



Defence Committee

Oral evidence: [The Situation in Iraq and Syria and the threat posed by Islamic State in Iraq and The Levant \(ISIL\)](#), HC 690 Wednesday 3 December 2014

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Members present: Rory Stewart (Chair); Richard Benyon; Mr Jeffrey M. Donaldson; Mr James Gray; Mr Dai Havard; Dr Julian Lewis; Mrs Madeleine Moon; Sir Bob Russell; Ms Gisela Stuart; Derek Twigg and John Woodcock.

Questions 286-366

Witnesses: **Lt General Sir Simon Mayall**, Defence Senior Adviser to the Middle East, **Lt General Gordon Messenger RM**, Deputy Chief of Defence Staff Military Strategy and Operations, and **Peter Watkins**, Director General Security Policy, gave evidence.

Q286 Chair: Welcome to this session of the Defence Select Committee on the situation in Iraq and Syria, and specifically on the threat posed by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant.

An apology, first, to Lieutenant General Sir Simon Mayall, because unfortunately his name tag does not include his well-deserved knighthood. We apologise for that, and thank you for coming.

May I begin with a relatively straightforward question? We have quite a lot of colleagues to get in in a relatively limited time, and I will hand over to them rapidly, but could you perhaps begin, General Mayall, by giving us a sense of what the priorities should be for defence engagement in the Middle East?

Lt General Sir Simon Mayall: I am Lieutenant General Sir Simon Mayall, as the Chairman said. I am the defence senior adviser for the Middle East and I equally carry the role of security envoy to the Kurdish region of Iraq, although that is a wider remit across all Iraq.

My fairly consistent theme about engagement in the Middle East is that it is an area that is highly complex, highly complicated, and encloses within it a very wide range of British interests—political, diplomatic, military, commercial, financial. It is an area where the United Kingdom cannot afford not to be engaged or not to approach with a well educated and long-term mindset. It will throw up both threats and opportunities for many years to

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come, and I think we happen to be a country that has both a history and responsibility for being engaged there. I think there remains an extraordinary amount of both affection, in a funny sense, and respect and regard for this country; and therefore my very consistent message throughout my career—because I have spent a lot of time in the Middle East in all sorts of guises, be it in areas of the Gulf, Iraq, Iraq again, now—is that the United Kingdom should remain very firmly engaged politically, diplomatically, militarily, across the board. So that is my major message about the Middle East.

Q287 Chair: Can I bring in other witnesses? Priorities for defence engagement in the Middle East: Peter Watkins.

Peter Watkins: I agree with much, indeed all, of what Simon said. Our priorities are to support the very rich web of alliances and partnerships that we have with the Gulf states. Our military relations with them are central to those relationships, whether it is providing training or close contacts between the respective armed services. So in terms of the current inquiry, that defence engagement is very much supporting our wider political engagement with those countries, which is in turn underpinning our strategy towards containing and defeating ISIL.

Lt General Gordon Messenger: I have little to add. Quite a significant military hardware footprint in the Gulf region—yes, it is there to deliver security to the region; yes, it is there as part of a sort of coalition, including GCC, counter-Iranian influence in the region; but it is also there to progress wider national objectives, both security and otherwise.

Q288 Chair: In terms of the resources behind this rhetoric, recent answers to parliamentary questions reveal that the military has so far trained zero personnel in level 4, expert level, Arabic, and only six personnel in level 3, professional level, Arabic. Do you really have the resources in order to fulfil these kinds of objectives? In particular—let us bring in General Mayall—could you reflect on the comparison with the kind of investment that the French, for example, put into this kind of activity?

Lt General Sir Simon Mayall: I would say we have the resources. I think, again, this comes back to my earlier answer about the question of a mindset that thinks in terms of decades and not years. It is a mindset that then needs to be underpinned by a policy that I think should—on the basis of what I was saying earlier on: this long historical connection we have got—and I think will, go on inevitably. It is non-discretionary to be dealing, I feel, in the Islamic, Arabic-speaking world. I do think we have been a bit neglectful. I say that as a country; I say that probably as an institution.

I do think our French partners are more ruthless in using their military footprint around the world for *raisons d'état*. I could quote one or two examples where I have come across highly professional French officers who have been deeply immersed in the intelligence, language, diplomatic sphere, whereby I think they support wider French interests slightly better. Peter is in charge of policy on this. It is a comment, not criticism.

I really do hope that, as we move some of the elements of the last SDSR, one of the defence engagement issues I hope we will take into the next SDSR will be this acknowledgement, at the very high political level, should I say, and asking the military to then have the “So whats?”—that we should be investing very firmly in the generation of

young captains, for instance, at this stage, who will sit in front of future House of Commons Defence Committees, in our sort of rank and experience, but to whom we give better tools to do this pell-mell diplomatic engagement in areas of the world where things are so critical.

Q289 Chair: You very kindly offered to give us a couple of examples of the French. Can you give us a sense of the French defence attaché or maybe a French position in the UAE, or some sense of their resources and training or experience?

Lt General Sir Simon Mayall: The one example I have used many times just within the Ministry of Defence was a French colonel in Libya who had had a year's intelligence training. He had had a year's or two year's Arabic language training. He had been to Egyptian staff college. He had spent three years as the defence attaché in Cairo, three years as the defence attaché in UAE. He was doing his second year and he probably would have done three years in Tripoli if, like the rest of us, he had not been pushed out by the crisis in Libya. I just feel that it is not for everyone, but there is an element of our armed forces that should be put on that mindset. We could do this much better than the French; we just need to have a mindset that is prepared to invest in it. The United Kingdom would be much the better for it, with its global footprint, if we had a bit more of a cadre of people.

Peter Watkins: May I add something, Chair, partly drawing on my previous role as director-general of the Defence Academy? We have actually made a considerable investment over the past couple of years in upgrading and improving our language tuition. As you know, we closed the old school at Beaconsfield and moved it to Shrivenham; we made a considerable investment in much better teaching and learning facilities. I cannot challenge your precise figures, but we do train people in Arabic—perhaps not as many as we should, to the level that you said, but we are making a major investment in that respect. The other thing that we are doing, and Simon alluded to it, is developing what we are calling a defence engagement stream, so that young officers have the chance to do a succession of postings, either serving in or related to particular parts of the world. Over their careers, they can build up considerable expertise. I would not want you to get the impression that we are miles behind on this, because we are not.

Q290 Chair: The full figures for what has so far been achieved are, at level 4: in Dari, one member of the armed forces; in Arabic, nil; and in Pashto, one. I would suggest politely that we have a very, very long way to go before we start patting ourselves on the back. I am interested to know why we are not achieving those levels.

Peter Watkins: We train large numbers to lower levels, because—

Chair: At the level below, level 3, the total number speaking Arabic and qualified is six. I would like to push back to learn a little more about that, but I will now come to James Gray.

