, due to poor leadership. That is one aspect: morale is very low.

Another aspect was the sorts of training that the Iraqi Army have received. The coalition forces prepared it to be a counter-insurgency force, yet the coalition forces would take territory and then use Iraqi forces to hold that territory.

Islamic State is fighting as a conventional force. It is not fighting as a governed force; it is moving in large formations, so there is a training gap there. But Islamic State has high morale. It seems to have some cohesive leadership, and it has resources. Large amounts of its resources were actually formerly Iraqi Army resources given to them by the US.

Q160 Sir Bob Russell: You paint a picture of total chaos and collapse. With that in mind, how can the Iraqi Army be strengthened in both the short term and the long term, if at all?

Emma Sky: I think the Iraqi leadership is aware of the problem. That is why there has been discussion about recruiting local forces, which they call national guards. They see that as a means of allowing Sunnis to raise their own forces in the provinces. That would then enable them to turn against Islamic State. They also see it as a way to demobilise Shi'a militias into the national guard. So they are locally recruited forces perhaps reporting to the governor of that province and supported by central Government as and when needed. It is very difficult under these circumstances to build up an inclusive Iraqi Army.

Many of the Sunni members of the Iraqi Army deserted. The Iraqi Army at the moment is seen as a Shi'a Army backed up by Shi'a militias. When the Iraqi Army was in Mosul, it did not have good relations with the local population. It was seen as an occupying army inside Mosul. That is another one of the factors that led to them collapsing so quickly.

Q161 Ms Stuart: It was always argued that one of Iraq's strengths was that it had integrity as a nation state and that its components were holding together. It looks at the moment as though they are not holding together very well. What is your assessment for the long term? Can we keep those boundaries, or are we moving along something much wider—a sort of post-collapse of the Ottoman empire redrawing of boundaries in that area?

Emma Sky: I think what we are witnessing is due to a total failure of the political elites. They have failed to develop a sense of belonging and inclusiveness in this nation state. So we have got a captured state that takes all the resources to itself and has failed to reorganise and to develop in a way that is inclusive.

After 1979 and the Islamic revolution in Iran, there was an increase in sectarianism. 2003 brought a whole new wave of sectarianism, and it has become one of the narratives. That does not mean to say it will stay a dominant narrative. It does not mean to say it was inevitable, but political entrepreneurs who make use of all these fissures and are trying to build up their own base are playing on that issue.

The Kurds have for a long time wanted independence. That is not new. But the Arabs of Iraq, and all the different minority groups that live in Iraq, until recently in all the opinion polls wanted to stay together. So, again, it is important that we do not fall back into this mindset that Iraq consists of three homogeneous antagonistic communities. It has never been that way. There are people who want to make it that way. We think it is really important to

look at the much deeper issues involved. If we look within the so-called Sunni area, people are competing for power all the time. Inside the Shi'a area, people are competing for power. There is nothing homogeneous about this. It is trying to create systems that allow that competition for power to take place peacefully rather than explode into violence.

Q162 Ms Stuart: So what are the conditions we should look to provide? What you describe is a form of federal state that is nevertheless a nation state that is being held together. Can you see any signs that the leadership we are currently dealing with in Iraq shows the ability to be as inclusive as would be required? Is there a structure that would allow anybody to deliver the kind of public services that would provide cohesion, if they wanted to?

Emma Sky: One of the main struggles since 2003 is between those with centrist tendencies and those who want much more decentralisation. After what has happened in the last year or so, we hear much more talk now about the need to decentralise power as much as possible down to the provinces. If you split Iraq into three parts, you will have continuous fighting about where borders should be, who controls the oil and who controls the water resources. But if the decentralisation is much deeper, to the province and district level, if the electoral system is changed so that people are representatives of the communities in which they live and if power is pushed out as far as possible, people will be judged on the delivery of services. They will not be able to use sectarianism to raise support because people are of one sect or one ethnicity in those areas and towns. That is the way that people see of trying to stop the fierce competition that takes place in the capital—decentralise as much as possible so that identities which are based on your town or your village, which are much more natural identities, become more dominant and weaken sectarian tensions.

Q163 Ms Stuart: Is there anything that the outside world could do to encourage and help further that process, or is it something that has to come from the Iraqis themselves?

