



Oral evidence: [UK Government policy on the Kurdistan](#)

[Region of Iraq](#), HC 564

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Members present: Sir Richard Ottaway (Chair); Mr John Baron; Sir Menzies Campbell; Ann Clwyd; Mike Gapes; Mark Hendrick; Sandra Osborne; Andrew Rosindell; Mr Frank Roy; Sir John Stanley; Nadhim Zahawi

Questions 139-224

Witnesses: **Tobias Ellwood MP**, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and **Edward Oakden**, Director, Middle East and North Africa, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, gave evidence.

Q139 Chair: I welcome members of the public to this sitting of the Foreign Affairs Committee. This is our third and final evidence session on Kurdistan. On this occasion, we are taking evidence from the Foreign Office and are delighted to welcome Mr Tobias Ellwood, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Foreign Office. Mr Ellwood, welcome.

I also welcome Edward Oakden, no stranger to this Committee, who is the Director, Middle East, in the Foreign Office. I welcome you both.

Minister, it is now three months since Mr Abadi was installed in Baghdad. Have you made any assessment of how he is getting on? What are the prospects for him having a more inclusive Government?

Mr Ellwood: First, Chairman, can I thank you for the opportunity to appear in front of you, and thank you for the work that you are doing in taking an interest in not just the region and the country, but the Middle East as well? It helps my work, our work, the Government's work, that the British Parliament is engaging and trying to understand these issues and furthering British influence. I am very grateful for what you are doing—I understand you have had a very interesting visit yourself—so I am pleased to be here.

You ask an important question. It is a short amount of time that he has been in place, but if we look back in June of this year, at where things stood, with ISIL moving down the Tigris and Euphrates river, things looked bleak. The Mosul dam potentially could have been blown up; Baghdad itself was under threat. We look at today and we see that Maliki is no longer there. Al-Abadi, as you say, is in place. He has a far more inclusive Government than I think anybody could have expected to be produced, and I think if you look back at the last time a Government was formed and the length of time it took for the Cabinet members to be announced, I think we should be pleased with the progress that has been made.

An international coalition has been formed of over 16 nations, able to hold back and deter ISIL, allowing the space for the depleted armed forces of Iraq to reinvigorate, train and themselves provide a ground capability to take on ISIL. So I am not complacent. I do not think we should be naive. It is going to be the long-term game here. We should not expect results overnight certainly, but I think considering where we were in June and where we are today we should be pleased with the progress.

Q140 Chair: This inquiry is about Kurdistan but have you got a view about how he is reaching out to the Sunni communities in Iraq, and getting the cohesion between the Shi'a and Sunni communities?

Mr Ellwood: This is the big challenge that the new Prime Minister and President actually face, and the appointment of a Defence Minister, Obeidi, a Sunni himself, and the Speaker in the Parliament as well—engaging with senior Sunni representatives is so important; we have to remember, and I am sure you witnessed this on your visit, how disenfranchised the Sunnis were under the Maliki regime. This is why it is so important that we engage not just in Ninawa and Anbar province but the whole of the north-west of Iraq.

The Sunni community has been scarred, I think, by recent events, but we also have to remember how diverse that community is. There is not a single Sunni voice that represents everybody in the north-west of Iraq. That, I think, is the challenge of bringing people back to the table, recognising that the Baghdad Government represents them all and looks to the future.

Q141 Chair: There was a lot of talk about it being their last chance while we were down there. Is that how you see it?

Mr Ellwood: It is a little sensationalist to say that. There is no doubt that there is the anger and frustration that we saw under Maliki. You had demonstrators, Sunni demonstrators, coming out wanting a better life, better representation; and it was the Baghdad Government that then attacked them. So there is massive distrust; there is no doubt about it. And then, of course, there are the complications of the relationship, which I am pleased to see are moving forward, with the Kurdistan region as well. So I do not take away from the fact that life is very tough and it is good that the international community is re-engaging with this part of the region in trying to facilitate a solution.

Q142 Chair: Thank you. Moving on to the oil and gas side, while we were down there we were aware of the nature of the dispute between Erbil and Baghdad over oil revenues payments in general, since when I very much welcome the fact that you have been able to welcome an interim agreement on this. Could you tell us a bit about the agreement? Did the UK play any part in brokering it, or did they manage to do it themselves?

Mr Ellwood: The agreement is still very fresh, and I am very pleased, because this has been a major breakthrough. It is worth just stepping back and saying that Iraq as a country is fortunate to be sitting on such enormous mineral wealth. It provides that vision, that direction of travel of where the country should aspire to go to spend that wealth wisely.

On Thursday an interim deal was signed, so this, I hope, will be the beginning of further discussions and agreements that will take place between Baghdad and Erbil; but

essentially the agreement was a lump sum of \$500 million, which was granted to Erbil. This was to pay for a number of outstanding debts—legacy debts. In addition to that, there is also a licensing agreement of 150,000 barrels, to be sold with, essentially, the blessing of Baghdad. This was perhaps the difficulty that in the last couple of months we have seen, with Erbil, having invested in pipelines, able to secure routes to export the oil, but not being able to do it with the legitimacy, perhaps, that the rest of the world, and indeed Baghdad, wanted to see.

Q143 Chair: This is, as you say, an interim agreement. There is a lot more to come. Is there any role for the UK in helping them reach a final conclusion on this?

Mr Ellwood: Well, we could be selfish and say that we have a British interest in this. I think 50% of the oil production in Iraq is thanks to British companies—BP and Shell, mostly—involved in that. We want to see the country prosper and we want to see British companies do well in the region, but yes, I think there is a role. When I was asked in Foreign Office questions whether Britain would participate in facilitating discussions, I stood up and was pleased to say that our embassy has been active in talks on both sides to encourage voices to come together. That is a priority for the country, no matter what region you are in.

The over-reliance on hydrocarbons is huge. It represents in the region of 1% of employment, but 93% of revenues and 62% to 63% of GDP. The country therefore enormously relies on refining, producing and exporting oil. I am pleased with the interim deal. I hope it will lead to a consolidated deal in the future, not least with the disputed areas of Kirkuk and so forth, which still need to be reconciled. I hope that that will be the direction of travel.

Q144 Chair: What sort of final deal will be most in Britain's interest?

Mr Ellwood: I think it is difficult to say. We want to see British companies flourish there and we want to see a safe environment in which all international companies can operate. We want to see oil moved to parts of the world and not have legal question marks over whether it can be purchased. I am pleased to say that that is taking place, so I think we are heading in the right direction.

Q145 Chair: As you know, Kurdistan is sitting on a huge quantity of gas. If that could be properly piped into Europe, that would address the over-reliance on Russia's gas supplies. Is there any role for Britain in facilitating that?

Mr Ellwood: That is something that is worth investigating and is worth further discussions. It is something that the embassy might have some thoughts on. You are right to say that the potential in northern Iraq is huge, and a lot of it is untapped. It will help the country for many years to come. Edward, do you want to add to that?

Edward Oakden: Only to say that Shell is already doing a major gasification project in the south. It would be logical for it and others to look at the north as well, but that will be easier once there is a resolution on the share of the energy resources.

Q146 Chair: It makes getting a final agreement all the more important.

Edward Oakden: Yes, absolutely.

Q147 Mr Baron: Perhaps it is not going too far to use terminology such as “last-chance saloon”, because it was echoed by the Foreign Secretary in questions on the Floor of the House, and there is a general acceptance that this is the last chance in regards to the politics of the situation. Before turning to the Iraqi army, may I just briefly follow up on one of the Chairman’s questions? Yes, we have had a new Prime Minister and elections, but are you at all concerned, Minister, that the immediate tier below the Prime Minister—the politicians, the administrators and the bureaucrats—has essentially remained the same? Does that not bode ill when it comes to trying to encourage a more inclusive form of politics, which we all know is one of the core problems? Are you concerned that that tier below—these are very important people, given the absence of the bureaucracy and back-up that we have—has not been replaced?