Q291 Mr Gray: May I ask what will sound like a personal question? I do not mean it to, because we are very old friends indeed, and I am not trying to make the question personal. None the less, by comparison with the French officer in Tripoli whom you described, Simon, can you give us a flavour of the training and things that you had after we left last year? Have you got Arabic, for example? What have you been put through? The job you have done

is so fantastic—everyone says how brilliant it all was—so it would be interesting to get a flavour of the kind of training that the military provided before you went on it.

Lt General Sir Simon Mayall: I continue to thrive, dare I say, on 10 weeks of Arabic language training in 1985. I was very fortunate then to go and command a tank squadron in Oman. One of my fellow squadron leaders there is now the Chief of Defence Staff of Oman. It is that type of investment, but I have been dealing with the Arabic world ever since then. I am afraid that this is endemic, and this is a comment across many decades—and it is four decades that I have been in the military nearly now. We have not seized this concept that we are still much loved, respected, renowned in the Arabic-speaking world, and we would do well—harking back to Peter, being the former director-general of the Defence Academy—to invest a lot more in it. In those parts of the world where, through the prism of defence and security, we gain this influence, access and privileged position, which the United Kingdom should aspire to, we should be hugely ambitious in terms of both the opportunities there and our responsibilities for threats. We should have a mindset, although it is not something that you can turn on overnight. We should actively be giving people the tools to move in the area. I can go to a certain level and I can categorically say that I am the best Arabic speaker of my generation across all three services, but that is a complete indictment, not a boast at all. People of my ilk in 20 years' time should be much better equipped, because we are never not going to be dealing with the part of the world that the Committee is looking at today.

It is just a process start and Peter is right—absolutely, under his guidance of the Defence Academy much more was done, but as your statistics show, Chair, it takes a long time to get to that level 4. We have got to start somewhere, and you need a mindset that says, “We are going to need these Arabists,” because then we would not need to be going in with interpreters the whole time, or only dealing with those who can speak English; we can tackle things. That French defence attaché just swung through, talking to all the worker bees in the Ministries of Defence and the Ministries of Foreign Affairs—huge intelligence gathering—but we do not have that.

Q292 Chair: Let's move on to ISIL—Daesh, the Islamic State. Given that, what sort of resources do we really have focused on Iraq and Syria? For example, what presence do we have of a defence section in northern Iraq? Where were we six months ago? Where are we now? Do we have the depth of expertise required to get a detailed understanding of the enemy?

Peter Watkins: I will ask Gordon to add to this in a minute, because he has been there quite recently. We have had a defence section in Iraq, in Baghdad, for a long time.

Q293 Chair: In Irbil specifically—in northern Iraq?

Peter Watkins: And we have had a deputy DA—I think I would probably call him that to avoid any legal complications—in Irbil for some months.

Q294 Chair: When did he arrive?

Lt General Gordon Messenger: He arrived in response to the increased effort to provide, initially, humanitarian support to the Kurds, so before that we did not have a defence section in Irbil and the defence section in Baghdad had responsibility for Irbil.

Q295 Chair: So would I be right in saying that at the moment at which the Islamic State mounted its advance on Gwer and Makhmour, there was no defence section in northern Iraq? I am talking now about August.

Lt General Gordon Messenger: That is right, yes.

Peter Watkins: But Iraq is still a unitary state. The capital is Baghdad. It is our normal practice to put defence sections in the capital, where they work with the Defence Ministry and the other Ministries of the Government concerned, so it wasn't that unusual.

Q296 Chair: Given that, Peter, why have you now put an assistant defence attaché into northern Iraq if you did not think that that was necessary before the advance on Gwer and Makhmour?

Peter Watkins: Quite clearly, there is a lot more activity going on in and around Irbil now than there was before, so it is easier, from a communications and liaison perspective, to have a deputy to the defence attaché based in Irbil. It's pragmatism.

Q297 Chair: Do you think that you might have been a little better equipped in August at the moment at which the Islamic State advanced on Irbil if you had, like the Americans, had a defence attaché on the ground and able to visit the front line?

Peter Watkins: That is speculative. I think the speed and scale of the ISIL advance all those months ago took many people by surprise.

Lt General Gordon Messenger: I would also say that although you are right that there was not a defence section specifically associated with Irbil, the defence section in Baghdad took its responsibilities with the Kurds in Irbil very seriously and was the conduit through which we gained understanding of the situation. It is not just a defence issue. In terms of understanding the situation prior to the ISIL advance, there was a cross-Government effort in Irbil and we were privy to some information flowing from that endeavour while the incident played out.

Q298 Chair: General Mayall, would you like to reflect a little on the kind of resources that we have in understanding the enemy and the threat posed by the Islamic State—the resources that we had before August and the resources that we have now? Are they adequate? Could we do more? Have we really got to grips with this target?

Lt General Sir Simon Mayall: The interesting thing, to answer your previous question, is that we ended up with two very distinct military problems as a result of the advance of Daesh. Nobody anticipated that the KRG and the peshmerga would be fighting, as it were, a separate war. Within three weeks or less than that, they had a 1,050-km front line with a terrorist state and a 15-km front line with the rest of the Iraqi state. That was why it became critical to treat the area around Baghdad, Ambar, etc., as one military problem, let alone a political or diplomatic military problem. Then, when we had to do our best to keep the peshmerga in the fight, we had to reinforce in Irbil, so I think that's right.

Overall, we were, like the Americans—since 2011, with the combination of an American desire to get out of Iraq and, dare I say, a Maliki desire, probably inspired by Iran, to get western influences out, it has not been an easy environment to be in. I think we have now got a very good footprint across the region, in all the headquarters and in the Ministries of

Defence. We all understand—I'm sure people will cover this if we move on to it—that it is the politics in Baghdad that is going to be the long pole in the tent. But in terms of gathering the coalition politics, in terms of keeping the contribution of the ISF and in terms of our contribution to the peshmerga and our ability to move in and out of the Ministries and the various operational command centres, I think we are now very well placed. I think we were probably no less taken by surprise than the Iraqi Government were in August.

Q299 Mrs Moon: I wondered if we had a sense of where this is going. The focus today is on the Middle East, but we are beginning to hear of a wider threat. Are we making sure that we are aware of that wider threat and that we are prepared, should it grow? I am thinking in particular of the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Peter Watkins: You mean a wider threat from violent Islamic extremism?

Q300 Mrs Moon: No, I mean from IS.

Peter Watkins: I can't say very much about that—my colleague might be able to add to it. Yes, there are rumours and speculation that there may be some sort of broader IS presence spreading towards the east, and that's obviously something we are watching very carefully.

Lt General Gordon Messenger: I think IS are quite a big brand at the moment, and therefore association with that brand is something that violent extremists might seek. That is something that we are seeing—not to an enormous extent, but certainly to some extent—looking both east and west in the area you described, but also in areas of north Africa.