Emma Sky: It is helpful if the outside world does not see everything that happens in the Middle East in terms of Sunni-Shi'a conflict. I was in a meeting this week and I was told, "Sunni and Shi'a have been fighting each other for 10,000 years." That framing is complete nonsense. The people in these regions have lived peacefully, for the most part, through their history. If we keep framing it in terms of the divisions in society, we are not helping to look at the opportunities to lessen this competition or how to create a better balance. This is a power struggle. Politicians everywhere, in how they mobilise people—they mobilise in the Middle East at the moment by using sectarianism. It is a real struggle between Iran and Saudi. It is a proxy war going on. It is the local power struggles. It is many, many different aspects. It is important that we understand that in its entirety so that we are not seen as taking sides in the sectarian war or exacerbating the worst tendencies, but are looking to help develop the bridges and the mechanisms to lower the competition.

Q164 Mr Gray: What you have described seems to be quite different from what many people in the thinking groups in the UK have been saying about what we are doing in Iraq. Given the background of what you described and the answer you gave Gisela about the

political solution to what is happening there, what is your assessment of the usefulness of nine Tornados carrying out umpteen missions—apparently very few of them actually firing any weapons? Is there any purpose to that? Are we doing anything useful or, indeed, making the situation significantly worse?

Emma Sky: I am not well informed enough about the specifics, so I cannot talk about those. But, in terms of showing that Islamic State cannot win, there is a use to airstrikes because it stops the advancement of Islamic State and helps contain it. If we look at how to defeat Islamic State, containing and stopping its advance has to be part of it, but it is only a part. There have to be many more elements to it. Otherwise, we become the Air Force for what will be perceived by Sunni communities as Shi'a expansionism and the expansion of Iran. In isolation, if it is just airstrikes, we are of use to only one side. But if it is part of a strategy where we are also at the same time reaching out to Sunni tribes, helping with identifying who and how to flip, and showing better governance, all those aspects will lead people to make different choices.

In 2007, we saw the Sunnis make different choices. They chose to stand against al-Qaeda in Iraq; they calculated what was best in their strategic interest. Whenever we talk to people who are living under Islamic State, they hate living under it but they also hate living under what they perceive as discriminatory Iranian-backed regimes. We need to show them better alternatives. That is key.

Q165 Mr Gray: Leaving airstrikes on one side for a moment, we are talking about encouraging, arming and training Sunni militia, Peshmerga and others. How do we, in the west as a whole, know who we should be supporting and how will we go about supporting them? How do we know who the good guys and bad guys are? What practical measures could the UK Government, for example, take to support people?

Emma Sky: We have been in this situation many times before. Whatever we do always has unintended consequences. People's behaviour changes. They could be our good guys one day and our bad guys the next. However, it is always about having a vision of the future of the Middle East—what it could look like. If we are obsessed with Islamic State, well, it will be defeated, no doubt about that, but what will be left of these states? They will probably be controlled by militias, setting the conditions for the son of Islamic State to come along. Islamic State is the son of al-Qaeda; this could just lead to the son of Islamic State if we don't help resolve the underlying issues that allow hideous groups such as Islamic State to gain traction.

Q166 John Woodcock: Thank you, Professor Sky. This is fascinating. I want to concentrate the majority of what I ask you on Syria, but just before I do that, you have painted a pretty bleak picture of the situation at the moment. I am particularly interested in your thoughts on the capability, broadly, of the UK, the US and a range of international coalition partners to change the situation politically on the ground if they were seized of the need to do so, in addition to this containment exercise—as you describe it—through airstrikes.

Emma Sky: It is difficult. I fear that we are going back into the language of the global war on terror. Forming this large coalition may make us feel better about ourselves but some of the regimes that are part of our coalition in the Middle East are the very types of regimes that create these problems in the first place. You can see that some of our so-called allies are clamping down on their opposition, whether it is the Muslim Brotherhood or secular opposition—all sorts of opposition—and they are using this opportunity to do that. Some of these regimes are the very regimes that have been supporting Islamic State, because they see it as an alternative to Iran. If we are going to be in coalition with them we have to use our influence to try to help change some of their behaviour. We cannot just turn a blind eye to it because our core focus is on Islamic State.