Mr Ellwood: It depends what you mean by concerned. In one respect, it depends on the authority of the Prime Minister and the President of course, and whether they are able to wield that authority. We are aware that Maliki continues to be involved—to be inside the tent.

There is also the question mark, as I alluded to earlier, about who are the Sunni representatives. I was polite in saying—I will be a bit more forthright—that there is a diverse mix of tribes in the Sunni area. They do not speak with one voice, so requesting those Sunni leaders to come forward is difficult, not least because—we have not touched on this yet, but I am sure we will—half the country is at war. It is engaging in an incredible battle in the west. You want to attract these people to the table, but many of them are not even in a position to be able to come to the table. They continue to be—

Q148 Mr Baron: Are you satisfied, Minister, that there is enough tangible evidence of an inclusive approach by the new Administration, or at least of attempts towards that? Has there been an attempt to reach out?

Mr Ellwood: We have very much encouraged that.

Q149 Mr Baron: I know you encourage it, but are you seeing evidence of it?

Mr Ellwood: Yes. I illustrated that a number of the ministerial posts have been filled by senior Sunnis. As I said, many other Sunnis that we want to see involved are as yet unable to do so because of the geographical terrain. They are not able to represent or even to participate. They are out of the country in exile as well. We have to be careful, though, about wanting to pick a selected first XI, if you like, and say, “Look, these are better people to have.” We have done that in other countries—keeping alive a person whom we might make a future President or Prime Minister of the country. It doesn’t always turn out the way we want it to.

Q150 Mr Baron: One is not suggesting that for one moment. One is saying that there has been an absence of an inclusive form of government, which has alienated the Sunnis in the north, and that has been part of the problem. But let us park that for the moment.

Let’s turn to the Iraqi army. They were trained by the Americans, fully equipped, brought up to their numerical strength and very strong, yet they fled at the first sign of trouble. Are we being naive to believe that you can meld different tribes and cultures, given

the 600-year history of the region, into one force and expect them to take on an opposition from which a large part of their own army is recruited?

Mr Ellwood: First, I do not agree with your introduction and description of the Iraqi forces.

Q151 Mr Baron: You think the Iraqi army did well, do you?

Mr Ellwood: No. I am saying they were not as strong as you suggest they were. Is this back in June, before they dropped their guns and ran?

Q152 Mr Baron: I am saying that when they did drop their guns, they were full strength and well-equipped and had been trained by the Americans and equipped over a period of years, yet at the first sign of trouble, they ran.

Mr Ellwood: Right. That is to gloss over the leadership that was looking after the Iraqi forces. These were Shi'ite generals who were placed in there by Maliki himself. He was actually running the show, perhaps because he was concerned about their power and authority. Therefore, the structure under which the good Sunni leaders and others operated, and with which you and I are very familiar, having both served, was removed. Not only was it removed; the support element from the Americans was also removed. Maliki requested that it end. Therefore, in fact, these generals were answering directly to Maliki's office. When the attack came, the orders were not there to co-ordinate activity, which is why many of the generals were unsure what to do to provide mutual support. Not only that, they were serving in a Sunni area themselves. That complex environment led to the forces crumbling much faster than we would have anticipated that happening.

Q153 Mr Baron: So you, Minister, would put it down to an issue of leadership rather than the attempt to meld a united force out of a mix of different ethnicities, religions and cultures?

Mr Ellwood: The lesson has been learned from there. What General Allen is now seeking to do is create a national guard, which works on exactly what you are implying: a complex tapestry of myriad ethnic groupings. Each area will be able to develop its own national guard, answerable to senior authority. That is the direction of travel, that is what the Americans are now focusing on and that is what I think is best suited to that particular country.

Q154 Mr Baron: Finally, it appears that the UK is offering little or no assistance to the ISF. Why is that, and are there any plans for that to change?

Mr Ellwood: I wouldn't agree with that at all. First, we are involved in air strikes, which are assisting the ground forces in Iraq. As you are aware, there are Tornado sorties. Over 80 combat missions have taken place from Akrotiri. We are also providing ISTAR—the important intelligence-gaining that is needed—and we are part of a coalition. You may want to see the British flag doing X, Y or Z, but we are doing what has been asked of us. If there is more to be asked—if the Iraqi Government wants us to do more—we will certainly consider it, but we are part of a 60-strong coalition. I think we are doing as much as we can do, but we will certainly consider any request to do more.

Nadhim Zahawi: Welcome, Minister. I draw to the Committee's attention my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I have both pecuniary and non-pecuniary interests, as I have a family business in Iraq and Kurdistan and advise a number of companies. As well, I co-chair the all-party parliamentary group on the Kurdistan Region in Iraq.

Chair: Thank you very much. That is on the record.

Q155 Nadhim Zahawi: Minister, Iran was one of the first countries to offer help to both the Kurdistan Regional Government and the Baghdad Government, through the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and Qasem Soleimani. We were told that in the battle against IS Soleimani visited the front lines, across from Kirkuk and all the way to Gwer and Makhmur. Do you welcome the engagement of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards in the battle against IS in Iraq, and Iran's gifting of military equipment to the Kurds? We were told that they delivered some heavy artillery and some ammunition from warehouses in Baghdad.

Mr Ellwood: I will invite Edward to say a couple of words on the long-term relationship, with which he is very familiar as he has served in the region. I would simply say that sometimes when we look at Iran through the British spectrum of events, and more modern events at that, we perhaps forget that there is a strong historical and geographical relationship between the Kurds and Iran. The third largest ethnic group in Iran is the Kurds themselves, and therefore there will naturally be a synergy and an interest. We are aware that the Revolutionary Guards actually deployed in Diyala province, and we very much kept an eye on what was actually happening there. This was at a time of huge flux when huge change was taking place, with ISIL pushing down, as I mentioned earlier. Obviously, this is a decision for the Iraqi Government, but I believe that it is best for Iraqi forces—whether they be southern Iraqi or Peshmerga forces—to actually liberate the country and provide that security.

Edward Oakden: The only thing I would add is that the Iraqi Government have made it very clear that they do not want foreign forces of any kind on their soil. They think it is better for Iraqi troops to liberate their country from ISIL, and we agree with them. We all saw the curious way in which Soleimani became a sort of folk hero on mobile phones in Iran for stopping the advance of ISIL. We are pretty clear here that while Britain and Iran might share a common challenge in confronting ISIL, which Iraq shares too, that common challenge stops about there. The sort of Iraq that Iran wants to see is very different from the sort of inclusive Iraq that its Government want to see, which the KRG want to see and which we want to see.

Q156 Nadhim Zahawi: Looking at the track record, Syria has ended up with a plethora of militias forming. Presumably, that would not be welcome in Iraq.

Edward Oakden: Not at all welcome. In fact, what Soleimani was doing in those early days was going round the Shi'a militias, and organising the Shi'a militias in Baghdad and its environs to fight ISIL. The way in which those militias have behaved has been pretty patchy, to put it mildly, albeit brutally effective.

Q157 Nadhim Zahawi: Thank you. I think we will return to talking about the Peshmerga later. Minister, are you satisfied that the current allied military strategy against Islamic State in Iraq is working and has momentum, or are you resigned to a longer term war with all that

that entails? That would include IDPs not being able to go home. We spoke to many IDPs who held no prospect of returning to their homes.

Mr Ellwood: First, let me take it from a kinetic military context, and then talk about the IDPs separately. We need to be patient. We need to see this as a long-term operation, not least from the perspective of fighting a war but also that of stabilisation and peacekeeping. We are in the early stages of that, and it will take a lot of time to defeat ISIL in the manner that we are doing. That is not to say that there may be other ways in which that could be done, but the strategy at the moment—which I think is the right one—is to allow the Iraqi ground forces to liberate the space, particularly in Anbar province, and to push ISIL back to where they came from, which was from Raqqa and down the Euphrates river. It is because they were able to steal the kit that we spoke about earlier that they were able to push back up and use that very same kit with regard to Kobane and so forth.