Lt General Sir Simon Mayall: IS, AQ, Ansar Beit al-Maqdis, Jund al-Islam—all these are manifestations, some of them regional or cultural, of this unfortunate extremist ideology at the heart of Islam. There is almost a bit of a competition between AQ senior leadership and, now, the Islamic State for loyalty and the bayat, as they call it—the oath of allegiance—either to Zawahiri or al-Baghdadi. What you talk about in Pakistan and Afghanistan is a manifestation of the old issues we have had with al-Qaeda and the various Taliban areas, be they Afghan or Pakistani, but they are just morphing through a slightly different prism with IS. So the brand name which we picked up—you will remember AQ in the Maghreb, AQ in the Arabian Peninsula—is beginning to become IS in the FATA, IS in the Sahel. So there is a bit of a competition for which brand appears to be most attractive, but the core of it, I'm afraid, is this really very unpleasant ideological extremism.

Q301 Mrs Moon: But it is a brand that, as Mr Watkins said, caught us on the hop. Are we making sure that it does not catch us on the hop again, if it morphs into another area?

Peter Watkins: I did not say the brand caught us on the hop. ISIL, ISIS, Daesh—whatever you call it—has been around for several months, from the beginning of the year. What surprised people back in the summer was the sudden, if you like, resurgence, scale and velocity of the ISIS advance through Iraq in the direction of Baghdad.

Q302 Mrs Moon: What are we doing to make sure we don't get caught in the same way on the Afghan-Pakistan border? Are we keeping an eye on it?

Peter Watkins: Yes we are. Of course we are keeping an eye on it.

Lt General Gordon Messenger: The answer is yes, we are keeping an eye on it. What made what happened in Iraq and Syria unique was the mass and the speed at which that mass could be generated. We are keeping an eye on these flashpoints to ensure that that mass cannot be generated as quickly as it was. But at the heart of this is the issue of countering the ideology that Simon and Peter have talked about. That is a very strong strand to the work that we are doing domestically, but it is also something that regional leaders are actively pursuing to ensure that it has a Muslim front. We are working with some of those leaders to give the benefit of some of our experience, but it clearly needs to be led by them, and the messages need to be delivered by them.

Lt General Sir Simon Mayall: If I may just say—this goes back to the earlier question from the Chairman—this comes back down to our global footprint and how much we are prepared to resource the issues of defence engagement. Some members of the Committee will know that the Americans refer to this as phase-zero operations—in other words, your level of understanding of what is going on and your capacity to spot trends and see threats coming, and therefore to be able to manage a crisis, is that much better. This goes back to preparing our armed forces, our intelligence agencies and so on and having a footprint out there, precisely for—we are not alone here—western countries to see all the constant manifestations. I fear this type of threat, because this is absolutely a generational fight for the soul of Islam and a battle of ideas between moderation and extremism.

Q303 Mrs Moon: My question is about our preparedness and whether we are talking with other Governments and ensuring that we share with them whatever expertise and learning we have developed as we go along and whether there is an open door—in Afghanistan, a new Government have just come in—for Afghanistan and Pakistan to have access to that help and support, should they need it.

Peter Watkins: The British Government have developed considerable expertise in this whole area, not least in terms of some of the risks at home. There is the Prevent programme, and so on. We have developed that expertise and considerable understanding. In the context of the current campaign against ISIL, we have been working with partner Governments in the region. A conference was held in Kuwait recently to help them develop their communications and their messaging, working with moderate elements within Islam, and so on. We are working to gradually de-legitimise and isolate the ISIL brand, which is a particularly extreme and pernicious version of Islam that has, of course, been repudiated by most Muslims. We are definitely using our expertise and engaging with other Governments.

Q304 Mr Gray: My question is simple. If we had evidence that large parts of the various different groups that form the Afghan or Pakistani Taliban were regrouping under ISIL in one way or another, would that make them a greater threat than they are in disparate Taliban groups, which they are currently?

Lt General Gordon Messenger: In terms of capability, the answer is no. This goes back to the idea that the threat that you described was generated by a vacuum of governance and that the countries in which ISIL thrives were not able to contain the threat from within. A

strong part of ensuring that it does not flare up again is the development of capacities in the nations where there is a risk of a governance vacuum. That is in the area that you describe and in north-west Africa and other places around the world. Internationally, because this will never be a UK-only affair, there are strong collaborative partnerships to build capacity in those problem regions.

Q305 Ms Stuart: I think we have established that it is an intensely complicated conflict. We could probably understand the area a little better. Why are we intervening? Why are we there?

Peter Watkins: First of all, as the Government have set out many times, we believe that our national interests are at stake. It would not have been in our national interest to allow ISIL to pose a threat to the continuing existence of Iraq, as it did at one point. It would not have been in our national interest to allow ISIL to set up what would have been in effect a terrorist threat. It is well established—Ministers have said this many times—that there have been ISIL plots in this country and in countries that are close allies. That happened most recently in Ottawa. The answer is that it is not in our interest to allow this particular phenomenon to take hold.

Q306 Ms Stuart: So it is not in our national interest to allow people to come to the British isles to cause any difficulties. We have established something of a pattern of simply asserting the national interest without defining it. Back in August, it was not in the national interest to arm the peshmerga. It now is in our national interest, but no one ever explained how the national interest had been redefined. I come back to the point that it is an intensely complicated conflict, where even the players in the middle east—namely Turkey—are sitting on their hands watching this and not intervening. Why are we intervening?

Peter Watkins: If I may pick up on your point that it is a “complicated conflict”, it is precisely because it is “complicated” that there are a number of strands to our strategy. One is, if you like, the direct interdiction of terrorist threats to this country. That is mainly a law enforcement activity led by the Home Office. The other is to seek to contain and eventually roll back and defeat ISIL in Iraq and Syria.

Q307 Ms Stuart: Our six Harriers are not going to do that, are they?

Peter Watkins: Yes, but that involves a number of strands. The primary one is political. It is about doing what we can as a member of an international coalition—we are not doing this on our own; we are just one of many—to consolidate a more inclusive Government in Iraq. It is pretty clearly established that one of the reasons why ISIL took hold in the way that it did was the alienation of the Sunnis. It is about dealing with the humanitarian consequences of what has happened, because of the risk of radicalisation among internally displaced people, and about working with the neighbouring Governments, who can also contribute to this. Then of course it is simply about mitigating the consequences.

Q308 Ms Stuart: By which measure would we establish that by being there we were actually making the situation less complicated rather than making it even more complicated?

Lt General Gordon Messenger: We are certainly very live to the fact that being involved in that region as a western country, along with other western nations, risks exacerbating the radicalising effect. Therefore, as we calibrate our activity, including air strikes, we are very alive to that risk and take appropriate precautions.

There is an awful lot of polling in this country of the Muslim populations, and they are asked their view of the approach that has been taken. There is no sign that our military activity has led to any radicalisation in this country.

Q309 Ms Stuart: I am a Birmingham MP. I am fairly familiar with the difficulties of Muslim populations, but at this stage we are trying to deal with ISIL in Syria and Iraq. Is our being there as part of a coalition actually helping to solve the problem there, if it is meant to be in our national interest and not just about dealing with it domestically?

Peter Watkins: First of all, we said right from the outset that this would be a long, drawn-out process; it would not be done quickly.

Q310 Ms Stuart: No, I am not describing the process; I am trying to get to the reason why we are there.