Q167 John Woodcock: I can appreciate that. To drill down into that question, we spend a lot of our time talking about military capability, when the evidence that has been given very strongly thus far to this inquiry has been that the military element is only one part—and probably the minority part—of what needs to happen. You give a compelling picture of how things ought to change on the ground with Sunni tribes to change the reality in Iraq, but I personally do not have a sense of what would be needed to do that and what locus, say, the UK could have in making that happen. Otherwise, we simply diagnose a problem and do some bombing, and then you

end up in the situation with son of and son of and son of.

Emma Sky: I guess this is a problem that will take years and years to play out. Our influence on this is limited. We can, by doing certain things, make things worse, and by other actions we can make things a bit better. Obviously the negotiations with Iran and the possibility of a nuclear deal will have consequences—a couple of different consequences, and you can play those as good or bad—for what will happen there. There is a fear for some in the region that such a deal with Iran will then be used by the US as an excuse to leave the Middle East and pivot to Asia. There is a fear that America will realign with Iran. Again, all these fears that different regimes have must be understood. We frequently make wrong assumptions; those regimes frequently make wrong assumptions. The need to be in constant dialogue to help ensure that we understand them and they understand our positions is key.

There are never quick solutions to these problems. What was possible two years ago is different today. What was possible 10 years ago is very different today. We have to be patient but have a long-term strategy. It is not simply about dropping bombs on Islamic State.

Q168 John Woodcock: Understood. You bring in Iran and I would like to follow up on that, in particular in relation to Syria. Do you think it is just a wrong assumption and/or naive to think that Iran can in the near to medium term play a positive role in the region that does not destabilise and overall be balance-negative?

Emma Sky: I think in the long term it is not in Iran's interest for this to escalate into a global Sunni versus Shi'a war, because the Shi'a are the minority. So there is an interest to contain. Islamic State is an enemy of all, but that does not mean to say that we should realign with Iran against Islamic State, as that again creates other problems.

There are ways of looking for truces inside Syria; so something that is not a peace settlement or a political solution but is just a series of ceasefires between the regime and the opposition—again, that would be in Iran’s interest. It is a matter of whether Iran could make the Assad regime see that it is also in its interest. Iran is very much part of the problem of what we are seeing in Iraq and Syria. It could also potentially be part of the solution.

There are different trends inside Iran and different powerbrokers. Understanding the different dynamics inside Iran is critical. That is something that the UK probably has a better understanding of than the US.

Q169 John Woodcock: That is interesting. You said at the beginning that you believe Assad is being strengthened by the current military operations. When representatives of the Syrian moderate opposition have recently come to the UK they implore the UK to be part of air strikes, to help provide them with cover in their fight against Assad. Do you think that that dynamic could play out or is that not what is happening on the ground?

Emma Sky: When you speak to Syrian opposition or Turkish officials or Sunnis inside Iraq, the enemy for them is the Assad regime. For many of our allies in the Middle East, their enemy is the Assad regime. They would like to use the coalition also to start attacking the Assad regime. That is their focus. They will say that Assad has killed 200,000 people; Islamic State has killed only 10,000 people. Our whole focus training Syrians to fight Islamic State when they want to fight the regime is part of the conceptual mismatch that we have inside Syria.

Q170 John Woodcock: Finally, there is a live question in the UK about the capacity—the wisdom of going further than simply training the Syrian moderate opposition, and actually arming them both in their fight against Assad, and potentially playing a more active role in fighting ISIL. Is that a good idea? Is there a level of coherence within that group to avoid the danger, which has been prevented so far, of their splitting off into radicalism themselves?

Emma Sky: I don’t know enough about the different groups inside Syria to be able to make a judgment on that, but the whole rationale behind arming and helping the Syrian opposition is to put pressure on Assad to get him to the negotiating table. It is seen as part of a political strategy. If we think we can just train 5,000 Syrians to send them to fight Islamic State, they will be slaughtered. Those 5,000 trained Syrians are not going to be able to defeat Islamic State, particularly when their main goal is trying to defeat Assad. The idea is, how do you get the regime to want to come to a truce, to get it to the negotiating table? That is a coherent goal; how do you get there? Otherwise, the danger with just putting more and more fighters into Syria is that you are going to keep a civil war going there indefinitely, rather than help it reach some outcome. The final goal must be very much in people’s minds before they start thinking which groups to support.