We need to recognise that the air campaign we are operating at the moment is providing the umbrella of support. The training that the Americans—and the British as well—are providing, not just with ISTAR but counter-IED and so forth, and the myriad of other support coming from the region, mean that we are seeing successes but it is going to take time.

The IDPs are an interesting aspect of this. I spoke about this with the American ambassador and with General Allen. I asked who they had in mind as mayor of Mosul or Fallujah and so on, when these cities and towns are liberated. Who is going to come in and run the police? Who is going to be the head teacher or run the water facilities and so forth? These are thoughts which we need to start thinking about immediately. I am afraid it seems that nobody thought about them in 2003. That is why we ended up going from liberators to occupiers, because life did not really change. That is very important.

I mentioned earlier that there were many Sunnis who felt disenfranchised. There are also Christians, Yezidis and others who are worried about retaliation when people come back after ISIL forces are pushed back. I visited camps in and around Erbil recently and there was no doubt that they were scared. We need to make sure that there is an assurance of an infrastructure capability which will look after them.

One thought being considered is to move the refugee camp straight away to the outskirts as soon as an area or town is liberated, and not force people back into their original homes. They may not trust their neighbour, who ransacked their home or pushed them out because the wind of change suggested that the Sunnis were on a roll and they felt obliged to support ISIL. The camp would be outside the town so that they can start to go back to work or move back in their own time. If they end up staying there, then at least it is a new community and a new conurbation close to where they were before.

Q158 Nadhim Zahawi: You clearly have deep knowledge of the situation on the ground. Would you say that rather than the de-Ba'athification process of 2003-04, what we need is a truth and reconciliation process to take place, if these IDPs are really going to settle down?

Mr Ellwood: The truth and reconciliation process was appropriate and was designed. There have been a number of models, not least in South Africa, but also in Rwanda with the gacaca courts. There will need to be some method by which communities can come back

together and deal with the horrific hostilities that have taken place, with individuals choosing to take up arms simply because they got caught up in a horrific war.

Q159 Mr Baron: Most would agree, and I think you alluded to the fact, Minister, that an air campaign alone is unlikely to defeat ISIL. What are needed are troops on the ground and an inclusive form of politics. Can I suggest to you that, with very little progress on the politics side and with very little evident progress on getting the Iraqi army up to speed, this is going to be a very long campaign? Therein lies a danger, because the air campaign on its own could become counterproductive. Evidence has been taken by the Committee to suggest that there is concern that the longer the air campaign goes on, the more the Sunnis are going to feel persecuted and civilian casualties could rise. Therein lies the prospect of it being counterproductive. What is your view? Is there a plan B if the politics and the army do not kick in fast enough?

Mr Ellwood: You are impatient, as I think everybody is, to see Iraq liberated, but I do not agree with your premise that there is simply an air campaign. There is an air campaign with which we are involved, but we are just one small part of a larger jigsaw. I went to pains to say that the Iraqi army is being retrained. The Americans are very much involved with that. We are doing our part as well. If we are asked to do more, then we will consider that. It is very important that we do not make the mistakes that we have in the past of compounding the problem by putting troops on the ground, which could end up making the situation worse. We have to give the space, and we are seeing evidence of Iraqi armed forces successes, but it will take time. Yes, it is absolutely right that we could move NATO forces in there, but you, for one, have a track record of being perhaps a little bit reticent about that. Are you advocating that? I would say that there is no appetite in this country to do that. There is an appetite to support the strategy, which is to give the space to the Iraqi forces to develop the skill sets, or rather reclaim the skill sets many of them already have. One of the things they spend a lot of time doing is fighting. We need to co-ordinate that to ensure that they then can regain their ground and the stabilisation can continue.

Q160 Mr Baron: Just for absolute clarity, one isn't suggesting NATO forces—one was talking about the Iraqi army and getting the Iraqi army up to speed. But you still have not answered the question, Minister, with respect. Are you alive to the danger of airstrikes alone, over time, becoming counterproductive when it comes to the Sunni minorities?

Mr Ellwood: Again, I do not agree with your premise of airstrikes alone. There is artillery capability, there is infantry and so forth. I may be misunderstanding the question, but you are only looking at it through the lens of the international kinetic contribution here. That is a false premise.

Q161 Mr Baron: Until we get the Iraqi army actually pushing forward—we all know there is no substitute for boots on the ground—essentially we are relying on airstrikes. There may be artillery as well, but essentially there are airstrikes. Is the Foreign Office alive and is politics on the ground alive to the danger that this could become counterproductive over time? One does not want to rush in, but there is a real danger that airstrikes, without the Iraqi army on the ground pushing back, could become counterproductive.

Mr Ellwood: I cannot go further than to say that successes are happening. We are seeing the Iraqi army hold ground. They are not being able to push back as fast as we would

like or they will eventually be able to do, but they have thwarted the attack by ISIL. It will now take time for them to go from the defensive mode into offensive. That will simply take time. We have to be patient and allow for that to happen.

Q162 Chair: It has been announced that we are using drones out there. Without giving away any operational capacity, is that a large part of the operation, a small part or a microscopic part?

Edward Oakden: It is one element. From memory, it is smaller than the number of flights that have happened—subsequent to, and smaller than, the number of Tornado flights. From memory, there have been about 80-plus Tornado flights and 20 strikes. The number of drone strikes is in the low single figures at the moment.

Mr Ellwood: I appreciate the tone with which you ask the question. It makes sense not to probe too much into this area, because otherwise you are giving information away to the other side.

Chair: I quite understand.

Q163 Ann Clwyd: I am chair of the all-party group on Iraq; a non-pecuniary interest. I also have a long association with the Kurds. After the IS eventually is driven out of the Kurdish Arab border areas in northern Iraq by the Peshmerga, do you see the need for some sort of international peacekeeping mission to keep order and prevent communal reprisals, which you touched on earlier?

Mr Ellwood: First, I pay tribute to the work that you have done. I know that you have been very focused on this and supportive of all the groups in Iraq, not just the Kurds. The physical protection needs to come. You are quite right in saying that there needs to be that sense of security. The national guard programme that is being put in place allows, from a tribal perspective, a local connection between those who are doing security capability and those who live there. You do not bus in those from one part of the country to another part in order to provide that; that is where we went wrong before. I would not consider that at this stage. Introducing international peacekeepers or any form of that is not something that is being discussed at the moment.

Q164 Ann Clwyd: I am glad that you set the record straight about the Iraqi army, because I think that it has been criticised unnecessarily. It did not just run away; there were factors present and there was no clear command. It is important to put that on the record. Many of the minority groups displaced from their traditional homes—the Yezidis, Turkmen, Assyrians, Mandaean and so on—may not want to return to their homes because of fear of reprisals. Everyone is urging them to go home, but that may not be realistic. They will need some kind of assurance and protection. I remember the prince of the Yezidis arguing some years ago for an enclave just for the Yezidis. That feeling has been there for some time. They feel unprotected—more so now, of course.

Mr Ellwood: You pose such an important question. It is perhaps worth reflecting on what part of the world we are dealing with—Mesopotamia, or the “land between two rivers” as it is called. This is the fertile crescent. This is the birthplace of so many religions that have

lived in relative peace for thousands of years. Christians and a whole variety of religions have stemmed from that corner of the world—Alawites, Turkmen, Shabak. They have lived together in peace and can do so again, but we should not overestimate how vulnerable they all now feel. When I visited a number of the refugee camps, that is exactly what they were concerned about. That is why the Iraqi Government must be inclusive in ensuring that they are represented politically and also protected physically, using the correct make-up of the national guard.