Peter Watkins: You asked us how we were measuring what effect we were having. In terms of the situation on the ground, the ISIL advance that we saw back in the summer has been largely stopped and in places is being pushed back. So that is at the moment, if you like, how one can measure the success that we have achieved so far, but we have never pretended that this would be something that would be done quickly, and “success by Christmas”. It was going to take months, if not years.

Q311 Ms Stuart: That is still the process; I am still trying to get to the reason why we think we should be there.

Lt General Sir Simon Mayall: For me, the measurement of success is that Iraq is held together as a unitary state. I think if we lose Iraq, and the pressure on the Government forces a Shi’a-dominated Government to fall back, frankly, on its only natural supporters, which would be Tehran and the Iranians, then that historical competition between Turks, Persians—as they are largely referred to—and Arabs, which is largely where the big Venn diagram is in the whole sort of Sykes-Picot area, falls there. I think we will end up with Tehran, Baghdad, Damascus and then—up to a point—Beirut dominated really by Shi’a influenced by Persians, and a very, very large mass of completely disenfranchised Sunnis, within which they will act both as a catalyst for other Sunni extremists to come and join them, and then begin to feed those back.

So, to my mind, and I have always been a staunch believer in this, our measurement of success will be holding Iraq together, and—you need a lot of stars in alignment, given the centrifugal pressures in that area—keeping Arabs and Kurds together, and Sunni and Shi’a together, in something that looks unitary, with an inclusive Government. If we fail, we will lose that keystone, and the effect from the borders of Iran all the way through to the Mediterranean will, frankly, be disastrous. The situation in the Gulf states, whose stability we really need because they are a keystone in the global economy, like it or not, would become hugely pressurised, and I then think the alarm will go. There is a measure of success, but the success that we had, up to a point, in 2011 was squandered by the Maliki Government—it fell back on sectarians. Syria is hugely complex, but I genuinely think that a well thought through political and military strategy in Iraq could yet deliver us defined success. Funnily enough, the catalyst of ISIS has actually pushed Iraqi politicians into a position where yesterday, for the first time, we had an agreement between Irbil and

Baghdad on the distribution of hydrocarbon revenues. We have had to go a ghastly way through this to get sensible people to do sensible things together.

Q312 Ms Stuart: This is a massive coalition with a number of international partners, but the truth is that there is one very big partner, and then the rest of us to varying degrees. To what extent do the US strategy and our strategy correspond? Are there any differences in approach between us and the United States?

Peter Watkins: Our strategy is, in effect, a subset of a broader international strategy. We are not trying to solve this problem on our own. We have particular national objectives that we are trying to achieve and the first is related to the security of our own country. Fundamentally, we are trying to achieve those objectives through participation in an international coalition led by the US. To answer your question, we would seek consistency.

Q313 Dr Lewis: I hope to come back to strategy a bit later, but would it be fair to say that, when one looks at a situation that is dominated by militant Shi'ites and militant Sunnis, with very few democrats apparently involved, there are no really good outcomes to be had, but that some bad outcomes would be worse than others, such as if ISIL were to become dominant? Would it be fair to say that our strategy is one of containment, rather than seeking a victory that, as you just implied, Sir Simon, is rather difficult to define or envisage?

Peter Watkins: I do not think we have used the word “victory” because this is not a military campaign in a conventional sense. It is a military contribution to what is fundamentally a politically-led strategy. In terms of the situation on the ground, we believe that one big step forward, which took place a couple of months ago and the results are beginning to come through, was the emergence of what is clearly a much better Government in Baghdad, who are beginning to undo the damage done by their predecessors.

Q314 Dr Lewis: You say that you don't use the word “victory”, but in your written evidence you talk about three objectives. Two of those objectives certainly fit into what I would call a sensible strategy of containment, which you haven't yet confirmed or denied is or should be your policy. One objective is disrupting threats to the UK mainland and interests overseas, which is a very sensible, practical thing to do. Another objective is mitigating the impact of ISIL and other violent extremist groups on regional stability, which is another very sensible containment strand. But the other one is to say that, as part of an international coalition, our objective is to defeat ISIL—in other words, victory—including discrediting its violent ideology in Iraq and Syria. That is not a very achievable prospect, is it?

Peter Watkins: I disagree. It is not achievable quickly, and we never said that it would be achievable quickly. The strategy goes through a number of steps, and initially the strategy is about containment. Again, I refer back to the rapid moves that we saw during the summer. Eventually, if we are to achieve the other two objectives, we need to do more than just contain ISIL. We need to push it back and seek to destroy it as an organisation.

Q315 Dr Lewis: That means victory over ISIL then, as opposed to long-term containment, which is probably a more practicable aim.

Peter Watkins: Long-term containment would be less successful than rolling it back and, as I said, destroying it as an organisation, but that will take a long time.

Dr Lewis: I will leave it there for the moment.

Q316 John Woodcock: It is heartening to hear you say that the military campaign is part of a larger political strategy, because the panoply of witnesses who have given evidence to this inquiry so far have nearly all decried the lack of any such wider strategy. Can you explain a bit more about what it is and what its components are, beyond asking the Government to be more inclusive?

Peter Watkins: There are two main strands to the political strategy, which reflect, if you like, the political geography of the area we are dealing with. One is to achieve a more inclusive Government in Iraq that can manage more successfully the sorts of centrifugal pressures in that country that Simon referred to. As I said, we are beginning to see some encouraging progress now, despite the considerable pressures and difficulties on the Government, in terms of outreach to the Sunni tribes and undoing the institutional damage that was done to the Iraqi armed forces.

The second political strand, which I would accept is more difficult, because the situation is much more complicated, is to try to get a political process going in Syria that would result in an acceptable Government in Syria who could manage many of the same pressures, in the way that quite clearly the present Government have failed to do.

Q317 John Woodcock: Thank you, that is helpful. Leaving Syria to one side, I think we understood that that was the aim, but how is the UK going to make a contribution to achieve that? What is it doing? How do defence and other areas of the Government's reach abroad come into that? How is that happening?

Peter Watkins: Much of this, of course, is diplomatic activity carried out by our colleagues in the Foreign Office. It is about working in conjunction with the Americans and the regional partners and others to encourage and support the new Iraqi Government, who need the encouragement and support of friends. It is also about engaging through the UN and supporting the efforts of the new special envoy, de Mistura, and so on, to get a political process going in Syria.

The military contribution to that is, first, to contain ISIL, because if ISIL is not contained, these political processes simply will not have the space to develop. It is fundamentally about creating the space in which politics can work.

Lt General Gordon Messenger: You asked where defence fits in this. Clearly, outreach is profoundly a political activity, but there is a military bit to the offer that we, the Americans and others are involved in. Our principal task is likely to be to help train the army and develop its capacity to ensure that the armed forces are balanced, credible and as non-sectarian as they can be. As Simon has said, that was the problem in August—that the army was a Shi'a army in Sunni areas. It had been undermined by corruption and poor appointing by the then Prime Minister. Building something that has more substance, and is more balanced and more trusted across the communities is clearly the aim.