Q171 Mrs Moon: I’d like to ask you about the regional players and how real a contribution you think they will make to fighting IS. Is it realistic to think that Saudi Arabia is going to bomb IS? Will they put boots on the ground? Will Qatar actively, physically send their

personnel in? What role do you think the regional countries will play and how much are they requiring cover from the Western coalition forces for the fact that they are going to do very little?

Emma Sky: I really hope that none of these countries send troops into Iraq and Syria. That would escalate the situation even further, rather than try to tamp it down. You mentioned Saudi and Qatar. The danger is that they will use being part of the coalition to co-opt their own legitimate opposition, not to become more inclusive and deal with their own issues. In Saudi in particular they are faced with the need to find jobs for so many different people. They've got their own issues. The last thing we want is to encourage Saudi troops or Arab armies to go into Iraq and Syria. That would cause more Iranian troops to be brought in. There are enough fighters there as it is. We want to try to make less, not more.

Mrs Moon: We face a lot of comment from military experts in our media, saying that the priority to win against IS is to have boots on the ground and urging that the West will have to put boots on the ground. You are arguing that quite the opposite is true: that that priority should be the training and enhanced capability of the Iraqis to fight their own battles against IS.

Emma Sky: IS is only a symptom of a much bigger problem, but I believe it is the Sunnis of Iraq who have to defeat Islamic State. They are not going to be helped by Saudi or Qatari troops, or by any other groups that you might throw in. To help those Sunnis to turn against ISIS, there is use for certain types of different policies that western powers can help provide. That does not mean sending Western or Arab armies, but there are advisers: a lot of covert as well as overt assistance can be provided. The Sunni communities have to decide that it is in their interest to turn against the Islamic State and to expel them.

Q172 Mrs Moon: Who do you see having the political leverage with both the Government in Baghdad and the Sunni tribes to make the political changes that you say are necessary?

Emma Sky: We are starting to see that with the new Prime Minister, Abadi, in Baghdad. He understands the dynamics and what has caused this latest iteration of al-Qaeda—this time, the Islamic State. He understands what has led to that and he is showing a willingness to try to deal with those issues. He is currently trying to get the recruitment of local national guards passed by his Cabinet. There are currently problems in the Cabinet and they have not yet agreed to that law, but it is something that he is trying to do.

He has been reaching out to Sunni tribes—you see Sunni tribes coming to Baghdad to meet him. Sunnis are not at all immoderate. Some will look to work with the Government—they will get contracts for working with the Government, so they put that as an economic need. Other low-status tribes consider their relationship with the Government and think that they are probably better off under the Islamic State. You do this with your low-status rural tribes, low-status urban tribal leaders—you see people making their own calculations.

Nevertheless, the Prime Minister has put together a fairly inclusive new Government; the problem is that Sunni representatives in that Government do not necessarily speak for the Sunni population. The outreach has to go further. There is leverage on the Government from the US, because the Iraqi Government does need US support for equipment and training.

There is also a lot of leverage from the Iranians. Both of those countries have leverage on the Government, but the initial behaviour of the new Government in Baghdad is positive; it is just faced with many different challenges.

Q173 Mrs Moon: Can you say something about the role of Turkey in resolving the conflict? Turkey seems to have focused much more on bringing down the regime in Syria. Do you see Turkey having a positive role? If so, what is the important thing to encourage Turkey to take forward?

Emma Sky: Turkey frames the Islamic State in the same way as Sunni countries frame it and sees the main problem in Syria being the Assad regime. For a while, Turkey was quite happy to support, or allow support to go to, the Islamic State because they saw it as the most effective fighter against the Assad regime.

Turkey also has fears about its own Kurdish population, so you saw that at one stage it was not willing to support the PYD—the PKK affiliates inside Syria. It now seems to be playing a bit more of a pragmatic game. It is allowing Peshmerga Kurds from inside Iraq to go into Syria to help the Syrian Kurds. So we are seeing Turkey taking a more pragmatic approach.

Turkey is also calling for safe havens. Millions of refugees are coming over into Turkey, which has done a lot to take them in. That has been a positive. There has been a sense of Turkey being quite sectarian in its approach to the conflict.