Q165 Ann Clwyd: Do you think that people like the Yezidis, many of whom were rescued from Mount Sinjar, have all the assistance that they need at the moment? I have asked this question several times in the House: what is happening to the Yezidi women? We were all shocked when so many of them were kidnapped. There were reports of them being sold on the open market, in bazaars and so on. It appeared that it was the Peshmerga themselves—particularly Peshmerga involved with Syria—who helped the Yezidis more than anyone else. Can you confirm that?

Mr Ellwood: It was a particular wing of the Peshmerga that was able to come on to Mount Sinjar and provide such important support in their time of need. Many have now moved away and found refuge, mostly in northern Iraq, but you are absolutely right that there is a huge concern about the plight of the women. That is one of the reasons why the Department for International Development—I travelled with Justine Greening to northern Iraq. We visited a number of the refugee camps and she made a further commitment of additional funds. I do not know if we have any figures that we can provide, but I think that Britain is one of the largest donors to northern Iraq to assist in this very area.

Q166 Ann Clwyd: Is there any information on the women? I keep asking that question over and over again. What information do the British Government have about those Yezidi women? Many of them seem to have disappeared without trace.

Edward Oakden: We will check and let you know, but I do not think that we have very much, to be honest. As the Minister said, the Peshmerga themselves and the PYD were not just the ones who got them off Sinjar; the evidence is that they were, as one would expect, the most effective people in tracing the 3,000 or so who seem to have disappeared. For what it's worth, we are not getting urgent requests for further assistance for the Yezidis at the moment. Without at all wanting to underplay what the Yezidis have gone through, the push back that we are getting from quite a lot of Kurdish and Iraqi groups is: don't just concentrate on the Yezidi women, there are lots of other women who have been taken hostage and worse by ISIL, too. It is a question of trying to trace them all rather than concentrating on one. The figure for UK humanitarian aid to the KRG as a whole at the moment is £23 million, of which some—I think £4 million—was dedicated specifically to the protection of women and minorities.

Mr Ellwood: I am conscious that we have not adequately answered your question. We will go back and do some investigation. I am going to Iraq very soon and I will put this on the agenda and we will investigate it a bit further and get back to you.

Q167 Ann Clwyd: Thank you. The Kurdish Minister for Women's Affairs, whom we met during our visit, told us that in some cases they had bought some of the women—

Mr Ellwood: To liberate them?

Q168 Ann Clwyd: Yes. Contrary to popular opinion, some of those women have been taken back into their own families despite what had happened to them. If that is the case, it would be useful to have more information. Thank you.

I understand that the Kurdish Regional Government are planning to run local plebiscites in disputed areas held by the Peshmerga as soon as the security situation stabilises. How and when would you like to see those elections run?

Mr Ellwood: The key words there are “disputed areas”. First, had the Peshmerga not done what they did when ISIL advanced in the summer, it is probable that Kirkuk would have fallen and gone the same way as Mosul and Fallujah. In the constitution, there is a recognition that there should be some form of referendum—it is article 140—to allow the people of Kirkuk to determine their future.

Without getting too involved in this, the complexity is: where are your district boundaries? When there has been such a churn of people, how do you recognise what the established electoral districts are, for example, and who qualifies to vote? I think that this needs to be a consensual process. It needs to be inclusive, so that people feel involved, and to be seen as fair so that it can last.

Q169 Ann Clwyd: Should it be run by an international body or internally?

Mr Ellwood: That is a very good question. It is ultimately for the Iraqi people to operate it. Should they request assistance from the international community, I am sure that assistance will be forthcoming.

Q170 Chair: The Bishop of Leeds, in the silly season in the summer, got a quick headline for saying that we did not have the strategy to detect Christians in the middle east—that was around the time of Mount Sinjar and he was very much looking at northern Iraq. Can one have a strategy to protect Christians abroad?

Mr Ellwood: Edward may have thoughts on this. I hope that a strategy that is inclusive of Christians is already incorporated in other strategies. We have sets of human rights and governance values that we believe in: support to ethnic minorities and so forth. If we start being specific about any one particular origin, the next group will demand that as well. Therefore, there needs to be something that is all encompassing that recognises that. The Kurds are actually the largest minority population in the world without their own country. Therefore, the same question could be posed for them.

Chair: I am not sure if it will be long before they have their own country.

Q171 Sandra Osborne: Can I ask you about support for the Peshmerga? The message that the Committee received from the Kurdistan Regional Government was that they definitely needed further equipment, especially heavy weaponry, training and advice. What is the UK Government’s response to that?

Mr Ellwood: Can I throw that back and ask you to elaborate on what they have specifically requested?

Q172 Sandra Osborne: They were really talking about heavy weaponry. They had the heavy machine guns when we were there, we saw that, but they really wanted further armoured vehicles and things like that to assist them. I believe they were formulating a request to the UK Government at that time.

Mr Ellwood: The Defence Secretary visited recently and, certainly, as has been covered by the media, we have given a number of weapons systems, not least some heavy machine guns, 40 heavy machine guns, which come with training as well. They are quite complicated weapons to fire, 50 cal. I think the Yorkshire regiment has gone out to help with the training. I have some concern here, and I express this carefully; this has been their hour of need, there is no doubt about it. The Peshmerga were up against it and the world responded by providing weapons systems and, indeed, some training, to make sure that the line could actually be held.

We are now in the situation where they are, quite rightly, wanting to bolster their capability, but we have ourselves been involved in taking munitions from Romania and Bulgaria, which we airlifted. They use Warsaw-pact standard rounds, 7.62, and we ended up transferring those across. They now have a regular drumbeat of aeroplanes landing, providing more weapons systems. My worry is—I share this with the Committee—that this is in a tough neighbourhood, you are giving it to the Peshmerga, which is split into two, with a political wing as well. Those political wings were at war, a civil war, in the 1990s, yet there are a lot of weapons systems coming into the country.

As I say, I have no problem with the fact that we are arming them in that moment of need, but what I encourage—and I said this; I have been very frank with the Kurdish Government—is transparency. They need to make sure that their quartermaster is in place, that we see where these weapons are actually going, so they are not somehow squirreled away or disappear. Worst-case scenario—let's take a look at Libya. I am not saying it would end up that way, but it is so flush with weapons now, it is actually very difficult. Everybody feels the need to own one. I don't know how many are actually in the country, but the number of weapons is about three times the population.

On the arming of the Peshmerga, I would like to see—and Lieutenant General Sir Simon Mayall is involved in this—an upgrading of the transparency, the capability and the accountability of the Peshmerga to the Kurdish Government. They understand that as well, and Britain stands ready to support that request. That said, as I say, we have provided a number of weapons systems and, most importantly, counter-IED training, which is something they have requested. We stand ready to answer any further requests that come Britain's way.

Q173 Sandra Osborne: You mentioned the history of the Peshmerga. Have any conditions been put on the support that has been given—for example, the reform of the Peshmerga?

Mr Ellwood: I am not aware of any conditions as such. As I say, I have been very frank with the Peshmerga and, indeed, the Government, to say, this is your hour of need, we recognise that, but also, we have seen all sorts of containers come in from around the world—because requests were made across the board. Also, on their capability, anybody who has served or been near the armed forces, or has done the armed forces parliamentary scheme, will be aware that you need to have a standard set of equipment that your forces become familiar with, rather than ad hoc bits of kit that come from NATO-standard, Warsaw-pact, or,

indeed, Chinese weapons systems. That can become very confusing if, in the long term, you want to have a strong capability.

Q174 Sandra Osborne: In terms of the two main factions within the Peshmerga, there is quite a consensus that that needs to be reformed into a more modern structure. That is what I really meant by conditions.

Mr Ellwood: I absolutely agree: that is what we have been encouraging them to do, so you have the Peshmerga answering to the Government, rather than to any particular party. We should not forget that there is a third party which has not been mentioned yet: the Goran party, which is also developing. Will they now want their own military wing? I do not think that is the direction of travel we want to see.