Lt General Sir Simon Mayall: Also, we talked about the old saying that war is politics by other means. Politics is war by other means. We can create the space for politics to gain ground, but if the politics does not gain ground, we are conducting a very difficult military campaign, which is, fundamentally, just back into containment. There are elements of pressure in Ankara not to encourage the KRG to split. There is pressure in Teheran—tied

in, of course, to all sorts of other Iranian ambitions there—to convince them that an inclusive Government that brings the Kurds and the Sunnis in is better for them than being on the front line against ISIS in the long term. There is pressure in Riyadh and, dare I say it, the Gulf states to help us do part of the Sunni outreach and reach out a bit to Abadi, as long as he repays that confidence by acting in a non-sectarian manner.

In the mean time, of course, as Gordon and Peter said, the key is to try to enable the Kurds, the peshmerga in particular, and the ISF to regain the confidence and have enough capacity and capability to take that fight. Everybody has been absolutely clear that nobody wants western combat boots on the ground, but we are also clear, as we have been in a number of these conflicts, that the enabling activity we bring in terms of intelligence, strike assets, counter-IED, for instance, and just general training is what will actually allow the ISF—ultimately, we hope, non-sectarian—plus the peshmerga, plus the national guard drawn from the tribes, plus the Shi'a militia drawn into the Iraqi security forces, to take the fight back to ISIL. To an extent, we will push that back into Syria, which will give us another problem. But Iraq is the place where we have the best chance to turn both the momentum and the narrative of ISIL and this extremist ideology. It is that combination of politics and military in combination.

Q318 John Woodcock: I understand that. What I am not hearing—perhaps this is just my inability to read—is much about how that would happen other than by diplomatic means and just sort of asking them. There must be something behind that, must there not? Just as the final question, would you accept that the failure that has created the rise of ISIL is not simply down to the failure of the Maliki Government alone; it is our failure to have reconstructed properly?

Lt General Sir Simon Mayall: A combination of Syria and then the failure of the Maliki Government is what turned ISIL, which was, as we say, Syria and Iraq and all that—

Q319 John Woodcock: But Iraq was not a wonderful state that was about to flourish and was on track until Maliki came along and put it back to sectarianism. We did not do the kinds of things that I think you are talking about in the aftermath of the Iraq war. Do we not accept that as a Government?

Lt General Gordon Messenger: The relationship between the Sunni tribes and the largely Shi'a Iraqi army deteriorated significantly over the period after the Americans left and the rise of ISIL in both Syria and Iraq.

Peter Watkins: In terms of the incubator of ISIL, probably the most direct one was the civil war in Syria and, if you like, the ungoverned space in the north of Syria where ISIL was able to develop. The second factor is the difficulties in the north-west of Iraq, which resulted from the alienation of the Sunni tribes and so on as a result of the sectarian policies pursued by the previous Iraqi Government.

Q320 Richard Benyon: I want to ask you about the value of the air strikes that have taken place so far. In anything approaching a conventional conflict—if such a thing ever exists again—forces on the ground would have direct contact with providers of top cover. They would ask for targets to be assigned, and efforts would be co-ordinated. Obviously, that cannot happen in many areas. I would really value your view as to how effective they have been in degrading ISIL, and about how, as we have been hearing in the past few days, new players have arrived—possibly in the form of Iran actually conducting air strikes in Iraq—

and how that is all controlled, co-ordinated or not co-ordinated. Can we have an up-to-date assessment of how you see that?

Lt General Gordon Messenger: Shall I take that? We believe that air strikes have contained the momentum that ISIL once had. ISIL is able to generate localised tactical advances in certain areas, but by and large it is on the defensive and the momentum has swung to the Kurdish and Iraqi security forces. We believe that that is largely because of the air strikes. We are not saying that the air strikes will ultimately be decisive, but we are saying that we think they have been a major contribution to containing and limiting the momentum that ISIL had.

In terms of what they are able to do, the Kurdish security forces and the Iraqi security forces are now much better able to hold ground and feel more confident in doing so. Through good liaison, we are able to provide manoeuvre support so that when they are about to conduct an attack against an ISIL position, they are co-ordinated with air strikes and air strikes can go in in support of those Iraqi security forces and Kurdish security forces operations. The effect on the morale of both those organisations has been significantly enhanced by air strikes.

The impact on ISIL has been an equivalent reduction in its morale. It has been forced to change its tactics. It was much more out in the open and even held military parades in certain areas. That has stopped. It is resorting to more asymmetric tactics, including the use of IEDs, and it is using quite extensive measures to avoid being struck by moving at night, using the weather and avoiding grouping in big areas. Its tactics, techniques and procedures have been disrupted.

I would not want to overplay the capability degradation of the air strikes. We have obviously struck quite a few pieces of equipment, vehicles, weapons systems and the like but there is still more there. There has been some limited capability and as a result of that pressure, I think we are starting to see morale drop.

More specifically and more Syria-related, the air strikes have been taking down some of the oil infrastructure in Syria from which ISIL has been gaining revenue, and there is some evidence that those revenue streams have been disrupted by the strikes against the oil infrastructure in eastern Syria, and that ISIL's financial position is not as strong as it was as a result of that. No one is saying that air strikes alone are decisive, but it is fair to say that they have contained the immediate tactical threat of ISIL to large parts of Iraq and that the momentum has shifted as a result of that.

Lt General Sir Simon Mayall: I have been in the various joint operations centres in both Baghdad and Irbil. I genuinely think we would have had a complete collapse in Anbar without air strikes. I think we would have lost the Haditha dam, which would have been disastrous. I think we would have lost all of Ramadi. ISIL has Fallujah, which almost predates the Mosul collapse. I think they have had a huge effect. Gordon has talked about the negative effect on ISIL, but they have had a huge, positive morale effect on both the peshmerga and the ISF. They have undoubtedly created the conditions to enable the advance from Tikrit up to Baiji.

It is worth saying that the huge advances in UAVs and aerial ISTAR allow very precise targeting of strike assets. The mobile phone in the peshmerga area is absolutely the key. The peshmerga go forward, establish communications with the JOC to the peshmerga,

who are sat next to the Americans, who are then able to co-ordinate that. The days when you needed to have radio communications have gone. It is quite ad hoc, but it is very effective.

The key problem at the moment in pushing back is the IED threat, as we know to our cost in both Iraq and Afghanistan, and that is where—if we come on to training—we have a niche capability that we can offer to enable this. All of it is tied back to the politics. If we can't get the politics right, this military campaign does not get a huge amount of useful traction.

Lt General Gordon Messenger: Simon describes it very well, but you should not underestimate how much rigour there is to confirm the validity of the targets and the complete de-risking of collateral damage. Yes, there are targets indicated by mobile phones, but they will always be corroborated and all the necessary checks and balances done before they constitute a viable target.

Q321 Richard Benyon: Have you dodged the Iranian angle in my question?