Q174 Mrs Moon: Russia is very important in terms of its relationship with Syria and influence in Iran, and there are Chechens fighting with IS. Does Russia have an opportunity to help to bring about a settlement?

Emma Sky: Russia has a huge fear of terrorists coming back to Russia—Chechens and others from those territories coming back. It has that fear, but it is also playing a game against the US. If the US goes one way, it will seek to go the other way. Russia can play a negative role or a spoiler role. The question is whether Russia can be persuaded to play a more neutral role.

Q175 Mr Havard: In terms of Russia playing a more useful role, it has its warm water port in Tartus—it has its own interests in the area—and there is also the question of the Iranians. If the Kurds are going to find themselves a homeland—either a new homeland all of their own, or a re-accommodation back into a Sykes-Picot Syria border, an Iraqi border, some sort of accommodation with the Iranians, or a number of them—how do you see speaking to them about these government and governance arrangements that you say are really driving these groups to actually participate the way they are?

Emma Sky: In reference to the Kurds?

Mr Havard: Yes.

Emma Sky: Again, the Kurds are in many different groups, with different aspirations. The Kurds inside Iraq look for independence—the independence of Iraqi Kurdistan. Kurds inside Turkey look much more for equal rights inside Turkey. That has been the PKK’s position for the last period—being for democratic rights inside the nation state of Turkey. Inside Syria that is still very much being discussed—whether they will look for a federal region, or whether they will look for an independent region. Inside Iran, Iran’s fear is of Kurdish secession. So there is not one united Kurdish vision; there is not one united Kurdish leadership.

Q176 Mr Havard: Given that, what are your prescriptions? What do we say—can you help us to say something—about what we think the strategic view is? What are we trying to achieve in terms of an end state? Are we trying to build back those previous arrangements with the revisions you have just described, with greater local democracy, or what is it that we can offer these people in terms of what you described at the start—governance arrangements where they feel they are included, and they have got resources?

Emma Sky: That debate has to go on inside these countries—the leaders of those countries have to think of what is a new pact between them. That is a debate of which there is some discussion going on inside Baghdad, and the Kurds are involved in that debate. There is less of that debate going on inside Damascus now. If you could imagine 20, 30 years forward, could they have something like a European Union in the Middle East—so, much more trade between countries, much more free movement of people over borders? Could borders become less important? That is something to look to for the future—and those issues that trade arrangements can help. It is not going to be for the West to draw new lines in the sand in the Middle East.

Q177 Mr Havard: So you would take us back to 1907 when there was a discussion about drawing these lines in the first place, would you?

Emma Sky: We are not in the business of drawing lines. Some people think, “Oh, the lines were drawn in the wrong place; if only they had been a little bit to the right or a little bit to the left,” but this is...

Q178 Mr Havard: If you describe these forms of truce or accommodations, temporary transactional arrangements that you see are necessary, both in a sense within Syria but also within Iraq—although there is more possibility of doing them in Iraq, because there are more immediate levers to do that—how do you see US policy; how do you see the European policy; how do you see the British policy, in terms of trying to make that possible? Are we doing the right things? Is there something else that we should do in order to facilitate that rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia? What is it? What are the elements that we need to pull out?

Emma Sky: We need to have a broader reach to our policy. We tend to deal with every country on a bilateral basis, rather than standing back and having a much broader, deeper long-term policy. What sort of Middle East would people in the Middle East like to see in the

future, and how can we help get there? The danger is we overreact to Islamic State, and by throwing all our energies, and just targeting Islamic State, we are actually creating a whole new raft of problems in the Middle East that will take decades and decades to resolve. So stopping violence is obviously an imperative. In terms of ceasefires, people need to be much more realistic about the length of time these things take and also honest about where the root cause of the problem is, so that we are not just having the son of ISIS and the grandson of ISIS in a few years' time.

Q179 Mr Havard: I think one of the most important things you have said—well, I welcome it—were the remarks on the Sunni and the Shi'a, and how they have not been fighting one another for generations. That is a wrong analysis and I thank you for that. On the question of what we do, what do you see the time lines being? If the current military activity is to find, fix but maybe not finish—in the military speak of the US—but nevertheless, contain the situation, what do you see the longer-term time line being for changing the policy to bring some sort of rapprochement that you described earlier? Is it generational?