Edward Oakden: Perhaps I could just say—not least with Sir John Stanley sitting here—that we asked that all of our gifted equipment be used in accordance with international humanitarian law. We asked that it be used to meet urgent operational needs, including the defence of civilian populations, that it not be stockpiled or remain in Iraq, and that it not be sold or transferred to third parties. We got assurances back from the Kurdish Regional Government that they would observe those requirements.

Q175 Sandra Osborne: Finally, do you feel that the EU and NATO are playing a fair part in supporting the Peshmerga?

Mr Ellwood: The Foreign Secretary raised this last week at the Foreign Affairs Council in Brussels. He asked for it to go on the agenda for December's meeting, so the EU itself will be obliged to address this and ask whether more could be done. From the NATO requirement, the Wales summit came out with a statement, if memory serves. I may have to write to you with the details of that, unless Edward can add anything.

Edward Oakden: Essentially, NATO was looking at how it could best contribute to the Iraq and Syria mission overall, particularly in respect of training. This also comes back to an earlier part of the discussion, about whether there were ways in which we can use the co-ordination mechanisms which already exist within NATO to ensure a proper, sensible division of labour in terms of who supplies what. For example, the Germans have supplied a lot of weapons and ammunition to the Peshmerga. It would make no sense for us to then provide the same thing. We are trying to use the capabilities where they would add value, but obviously only where that would be the case.

Mr Ellwood: Perhaps I could briefly add that there also needs to be a synergy between what the Iraqi armed forces are doing in the south. I am pleased to see that they have come together, which is not something that they do a lot. That needs to happen more. A synergy of equipment needs to take place. There is also what is happening in Kobane, where there is fighting in built-up areas, or FIBUA, as it is called. That requires a different kind of kit and a different kind of training as well. They are taking the fight to the enemy, and I am sure that will lead to further requests for support for equipment and training.

Q176 Mike Gapes: That is what I want to turn to now—to Syria. We seem to be happy that the Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga are fighting to liberate Kobane from IS, from the Caliphate. We seem to be happy that the Americans are bombing the fascist and jihadist Caliphate, but we

do not seem to be willing to do anything about it ourselves. I declare an interest: last week I tabled early-day motion 500, which has the title “Labour Solidarity with Kurds” but which calls for all parties to give solidarity to the Kurds in Syria as well as in Iraq. Last year I went to Erbil with the all-party Kurdistan group, which I also declare.

Is there not some level of absurdity in the position whereby we know that the heart of this organisation is in Raqqa and they are carrying out beheadings from Aleppo or its outskirts, and they are trying to seize the areas which are currently under the control of the PYD or the YPG—the Syrian Kurds—and yet we have this self-denying position that somehow Britain is not going to be involved in Syria? Would you agree with me that this is illogical?

Mr Ellwood: I wouldn’t agree for a number of reasons. Perhaps I could qualify why I disagree. First, dare I say that you are falling into the same trap as John Baron—

Q177 Mike Gapes: I do not think it is the same trap. You may disagree, but I think we have different positions.

Mr Ellwood: Okay, different traps that are very close to each other. It is looking at it through the prism of Britain and saying, were Britain to be on our own and were this to be a unilateral capability to destroy ISIL, then somehow we should be in both Iraq and Syria. That is a logical conclusion to draw, but you forget that we are part of a coalition. The Americans and General Allen have not requested our participation. It is not that they have too many targets and require British aeroplanes to participate in a campaign. They don’t. What they need from us—and what we are providing—is intelligence gathering as ISTAR. We are able to provide that.

There is also a legal aspect which I think the Committee will be well familiar with. We are in Iraq because of the invitation of the Iraqi Government. There is a legal step that we would have to go through. The Americans were able to justify it through their Attorney General. Not only that, but the Prime Minister has made it clear that, were we to advance our involvement to include Syria in the manner in which you describe, it would require a further vote in the House of Commons and that takes us into a whole other world as to whether that would be successful.

Q178 Mike Gapes: I can understand the political reasons and I am not asking you to say that the Government would act without political consent. If the Americans think it is legal to be bombing ISIL inside Syria, what is the inhibition on the UK? Do we have different legal standards to the US?

Mr Ellwood: You are saying, “Why aren’t we bombing because the Americans are bombing?” If the Americans are able to do the bombing required, should we not use our assets to support and focus on areas where, from a coalition perspective, there is a need?

Q179 Mike Gapes: Let us try a different way. We have given support in terms of non-lethal equipment to the Free Syrian army. The Free Syrian army, as far as I understand it, is not engaged directly in many areas fighting against ISIL. It may be fighting the al-Nusra Front, or it may be fighting against the Assad regime, but from what I understand, the people in

Syria who are actually fighting against ISIL are Syrian Kurds. Why do we not give assistance to the Syrian Kurdish forces who are engaged in fighting ISIL?

Mr Ellwood: To go back to the Free Syrian army, you are right that we are providing non-lethal kit, that is, communications equipment, medical equipment and so forth. It is equipment which can be of service to them. They are providing and protecting the space mostly in the north of Syria. We are also providing support to the police in that area. That sits next to the humanitarian support, not only provided in that space but in as many parts of Syria as we can get into. The question that I would go back to is what our contribution is to the coalition itself. You want us to jump ahead.

Q180 Mike Gapes: No. I want us to take a view. If we are prepared to support some Syrians against ISIL, I wanted an explanation of why we are prepared to support the Kurdish Peshmerga and the Americans supporting the PYD but why we are not providing support to the Syrian Kurds in the existential fight which they are engaged in, in Kobane and elsewhere.

Mr Ellwood: Because—and I go back to the legality of it—there is no legal case for us to be able to do that. The people that are doing that and who are gaining support from us—and we have just been through this in a previous question—are the Peshmerga. They are now moving to Kobane. They are moving through Turkey. That has been agreed. They are now taking on that fight themselves.

Q181 Mike Gapes: I do not understand the argument about the legal case. Can you clarify that?

Mr Ellwood: As I say, when we first looked at this, there had to be legal justification for us to be able to enter Syria without their permission. It may well be that we return to this when it comes to another vote.

Q182 Mike Gapes: I am not asking for us to enter Syria. What is the legal objection to us providing support, as we have done to the Free Syrian army, to the PYD or other Kurdish opposition to ISIL and the Assad regime?

Mr Ellwood: I am not aware of any request from the PYD, in fact, for non-lethal support.

Q183 Mike Gapes: But you said there were legal problems. I am not clear what the legal objection would be. If we are prepared to support the Free Syrian Army, why are we not prepared to support Kurds who are engaged in opposition?

Mr Ellwood: The list that I just read out involved low-level communications kit, flak jackets and things like that. We are able to do this, but it is not arming in that sense.

Q184 Mike Gapes: Okay. One final question: is it our priority to defeat ISIL in Syria or to remove the Assad regime in Syria? Which is the more important?

Mr Ellwood: The international coalition's objective is militarily to defeat ISIL. We then need to create a space in order that moderate Sunni engagement can take over that space.

That is the objective. That will, of course, involve operations on both sides of the border. We are participating in one particular aspect of that, which I mentioned earlier. Assad—he is aware of this—is actually contributing to the success of ISIL by creating the space and denying moderate Sunnis the ability to have a voice. Because there is no voice, they have gone and rallied against him—you mentioned al-Nusra as an example of that. Assad himself is somebody that we believe has caused this, and that is why this is not a choice. Simply because there are two adversaries in one country, it is not so binary that we need to switch from one to the other or suddenly say, “Because ISIL’s now developed into a greater threat, we need to support Assad.”