Lt General Gordon Messenger: We have known about the interest that Iran has in ISIL, both from its relationship with the Iraqi Government and a territorial defence position, for a long time. We have known that Iran has had forces deployed into Iraq for some time. As to the presence and co-ordination that was reported this morning, I cannot comment on that. Certainly, we, as a nation, do not deconflict with Iran in anything that we do.

Q322 Richard Benyon: There is one perverse political consequence; these airstrikes actually help Assad, don't they? We, and within Iraq, and the coalition in parts of Syria as well, are actually assisting him in staying in power.

Peter Watkins: That has been alleged.

Q323 Richard Benyon: We are degrading his enemies.

Peter Watkins: Yes, but he has a number of enemies.

Lt General Sir Simon Mayall: And moderate opposition as well.

Q324 Dr Lewis: You have said that you regard a policy of containment in the long term as too unambitious, so what would you regard as a satisfactory regional solution in an ideal world? Let's imagine that people of good will, from all the participating sides in this multi-faceted conflict, were to sit down and negotiate in good faith. How likely do you think it is that one could arrive at a regional solution? It would presumably have to involve some sort of agreement between Iran on one side and Saudi Arabia and Turkey on the other—and we know how much they love and admire each other. What progress been made so far, or is this just a pipe dream?

Peter Watkins: From the MOD's perspective, this is, as it were, way out of our lane. This is very much something that is led by our colleagues in the Foreign Office. I am not sure that it is really our business to be pursuing satisfactory regional solutions in an ideal world. Defence ministries exist because we do not live in an ideal world. What we would like to see and would regard as a sign of success, and I have referred to this before, is a sufficiently inclusive Government in Baghdad and Iraq that removed the room for manoeuvre of organisations like ISIL. They would not be able to prey on alienation and

discontent in the way that they do at the moment. We would like to see a similarly inclusive Government in Syria. Basically, you would have two Governments in those two countries that were able to manage the complex ethnicities and ethnic jigsaws in those countries and not leave ungoverned space that organisations like ISIL can thrive in.

Q325 Dr Lewis: You are naturally not wishing to tread into the territory of the FCO, but I nevertheless return to the written evidence and the three objectives that you gave us. I said that two of those were sensible, but that the other, which is defeating ISIL rather than containing it, is unrealistic. In that document, under that rather impractical objective, you say the following: “We have been clear that the Syria conflict can only be resolved through a political settlement that brings together the moderate opposition and elements of the regime.” You concluded, “We are clear that Assad cannot be a partner in the fight against ISIL, and that he must step down for there to be peace in Syria.”

Do you regard that as a practical possibility, given the support for Assad by Iran and, ultimately, by Russia?

Peter Watkins: The reality of the situation in Syria is that Assad has become such a divisive figure that it is almost impossible to imagine that there could be the sort of political settlement that we mentioned if he is still on the stage.

Q326 Dr Lewis: But isn't it also impossible to imagine the Iranians and Russians accepting the huge defeat that it would be for their prestige if their protégé were to be defenestrated?

Peter Watkins: As I said earlier, we never said this would happen quickly; it will take time. Such changes can happen. Such a change happened in Baghdad in September.

Q327 Dr Lewis: Is it not possible to see the present alignment of forces in the region as just the latest manifestation of 1,000 years of conflict between Shi'as and Sunnis? Therefore, is it not more sensible to recognise that the best thing you can do in such a snake pit is to try to keep the lid on things, rather than imagine that there is some solution that has eluded humanity for such a long period?

Peter Watkins: I might let Simon comment on the 1,000 years of history point, because he knows the area much better than I do. What I do know is that the current degree of tension between the Sunnis and Shi'as is really quite extreme. There have been long periods when the two communities have managed to live alongside each other reasonably well, so I would not accept your premise that they must automatically and inevitably be at each other's throats.

Lt General Sir Simon Mayall: We hear horrific figures of killed and wounded in Syria—up to 200,000—and a large proportion are in the regime forces, many of which are drawn from the Alawite community. The Alawite community is about only 12% to 15% of Syria. They are very important, a bit like the Sunnis were under Saddam; they controlled it.

There is a real culling of military-age men among the Alawite. There are people within there who say, “We cannot kill our way. We cannot kill the majority of the Syrian population, who happen to be Sunni, in order to come to an agreement.” I am not saying that we have reached that level of exhaustion yet, but certainly a lot of people have now looked into the abyss.

One begins to question whether, if you give the Alawite community a stake in any future political settlement in Syria, you find that the Russians and Iranians find it would be to their advantage if we work out at what level you have to defenestrate the Assad family. I don't say that is ready. However, undoubtedly, as we found in Afghanistan funnily enough, you begin to change the balance of power between some of the villages, and they suddenly begin to find that military-age men are doomed demographically, to a position where you cannot see a future.

I don't say that is going to happen, but undoubtedly I will return. I am pleased we are going for Iraq first because, in terms of political strategy, there is a representative legitimate Government, not a regime. Mr al-Abadi's Government is not a regime; al-Maliki's was going that way. That is the place to turn the situation around, while at the same time continuing to work on all the other streams that might at least convince the regional players that there is no win-win situation. There is no win-lose; there may be a no lose-no lose, in which we can find enough people between Ankara, Moscow, Tehran, Riyadh and, dare I say, Washington who can come some way through this. We haven't killed quite enough people yet, sadly, for people to think the same way.

Q328 Dr Lewis: Just to finish, that is precisely the thrust of my line of questioning, that one should not be talking about defeat and victory. One should be talking about de-escalating and looking for a balance-of-power solution. Taking on board Peter Watkins's point that these adversarial communities nevertheless have long periods when they are not killing each other, does that not suggest that instead of idealised solutions, a more sensible strategy is to recognise that one has to hold these communities in check and just prevent the more unpleasant manifestations on either side from becoming too dominant?

Lt General Sir Simon Mayall: I will just say, for us—I suppose military—it is difficult. We don't use the words "destroy ISIL", but we do use the word "defeat". Part of that defeat is, of course, breaking away the extremist leadership. If you can remove the Sunni tribes and remove those who actually work in many ways in the moderate Syrian opposition but who, for a number of reasons, moved across to intimidation or enticement into the ISIL camp—this element of defeat is not a military one. It is the ideology. It is removing the basis. It is removing the funding. Fundamentally, it is attacking the cohesion of it as a movement.

For us in the military, if someone said, "Destroy ISIL," I think we would say, "I don't think that's right," because there is a very strong political move to this. For the military, the term "defeat" is very much a comprehensive approach through economics, politics and diplomacy. That is how I would defend the use of that expression—part of which is containment, of course, while you create the conditions in which the military aspect can be useful. But the political aspect can be more useful.

Q329 Dr Lewis: A speculative final question: if Assad—it is speculative—had been overthrown, do you really believe that we would have had a moderate representative Government? Would we not have had another Islamist regime taking over from another authoritarian dictator?

Peter Watkins: As you said, Dr Lewis, that is speculation. I think that a lot would have depended on the timing. If Assad had been overthrown quickly, at that stage back in 2011

perhaps a reasonably moderate Government could have stepped in. Obviously, over time, the situation in Syria has become more complex and, in many ways, more radicalised.