Emma Sky: We are talking decades, not weeks, and it is also important to understand the differences of each locality. It is all very local. In the last few weeks we have seen the Peshmerga working alongside the Sunni Arab Shammar inside Nineveh take back the border town of Rabia. A year ago, you could never have imagined the Shammar tribe with the Kurds. In the last week or so, you have seen the Albu Esa tribe in Amariyat al-Falluja in Anbar province fighting hard against Islamic State. It is really important that we do not have these broad-brush Sunni-Shi'a ancient hatreds, because we miss all the opportunities that are there. Groups can do what is in their interests. Groups are pragmatic. They can make deals and switch alliances all the time.

When we looked at Baghdad in 2003, 30% of the people in Baghdad were intermarried. Whenever you meet Iraqis, they are very proud to tell you that part of their family is this and part of their family is that. That structural fabric is obviously having a very difficult time and Iraqis are not willing to go back to the way it was. The new reality has been made, but that does not mean to say that we should buy into the end of days, ancient hatreds narrative that the extremists propagate.

Q180 Chair: Emma, colleagues have kindly gone very quickly, which gives us just seven minutes before the end of the session. I come back to your central theory, which seems to be roughly speaking, that, in the end, there has to be a political solution—that what we do in the meantime is contain and allow local political actors to resolve this. If that had been presented in 2005, people would have said, “Ooh, hold on a second. That sounds a bit like the British in Basra. You cannot really do that.” In fact, one of the justifications for the surge was people saying, “Listen, if you try to step back and contain and allow the Iraqis to sort out their own differences, you end up with civil war.” The argument then was that the solution or the policy should be 130,000 troops; clear, hold and build—in other words, a big, classic, foreign counter-insurgency. What has changed? Why is that not still the answer today?

Emma Sky: I think we have a tendency to misread what happened during the surge. We have a tendency to misread and not really understand the dynamics and we also come up with wrong policy answers. When we look back to 2006-07, Sunnis realised that they had lost the civil war. They were being slaughtered. Shi'a militias were coming in, coming through Baghdad, cleansing different areas, and Sunnis thought that al-Qaeda was taking them to defeat. If they had thought al-Qaeda was going to win for them, they might have made different decisions. They had enough problems with al-Qaeda and the leadership competition within their own provinces, but it was Iran that they saw as the biggest threat, along with the Shi'a militias that they saw as extensions of Iran. The Sunnis changed and realigned with the US against al-Qaeda in order to realign with the US against Iran. It was a different dynamic at that stage, and they might not have made those decisions if they had not felt defeated by the Shi'a militias.

Wind on a few years, and the circumstances today are different. The strongest external player in Iraq is Iran; it is no longer the US. The way that the US left Iraq gave the impression that it had been picked at by Iran, so Iran's influence increased. Again, different calculations are made. When you talk to the Sunnis, many of them think the Shi'a militias are the same as the Islamic State—they see them as the same issue. They don't say, "One is okay, and one is not"; they just see them as two evils. So you can't destroy the Islamic State if you have still got the Shi'a militias there.

In the past two days, the town of Jurf al-Sakhar in northern Babil, which is mostly Sunni and was held by the Islamic State, was liberated by Shi'a militias working with Iranians and supported by US air power. This then creates another set of antibodies. If the Sunnis feel that the Shi'a militias, helped by Iranian advisers and fortified by US power, are coming up into their areas, that creates a new set of problems. There are different dynamics on the ground. The West is not prepared to put 170,000 troops, or whatever, back in those countries, so it requires the Iraqi Government to understand that it can't use Shi'a militias to clear Sunni areas; only Sunnis can clear Sunni areas from the Islamic state.

Q181 Chair: This is obviously very complicated, but one of the most encouraging things you were talking about is what the Shammar, the Unizzah and other people are doing. That is a bit surprising. Looking at it from the outside, you would imagine that it would be difficult to get the Sunni tribes to turn against the Islamic State because they feel that they were betrayed after the surge. They don't trust anyone any more, and they don't trust the Baghdad Government. What on earth was the secret? Why on earth did the Shammar do it, and how do you get other people to do the same thing?