Q185 Mike Gapes: Let me be clear. You are saying that the priority is to get rid of ISIL. We all accept that this is not going to be immediate; this is a long-term process. That presumably means that, whereas, two years ago, the Government was talking about the imminent end of the Assad regime, we now envisage Assad in some form controlling considerable parts of Syrian territory for perhaps years or even longer.

Edward Oakden: I think the answer to that is, no, we are not. We do think that, if you like, the first concentration of our intervention should be against ISIL, but the effect of that must not be that we thereby strengthen Assad or that, while we fight with others against ISIL, the flame of the Syrian opposition is extinguished. Therefore, we have to be able to do both concurrently. We have also always recognised that, in Syria, you cannot have a simply military solution—that there needs to be a political process going as well. One of the things we are doing at the moment is trying to reactivate that political process, which paused after the failure of Geneva II, to get a sense of forward movement and to underline, despite all the international discussion around this, that we cannot see a future for Syria in which Assad is a part, after everything that has happened. So how do we, as part of the international community, move not only the military intervention forward—the military part of the picture—but also the political? They have to go hand in hand.

Mr Ellwood: There is no doubt that what is happening in Syria is complex, multifaceted and also unpredictable to some extent. What is happening is that, while from an ISIS perspective there is a thoroughfare of people from around the world who continue to join its forces, the same cannot be said for Assad. His officer class, in particular, is being depleted. Therefore, there could be a moment in the future where there are some big decisions to be made for the people under the Assad regime as to whether they still believe they should continue supporting him. It is a very important to recognise when that moment will be and how the international community will respond. If we were to take Assad’s regime—that space—a lot of warlordism is taking place there, and it is not a state as we know it, but it is not dead. If it is a patient, do we want that patient to die completely? Do we want Assad to be overrun, with all the criminality and the vacuum of power that would be filled in not just by al-Nusra but by ISIL, al-Qaeda and all the others? Or do we want that patient to remain alive enough so that we can have the infrastructure and the state capability there, for the Syrian coalition Government or others such as Alawites and Sunnis, who are the quiet voices who no longer believe that the future is with Assad? They would then be able to move it forward, rather than have the state collapse completely, which would be terrible for the entire region.

Q186 Sir John Stanley: Minister, what is the Government’s present estimate of the number of IS fighters in Syria and Iraq?

Mr Ellwood: Figures vary around 20,000 to 30,000. As I just alluded to, they are sadly continually being replenished. Many, often from around the region, are joining forces and being trained in small numbers. So the estimate is anything between 20,000 and 30,000.

Q187 Sir John Stanley: So you reject recent reports that the British Government's figures are massively understating the number of IS fighters.

Mr Ellwood: I am not sure what you mean. Do you mean the number of those Britons who have chosen to leave here and go there?

Q188 Sir John Stanley: No, I mean the total number of IS fighters. Recent reports, including in the media, claim that the British Government's stated figures are massively underestimating the actual number.

Mr Ellwood: I do not think we are ever going to get an exact figure. Ultimately they are a combination of military capability and insurgency. There is not a roll call as such that we can lean on. These are estimates.

Q189 Sir John Stanley: I understand that but we are not talking about a marginal difference. We are talking about quantum number differences. I think your official may recognise the reports I am referring to, which have been in six-figure numbers rather than five.

Edward Oakden: I think Sir John is referring to Fuad Hussein, national security adviser in the KRG, who alleged that the Islamic State has an army of 200,000. He was directing his ire at the Americans as much as anyone. Our evidence does not support that in the terms in which he said it. I think the point he was trying to make is that the so-called Daesh Islamic State control an area that is a third of Syria, a third of Iraq, which includes several million people, and how such a small number of fighters could control that.

One first has to analyse the structure of the Daesh. It has what they call—their term, not ours—the tip of the spear, who are the people who do the fighting. That is really small, probably in single figures of thousands. Then there are the people who come in afterwards, then the great mass who go along with the numbers who sustain. It is difficult to get hard facts but the incidental evidence is that the number of people, for example, who run the IS administration in Mosul, Raqqa or other places is very small. By any standard, this figure of 200,000 looks massively inflated.

Mr Ellwood: There are also many tribes that have simply chosen to put up their hands and say, "I support ISIL. They have come through my neck of the woods, down the Tigris river. I don't want to have a fight with them. I am a Sunni. I feel better off than I did under Maliki or Assad. I am happy because they seem to be the winning side at the moment. I will then support that." Do you include those numbers as fighters or supporters? There is a grey area when you count the numbers.

Q190 Sir John Stanley: Do the Government agree that within the IS areas in Syria and particularly Iraq, IS is trying to carry out enforced conscription of additional fighters from men down to young adolescent boys?

Mr Ellwood: It is fair to say that that is what is happening. ISIL uses a sense of fear to force the individuals who went there with the intent to fight. Britons who have returned or

gone to Europe have said that they were monitored, and if they were seen not to continue to fight with the same level of energy that they had when they went out there they would be killed or somehow persecuted. You are absolutely right that ISIL is using a massive amount of fear and brutality to contain the ranks.

Q191 Mr Roy: Minister, may I ask you about the consular services in Erbil? At the moment, the consulate is running from the seventh floor of a hotel. Is that good enough, and does it allow optimal service?

Mr Ellwood: I visited the consulate, and when we arrived I was surprised by its location. It is fair to say that the Kurdish region is in a very different place today to where it was in June. I am pleased that reinforcements are coming in from DFID, the MOD and the FCO to bolster the numbers. I will have to get back to you with more information about the location. I don't want to commit us to a new building. There is a question about whether that is the right location for it, bearing in mind our increased involvement and commitment in northern Iraq.

Q192 Mr Roy: The Committee's understanding is that there is an undertaking for a new building, which was supposed to open in the second half of next year. Is that correct?

Mr Ellwood: I do not know the times.

Q193 Chair: Why is it taking so long?

Edward Oakden: There is a plot of land and an existing plan to build a consulate general that would have been adequate to the circumstances before the ISIL onslaught. Why was it taking so long to get off the ground? Because we were having a number of issues with the local Kurdish authorities about land use, getting the necessary utilities tied in, getting the necessary permissions to build and so on and so forth. It became clear, after everything that happened in June, July and August, that we were going to go into a spike of activity. We are trying to judge where the new normal will be for 2016-17 and onwards, and what sort of building will be adequate to those requirements. We are pretty sure that what we were going to build in 2013-14 will not be adequate.

Q194 Mr Roy: Are you now telling the Committee that there is no agreement to open a new consulate in the second half of 2015? That is what the Committee was told. Are you now saying that that is not the case?

Edward Oakden: We cannot physically meet the timetable to build—

Q195 Mr Roy: So you are saying that.

Edward Oakden: Well, hold on. If I may finish, the timetable to complete a new consulate building by next summer became impractical about seven or eight months ago. That timetable was going to take another six or nine months. The point is that the building that it would have produced is no longer large enough for what we will need. We are trying to work out urgently what sort of new building we will need. Are the present facilities adequate? No, they are not. Clearly, we recognise that, which is why we were trying to build a new building.

Q196 Mr Roy: We need to get this clear. They planned to move by the second half of 2015, but that has now been stopped.

Edward Oakden: Well, the timetable to achieve that by 2015 is no longer practical for the reasons I have explained, but from about seven months ago, when we couldn't get the necessary permissions, it was not going to be anyway.

Q197 Mr Roy: Can you understand the local frustrations about, for example, the fact that it took the FCO so long to look at the previous building it was going to rent that the Russians gazumped it? We are now talking about another extension. When we were there, we were under the impression that the building is going to open in the second half of 2015. Can you understand local politicians' frustration when they perceive the United Kingdom to be dragging its heels on this particular project?

Mr Ellwood: You make an important point and I hear that loud and clear. I would like to think that local politicians judge Britain on our commitment, our investment and our relationship, not just on the building itself. If I may, I will investigate further and if I can, I will write to the Committee to explain what is actually happening with the plans. Bear in mind that from June to today, the size of accommodation has grown from what was needed before because we have upgraded the number of staff that will be working in northern Iraq.