Dr Lewis: Not so likely in 2013, then.

Q330 Mr Havard: Can I ask you about what we are actually doing in terms of training, equipment and so on? My understanding of this, which comes largely from the evidence that the MOD has presented us with—if I can put some of that back to you—is that we are doing things in Kurdistan. We are going to do other things in other parts of Iraq. We are talking about finding ways of, as it says in the evidence, probably integrating “several hundred personnel to the US-led programme” to help the “Syrian moderates”.

We are doing things in Jordan; we have been doing things in Jordan for some time. We have been doing things in Lebanon for some time, and money has been spent on that since 2012. There are a range of training initiatives of different types in different parts of the countries surrounding it, as well as within the borders of modern Iraq themselves. We have details about that, which we will publish. I am interested that command and control is also something that will happen. In terms of the public perception, everyone seems to think that we are just doing things in Kurdistan—that is why I mention this—when we are not; it is a much more differentiated programme. The complication in some of this, of course, is that there are the Iranians on the ground. What are the difficulties with training the peshmerga, which is one thing, and the rest of these Iraqi forces and arrangements? There must be a great difference in doing that. What are the plans to try to make that a coherent process?

Peter Watkins: I will start and then pass over to Gordon, who has been there recently. This range of activities that may seem quite disparate is a different way of contributing to the same strategy. Clearly, we are providing a particular form of training and we provide a lot of equipment to the peshmerga. As I am sure Gordon will come on to, we are looking at certain niche training that we can provide to the Iraqi security forces. At the same time, one of the objectives of our strategy is to mitigate the consequences of what is happening. We have therefore been concerned about the potential pressure on Jordan and Lebanon. The training there has a different purpose, which is to build up their resilience. We have set out in the memorandum the sorts of thing that we are doing. In some cases, they build upon support that we have been providing to those countries for a long time. But Gordon will give you detail on the peshmerga and ISIL.

Lt General Gordon Messenger: Initially, before the coalition was fully formed, it was essentially us working on a bilateral basis, and because we had more established relationships with the Kurds that was where we saw things first. Now it is very much part of a national coalition endeavour and the training and support we were providing is being requested by both the Kurdish and central Iraqi Governments.

You asked about the differences between the coalition. We are trying to limit those differences as best as we are able, and view this as a national programme. You are probably aware that the Americans see the establishment of four big training bases—or rather, the utilisation of existing training bases—across Iraq, one of which will be in Irbil. It is very much the intent to fold that Irbil training base into the broader infrastructure. As part of that, we see ourselves delivering niche specialist training in the area, which is much needed, particularly in counter-IED. We are still scoping the exact nature of that, but we hope to have some concrete proposals in the coming days. We are also looking, through

the American Office for Security Co-operation in Iraq—I hope you will be able to speak to them when you go out to visit—as to where else we might be able to add value.

When you put that as our contribution to a large-scale venture and overlay on it things that we have been doing for a while with the Kurds, on both the KDP and the PUK side, that is an appropriate contribution. Importantly, it is demand led. What we are not doing is force feeding training; we are delivering the types of training that these forces have asked for and need, and we are doing it in a co-ordinated fashion. The American-led OSCI is the engine room for that co-ordination.

Q331 Mr Havard: Some of the statements in the memorandum are along the lines of, “We intend to do this,” or, “We plan to put several hundred people into here,” or, “We are going to put people embedded into there.” We are going to do a lot of different things. Presumably there is a programme of application here, some of which will dependent on other analyses. Can you give us some insight into what the process of development is likely to be?

Lt General Gordon Messenger: In Iraq, which is based around those four big bases, the Americans are just moving into that format at scale. They have established a divisional headquarters in Baghdad that is co-ordinating that and we are sending the reconnaissance parties out there to ensure that at the time when our training is needed we will be there and able to deliver it. I cannot yet give you the numbers that are going to be part of that because we are still looking at light options and heavy options. It will be driven by the exact nature of the training.

You mentioned the Syrian moderate opposition programme. Certainly we have given a commitment to the US that we wish to contribute to that in a meaningful way, but that is less mature as a proposal and therefore, again, it is very difficult for us to be specific about the numbers and the timelines on which it might deliver.

Q332 Mr Havard: I ask the question because in the public imagination, all of a sudden, there will be British troops appearing here, there and everywhere—that is what people will say. If it comes as a surprise, that will not be terribly helpful. The better people understand the process, the better it will all be.

There has been a lot of talk about why the previous Iraqi army fell apart—the 50,000 ghost soldiers, corruption and whatever. You are going to have to work with militia; you are going to have to work with the fact that there are IRG on the ground, and there have been for some time; there is the deconfliction of aeroplanes, because the Iranians are flying about the place—how are we going to get a grip on, as you said, trying to make a coherent process out of what is currently a whole series of different groupings that are all, if you like, joined in the fight?

Lt General Gordon Messenger: Again, I think the idea of the four big training bases is going to be quite controlled and very internationally focused—a number of nations have signed up to pledge their support for it—and its output will be the reconstitution of three divisions of the Iraqi army. That is quite formalised and structured. You described a situation that is quite haphazard and difficult to control, but I don’t think we envisage that in terms of the training model that the Americans are going to put in place.

Q333 Mr Havard: But you are going to have to incorporate people into that process. It seems that there was a lot of weapons systems training—\$2 billion or whatever—by the

Americans after they left, teaching them to use systems they were selling to them, but there was no training of an integrated force in any sensible way. Is that what we are trying to do instead of what we see now?

Lt General Gordon Messenger: Yes, the emphasis is on collective training—in some cases, bringing existing units out of the line and, in others, amalgamating new recruits with existing soldiers, building them into a more cohesive whole in battalion-sized formats, and then putting them back into the line collectively trained as a cohesive unit. That is very much the intent.

Q334 Mr Havard: And the QRF stuff that we have been doing in Jordan and the stuff that we have been doing on the border in Lebanon continues in any event. Are we going to pull Iraqis out of Iraq and train them in Britain again? Where are we going to be training these people?

Lt General Gordon Messenger: The intention is to use the four bases. Initially, we looked at ideas of perhaps taking out the peshmerga or Iraqi security forces and training them somewhere—for example, Jordan. We have now settled on those four big bases in Iraq; those are where the Iraqis want to be trained.

Mr Havard: Okay, thank you very much.

Chair: Apologies to the witnesses; inevitably, as it is such an interesting subject, I have a lot of colleagues to bring in and a relatively short period of time. Unfortunately, Sir Bob Russell has to leave us at half-past 4 so I am going to jump the line a little and go to his questions and then back to other colleagues. If questions and answers could be kept relatively concise, it would be helpful.

Q335 Sir Bob Russell: Thank you, Chairman. There may be supplementary questions but I only have one substantive question, which I think would be uppermost in the minds of a great proportion of the British public: how can you, we, and the British Parliament avoid the charge of mission creep as we embed troops with Iraqi security forces to advise and assist?