Emma Sky: Having that level of local knowledge, you have got to look at the dynamics in each place. It is not one universality. Some will say, "Look, the Islamic State is so bad that we are going to work with anybody against it." Others say, "If we don't fight the Islamic State, they are going to kill us", which is probably what the Al-Bou Issa in Amriyat al-Fallujah said. You either fight or die or flee. For the Shammar to get back their territory, they had to rely on the Peshmerga. There are opportunities, but it requires knowing those dynamics.

Q182 Chair: But Emma, do we know those dynamics? One of the challenges is that people such as you were removed, and we haven't really had a significant presence on the ground since 2011. Do we have the resources or the investment coming in from anybody to have that granular knowledge of the tribes to be able to tell someone how to flip the Al-Bou Issa or support the Shammar?

Emma Sky: We have a knowledge bank, if we are prepared to use it, but at the moment we don't have people on the ground who are empowered to do this.

Q183 Chair: So if you were the CENTCOM commander or the British Prime Minister, what kind of resources would you be pumping in on the ground to increase the probability of success?

Emma Sky: Some of those resource would obviously be covert, but you could do much from somewhere such as Amman, where lots of people are fleeing the Islamic State. The paramount sheikhs of the tribes tend to be based in places such as Amman or Irbil. We should talk to them, and work out the different dynamics and what it would require for them to turn against the Islamic State.

Q184 Chair: Even if you did that, presumably all you would succeed in doing is eventually driving the Islamic State across the border into Syria.

Emma Sky: The Islamic State inside Iraq probably has stronger roots in society. Most of them are Iraqi, and they have stronger roots there. You have got more of the foreign fighters inside Syria—people coming to fight global jihad based inside Syria. So you can't deal with Iraq and Syria separately. But for the Islamic State, Iraq is central. We have more leverage and capacity to work inside Iraq than Syria. But you can't resolve this issue by dealing with just one

Q185 Chair: Finally, Emma, because we have very little time, the basic problem that we face in Britain is that we have an idea that airstrikes alone are not going to make any difference, which is why you hear a lot of people talking about boots on the ground. The alternative is people talking about an internal political solution, but that looks really difficult, because ultimately the Baghdad Government have not changed as much as people would have liked and the solutions that they are coming up with don't really feel like an inclusive democratic state. So people talk about a regional solution, but then we have to be realistic about the fact that Saudi, Qatar, Turkey and Iran are all playing different games. If airstrikes aren't going to do it and boots on the ground aren't, as you seem to be suggesting, sensible and we are drawn back to a political internal solution or a regional solution, which seems a bit improbable—it's very difficult to pull off because of Iran or Saudi—what really is the probability that anything that any of our political leaders are offering militarily or politically is going to lead to any kind of resolution?

Emma Sky: In the short term, there is no probability, but what if there is a longer-term approach that is about nudging people closer together? There are not going to be any great,

rapid solutions, so how do you lessen the proxy war caused by Saudi versus Iran, Sunni states versus Iran? How do you lessen that? How do you help to broker and mediate for local conflicts, and have a much, much longer-term approach? I am not talking about western troops as combat troops going and fighting in their own formations against Islamic State, but western forces can help to train. They can reach out to Sunni tribes to help to flip them. But I do not see western forces, brigade combat teams, going into battle as they once did in two places.

Q186 Chair: Presumably, the risk is that at the end of the story, once we have done all this—trained up all these Sunni tribes—we’re going to have somebody sitting in front of us in 10 years’ time saying, “You did the wrong thing. You armed and trained a bunch of Sunni tribal militias. You created the destabilisation of Iraq. You should have worked through the central structures, the Baghdad state. All these special forces and spies charging around with the Shammar ultimately created chaos. If only we had engaged in proper, legitimate state building.”

Emma Sky: When you look at Afghanistan in the 1980s and you wind forward, you can see a similar dynamic that could be put in place now. There will be many unintended consequences. There are no good options. You need to have some capacity at the centre to be able to decentralise. You are trying to rebuild strong central states. Iraq and Syria have failed. Another alternative is trying to have much more empowered local governments. It will go through a period of warlordism. What will come after the warlordism remains to be seen, but at the moment people see that as a better option than having this horrible power struggle take place in the capital.

Chair: Professor Emma Sky, thank you very much indeed for your time. This brings the evidence session to a close.