Chair: That would be helpful, particularly because we saw the Germans with a nice shiny new building over there.

Q198 Mr Roy: Can I go on to the joint ministerial committee and the promise that it would be set up, which we were told about again when we were there? Can you advise us as to whether that is the case and whether that joint ministerial committee is up and running? It was supposed to be set up after the visit here by Kurdish politicians in May.

Edward Oakden: When Prime Minister Nechervan Barzani was here in May we agreed that we would set up this committee, but, not surprisingly, the Kurdish Government have had other things to focus on since then. When we have seen him in the KRG since, when the Foreign Secretary was there just over a month ago, we agreed that it was something we needed to press ahead with and we firmly intend to do that.

Q199 Mr Roy: Just to clarify, it has not been set up or started yet?

Edward Oakden: It has not met for the first time yet.

Q200 Mr Roy: It sounds very like your consulate building in Erbil, Minister. Can you update us as to whether there are any plans to work with the Kurdistan Regional Government on reform and improvement of public service delivery locally?

Mr Ellwood: There are a number of areas, not just on security, where we are endeavouring to strengthen relationships. That is something that Britain does very well and, indeed, I think there is some training now taking place. You can ask me if it has started or if they have yet met, but I am not sure—

Edward Oakden: It has.

Q201 Mr Roy: I think we get the drift, Minister.

Mr Ellwood: Yes, you got the flavour of it. We are now training civil servants in various Ministries and working with them in order to improve the Government's transparency and accountability.

Q202 Mr Roy: And locally?

Mr Ellwood: Yes.

Q203 Chair: Do you think the UK's business footprint is as large as it could be?

Mr Ellwood: It is worth mentioning the Vision 2020 document, which relates to the last question, but also to this one. Can I ask why you ask the question?

Q204 Chair: Why do I ask the question? Because it is the job of the Committee to exercise oversight of Foreign Office policy.

Mr Ellwood: That is in no doubt. I think Britain has the largest number of businesses operating in northern Iraq than any other country. That is why I ask—we are actually in a very strong position—but obviously we want to be able to do more.

Q205 Chair: Let me give you a more detailed answer. When we were in Erbil we picked up the vibe that the UK presence was not as strong as it could be and that companies and corporations from other countries were far more active. To give you some examples, there is our travel advice, the UKBA, which has to complete its check at Erbil airport, and the lack of direct air links in the UK, to name but three.

Mr Ellwood: As I say, there already exists a huge footprint. Britain is very well established in both northern Iraq and also the south, not least with the hydrocarbons. Staying with the oil and gas industry, there have been difficulties with licensing agreements and the approval of Baghdad, which is why some companies have chosen to focus on Basra, the oil refineries and the work down there, and then not bothered to go anywhere near Erbil, because of the differences. That, I hope, is advancing and, with the oil agreement that we have, we can now see companies being able to do both and not feeling that they are being shunted away.

There is more work that we can do. We are looking to take more businesses out. UKTI is soon to be established in the consulate. We will be bringing more businesses to Erbil in order to introduce them to the opportunities there. The particular sectors that we want to invest in—or are already investing in—that I am aware of, are health care, education, infrastructure, and legal and financial services.

Q206 Chair: Direct air links?

Mr Ellwood: Direct air links need to happen. There is nothing more frustrating than having to stop off at Vienna on the way and so forth. There is a note on this, if I remember. I will quickly familiarise myself. There are some issues to do with the British being able to

check on the airside of the Erbil terminal. If we can get these sorted, from a British perspective, we are very keen for direct flights to happen. It then requires an airline to be able to pick this up. There are some issues to be dealt with, including certification of standard of security from a British perspective, which is extremely high, as you would appreciate. Once those are confirmed, I hope that any airline, but a British airline in particular, will pick up and have a direct flight from Erbil. I appreciate as much as everybody on this Committee the importance of direct flights.

Q207 Chair: Are there any plans to review the travel advice?

Mr Ellwood: Travel advice is constantly under review. It is something that I have to sign off personally myself, so I am aware of that. I will certainly take a look at it. I think we took a look at it quite recently, but I will certainly take a look at it for this Committee. We have to bear in mind the environment that we are dealing with, but I hope it has been proved, to the extent that it can be, that I am very keen for British business to flourish in northern Iraq, for the Kurdistan region to do as well as possible and for Britain to participate in that. If there is a possibility of reducing the threats and travel advice, I will certainly engage in that.

Q208 Chair: Going back to Frank Roy's question about regional government, I and, I think, other colleagues picked up the vibe that once the financial differences between Erbil and Baghdad have been sorted out and they have made good progress on this, there is the possibility that there may be an independence referendum in Kurdistan. Do you think that is possible?

Mr Ellwood: I think there is an awful lot of work to be done in other areas that need to be focused on. I am aware that this is something that the people of Kurdistan want to approach. I think it is also in the constitution to be considered. I believe this is a difficult neighbourhood and the Government believe that Iraq is stronger for having the influence of the Kurds in Baghdad. I think the integrity, security and economic prosperity are better pursued with the country remaining as it is.

Chair: The Clerk has pointed out that I have just pinched Andy Rosindell's question on that, for which, apologies. Would you like to come back on it now?

Q209 Andrew Rosindell: Yes, I would like to come back on it. Minister, the nation of Iraq was an artificial construction. The reality is that the people of Kurdistan would like to have independence at some point; there is no doubt about that. Is it not time for the UK to think about how, in the long term, the region and the boundaries of the nations can be changed and recreated to ensure that there is more stability and more ability to create stronger nations longer term, than the instability which I don't think can ever be resolved on the current boundaries?

Mr Ellwood: I can only repeat what I have just said. It is our view that the country is far stronger. The Kurds have a pragmatic approach with the other two major players, the Shi'ites and the Sunnis, in providing collective, transparent, integrated government in Baghdad. That is why I believe that in not only the country itself, but in the region itself, security and economic prosperity is better met by the country staying as one.

Q210 Andrew Rosindell: I understand that point. It is a valid point, but, as time goes on, is it fair to expect the Kurds to tie themselves to an artificial construction, of which they do not feel part, when they have proved themselves able to run a successful state independently of that? Surely, we should give the people of Kurdistan the right to have self-determination, as we would with anywhere else in the world.

Mr Ellwood: You are actually answering your own question in the sense that anywhere else in the world can follow our wonderful example that we had not long ago in Scotland, but that was done with the consent of the entire country. We had a result and that was honoured. That is important. Anywhere in the world that wishes to test whether a part of the country should go down the independence route should remember that.

Q211 Andrew Rosindell: I am not 100% certain it was with the consent of the rest of the United Kingdom that Scotland was potentially going to be independent.

Mr Ellwood: Are you saying that if there was a vote in England as to whether we should keep Scotland, there might have been a different answer?

Q212 Andrew Rosindell: I do not think there was a UK agreement. We allowed Scotland to make a choice, or the Government did. But we are going down a side road here.

Sir Menzies Campbell: A rather dangerous one, if I may say so.

Q213 Andrew Rosindell: Indeed. My point very simply concerns the people of Kurdistan, or certainly the Kurdish region of Iraq. If the UK Government were to support them to become independent, what criteria would need to be laid down before such a decision was made?

Mr Ellwood: We are moving into a hypothesis here, and it would be dangerous for any Government to start building parameters to do with what might or might not take place if a particular part of a country wanted to seek independence. I stress that this is a tough neighbourhood. The Kurds have a powerful influencing force—a powerful stabilising force—in Iraq as a whole, and the country is the stronger for it.

Q214 Andrew Rosindell: So are we against any possibilities in principle that Iraq must stay together come what may, or can you see circumstances in future whereby it may be not only in the Kurds' interests, but in the UK's interests, to allow separate states to evolve from the ashes of what we are seeing in the Middle East at the moment?

Mr Ellwood: I invite you to ask the same question many times, but perhaps with different wording. I am afraid it will be the same answer. The country is far stronger as one integral solid Iraq.

Q215 Nadhim Zahawi: Minister, in February 2013, on a motion from me, the House resolved without Division, "That this House formally recognises the genocide against the people of Iraqi Kurdistan", and encouraged the Government to do the same. The then Minister, Alistair Burt, to his credit, did not oppose the motion. He said that we could have further meetings to look at the issue, although the Government's position remained the same and it was not for the Government to decide whether genocide had been committed in this

case. We have heard some evidence in our inquiry that the Government's policy of non-recognition of the Anfal may damage the standing of the UK in Kurdistan. What is your response to that?

Mr Ellwood: First, the horrors of war should never be forgotten. I am grateful to the High Representative, Bayan Rahman, who took a British delegation to the memorial. It is incredibly moving to go to any of these locations and learn about the horrific history. It is important that we do not forget and that we learn from it.

What happened in Halabja in 1988 is for the criminal courts—it is a judicial matter, I am afraid, to use that term for genocide—rather than for any Government to label it. The International Criminal Court has made that clear. There is something called the Rome statute, which means, I understand, that with anything predating 2002, when the criminal court was established, you cannot go back in retrospect and use that judicial term itself. They have their reasons for coming out with that line of only looking to events that happened once the court was established.

With that said, I think it is important that we mark Anfal day. Indeed, my predecessor attended the event last April. I certainly would hope to do so next year. It is important that we do not forget what happened back in 1988.

Q216 Mr Baron: Minister, further to your earlier aside in answer to Mike Gapes about asking questions in a sort of silo approach and your confusion about traps, our remit is to actually scrutinise our own Government. Having said that, we obviously frame the questions as broadly as possible, taking into account regional alliances etc. In that vein, when it comes to the defence of the people of Kurdistan against ISIL, we have not really touched upon our regional allies. What more could we do to encourage a broader approach and greater support? What is the British Government doing? What is the West doing in order to encourage more regional support to achieve our overall objectives, given that we all accept air strikes alone will not achieve the task, and we do not want to put western troops on the ground?

Mr Ellwood: First, to answer the military aspect of it, I repeat what I said before; we are part of a wider equation, and the offering that we provide is what has been requested of us. If there are further requests, for example, to participate in Syria then they will be taken on board and, if requiring a vote in Parliament, so be it. We have to remember that we have to take the nation with us on this and have the support of the nation, which is why the Prime Minister brought this to Parliament in the first case.

You ask a very important question, which I do not think is asked enough, because it is actually quite easy to defeat militarily any insurgency; but you will not defeat the idea. That vacuum can be quickly refilled unless another ideology—a recognised, accepted ideology, that everybody else accepts—comes in, in its place. I think not enough is done to discredit ISIL or delegitimise its ideology.

In answer to your question if I think that there is more than can be done, it is for the region itself—it is the moderate Sunni voices—to offer and say, “Actually Islam is a peaceful religion. This is not what we stand for. This is not who we are. This is not the calling that you should be listening to,” and pursue a different ideology, which will see peace in Iraq and Syria.

Q217 Mr Baron: It is a fair point. You have got to take on the ideology as well as the force on the ground, but the immediate threat, when it comes to Kurdistan—and that is the purpose of this inquiry—is the ISIL threat in front of them. You have in the nicest possible way sidetracked the question. Coming back to military support—coming back to any other support; one accepts the point about ideology, but is there anything more our regional allies could do to help in taking on ISIL on the ground?

Mr Ellwood: I would say that the strategy at the moment, which is allowing the space for both the Peshmerga and, indeed, the Iraqi national forces, is working. I would say that the air campaign is providing the attrition that we need to hold back ISIL in Iraq itself. I think Syria, as has been exposed here a little bit is a bigger challenge. There is no doubt about it; but I think in what we are seeing there the strategy is working.

Q218 Mr Baron: So they are not needed, in short. Regional allies—support on the ground—are not needed, because the policy we are pursuing is working.

Mr Ellwood: No, I did not say that. I think that the strategy is working. What we do not want to do—Iraq does not want to see any other countries bringing in and putting boots on the ground, because that would compound the matter. They must answer and take over the space, push back that ideology and provide that security environment for the country to move forward peacefully. Having said that, there is more military support for the Peshmerga from the north itself, so there is more military capability and training, which can come from a variety of sources. I think that Germany has just brought in some more equipment, such as the MILAN anti-tank weapon system. I would like to see more done regionally as well.

Q219 Mark Hendrick: Minister, you mentioned that, whatever happens, the IS ideology will still be there. Is that not also helped by the fact that IS has had considerable financial resources made available to them now that they are selling so much illicit oil on the black market? They have also taken over banks and the like to get currency as well. Is that not part of the equation in terms of winning over a population who even though they may not like the ideology are nevertheless prepared to live under it, however difficult that may be?

Mr Ellwood: You raise an important point. Many are simply tolerating it because they feel that they have no other choice. That goes back to the situation that developed under Assad, where the Sunnis were not given free space and ended up rallying around a flag, which ended up being extremist. That complicates the challenge that we face.

Q220 Mark Hendrick: Do you think that that challenge is insurmountable? Can we win this from the air with a little help on the ground?

Mr Ellwood: Sir, I think you oversimplify what is happening on the ground, as opposed to what we are actually doing to contribute. What is taking place is not simply an air campaign; there is a multi-faceted approach in order to take on the capability, not least in supporting indigenous ground troops to take on the fight themselves.

Q221 Mark Hendrick: How long do you think it will last?

Mr Ellwood: I would not like to speculate, but I should perhaps urge caution in expecting anything in months or years. This will take a number of years. Al-Qaeda as an ideology in effect remains with us—there is a competition between ISIL and AQ at the moment—even though its leader was killed in Pakistan a number of years ago.

Q222 Sir Menzies Campbell: Minister and Mr Oakden, forgive me for not being present when you began your evidence. It is worth remembering that President Obama, when asked to say how long he thought it would take, said something like two or three years, so there is some corroboration for what you have just said from across the Atlantic.

Mr Ellwood: I am glad to know that President Obama is in agreement with me. I am pleased to hear that.

Q223 Sir Menzies Campbell: I am sure that he is quite relieved as well.

How far do you think success would be made easier if there could be serious disruption of the black market in oil from which ISIS is profiting considerably?

Mr Ellwood: We are aware that oil is actually being bought by Assad himself, oddly enough. There is an awful lot that is going through the black market in other quarters. There are enormous borders with Jordan and Turkey and so forth, and it is difficult to ensure that they are policed. Hostages are also being taken. You are aware that we have our own hostage situation, but ISIL has many Lebanese hostages, but it making much lower demands, which keeps the money coming in, because they are paid off. Sadly, there are also many individual donors from around the world that continue to fund ISIL and the ideology. One of the reasons why UN Security Council resolution 2170 was adopted was to prevent individuals from any country, rather than simply states, from breaking the law and continuing to fund terrorism in that manner.

Q224 Sir Menzies Campbell: I understand all that. I should really have asked a more direct question. Is any action being taken to try to disrupt the black market in oil?

Mr Ellwood: There are a number of sites, without giving too much away—

Sir Menzies Campbell: I understand.

Mr Ellwood: I think you sit on another Committee that probably looks into this as well. Operationally, we are trying to disturb the oil patterns.

Sir Menzies Campbell: I am content to leave it at that. Thank you very much.

Chair: Minister and Mr Oakden, thank you very much indeed. It is really helpful to us when we have sessions like this one, where we can speak quite openly and freely and get the evidence that we need.

Mr Ellwood: As long as we keep it to ourselves, that is okay.

Chair: I am afraid that I cannot assure you on that.