Peter Watkins: First of all, whatever we do has to be guided by the objectives that we set out in the first place. In the discussion that we have had so far, members of the Committee have grudgingly accepted that two of those objectives are fine but questioned the middle one. If we remain guided by the objectives, we can avoid mission creep. We have some pretty precise objectives. We are not trying to create perfection in Iraq or Syria. We have accepted that we are not trying to do that. That is the assurance that I would seek to give you.

Q336 Sir Bob Russell: So if there was mission creep, it would be at the direction of politicians here?

Peter Watkins: Well it is always for Ministers to decide what objectives we seek to carry out and how we go about doing so.

Q337 Mrs Moon: I would like to go back to the issue of training that Mr Havard started to explore. Lieutenant General Messenger, you said that you were doing some counter-IED scoping and that you hoped to have some decisions in a few days. I gather that we have been

employing private companies to provide counter-IED training. We have paid £230,000 for 18 peshmerga to have four weeks of training. Why are we using a private company rather than British armed forces?

Lt General Gordon Messenger: That was a Foreign Office programme designed to deliver very quick effect to the peshmerga on the back of a request by them. I have described something that is much more institutional, widespread and designed around collective training, which is why we see our military counter-IED experts as very much a part of that.

Q338 Mrs Moon: We had before that provided the same course for the Iraqi army. It was not a sudden decision; we had done it once before. Were you surprised that the British military were not asked to provide the training rather than the Foreign Office putting it out to contract?

Lt General Gordon Messenger: I think that the use of contractorised support like that is an entirely legitimate way to build capacity. We decide how best to do it when we look at the needs and requirements of the training audience. It is also linked to where our capabilities are at any one time and how available they are to deliver, but I certainly do not have a problem with the legitimacy of using private security companies to deliver bespoke, contained, well-directed training.

Peter Watkins: Also, I think that this training, which was quite specific, predated the events in August.

Q339 Mrs Moon: They predated them?

Lt General Sir Simon Mayall: Funnily enough, it was part of our bilateral military engagement through the Conflict Pool with C-IED. They had been training down in Baghdad with certain areas, before the collapse of the ISF. I think that it was part of that being asked for—it was viewed to be non-contentious to do counter-IED, and then it moved up to Sulaymaniyah. As Gordon has laid out, this is now much more a considered response to the threat being met by an inclusive Iraqi Government in which hopefully the peshmerga and the ISF will be conducting a national defence security policy that is enabled by coalition partners very much in a train and advise role.

Q340 Mrs Moon: I am sorry, can I just get this clear in my head? Are you saying that the contract was let, at least for the Iraqi army training, prior to the vote in Parliament?

Lt General Sir Simon Mayall: That is my understanding, because I went straight out there as the envoy very shortly after the fall of Mosul. This contract had already been running down in Baghdad, and it happened to be up in Sulaymaniyah at the time, because counter-IED is just something that all armies need to have as a capability. We can get you absolute chapter and verse on this, but my understanding, if I remember, was that I went out there as part of the British Government's response to assessing what our partners needed. If you recall, the idea was originally with the Kurds, because, to use David Petraeus's line, we did not wish to be the air arm of the Shi'a militia. As Maliki went and the new Abadi Government came in, we of course began to look at it as an all-Iraq response, but my understanding was that this was part of our bilateral, mil-to-mil engagement with the Government, which we use in a number of areas to give ourselves influence and access and to conduct contact.

Peter Watkins: This is standard protective capacity-building of a sort that we do with a number of countries around the world, and it is not normally subject to a parliamentary vote.

Q341 Mrs Moon: Are you are saying that we frequently use private military companies?

Peter Watkins: No, we do not frequently use private military companies; we sometimes use private military companies if we do not have the capacity to do it ourselves because our own people are busy, or if it is being done in a fairly bespoke way as opposed to an institutional programme of the sort that Gordon just described.

Q342 Mrs Moon: This was a Foreign Office contract—is that correct?

Peter Watkins: We understand it was let through the Foreign Office, yes.

Q343 Mrs Moon: Who else would it be? If it was not the Ministry of Defence and it was not the Foreign Office, who else could it be?

Peter Watkins: It would be one or the other.

Q344 Mrs Moon: So we don't know whether it was a Ministry of Defence contract or a Foreign Office contract.

Peter Watkins: Gordon said earlier that he believed that it was a Foreign Office contract.

Lt General Gordon Messenger: I suppose that what we are saying is that none of us believes that what you have described is unusual activity—it carries on elsewhere. Perhaps we do not have to hand the facts that we could have, but if you would like us to provide them to you, we can certainly do so.

Mrs Moon: Yes, please, because apart from anything else, it would be useful to know that the Foreign Office is setting and letting military contracts. It would be extremely useful to know that.

Q345 Chair: Peter, could we please get a formal note on all the details that Madeleine has requested?

Peter Watkins: Yes.

Q346 Mrs Moon: How soon do you think that the Iraqi forces will be able to carry out any significant attacks on Mosul, and to regain it? Will they be able to do that without a Sunni civilian uprising?

Lt General Gordon Messenger: In terms of Iraqi security forces activity, that is ongoing. They are conducting offensive operations to relieve the oil refineries in Baiji, they are preparing for operations in eastern Anbar province, and they are conducting ongoing offensive operations. Nevertheless, you are right to highlight the fact that there are some challenges that are much bigger than that and that it will take time before they are sufficiently capable of doing so. That is as much about building the capabilities of the military after years of deterioration, but it is also about the sectarian and ethnic balance and the difficulties of being a Shi'a militia or armed force with a bad reputation playing into a deeply Sunni area. The Iraqi Government will have to determine how best to do it,

but it is quite clear that having a balanced, credible, non-sectarian national armed force is at the heart of that.

You will also be aware that Prime Minister Abadi is keen to promote the National Guard, which he sees as an important part of an inclusive Government and a way to overcome some of the sectarian challenges that he experiences.

Mrs Moon: Thank you.

Q347 Mr Gray: Our discussions so far this afternoon have ranged over the degree of uncertainty about why we are doing things in Iraq and also about the means by which we are trying to achieve them. We have had the discussion about whether mission creep might occur and all that. Does that not indicate two things? First, does it not indicate that the thing we are doing in Iraq is fast-moving and changeable? Secondly, if that is the case, what store do you set by the commitment in the House of Commons motion that we all voted for that there would be no kind of ground war? In other words, if it is as unclear and fast-moving as our discussions this afternoon have tended to indicate, how can we be certain that there is no place for a surge?

Peter Watkins: I do not think I would entirely accept that it is uncertain why we are doing it. I think we have set out why we are doing what we are doing.

Q348 Mr Gray: No, it is uncertain in the sense that, for example, we were discussing the difference between defeating ISIL and destroying ISIL. That is quite an interesting discussion. Certainly the people who read the *Daily Mail* who were concerned about people getting their heads chopped off were of the view that we were going to destroy ISIL, and certainly the language that the Prime Minister used this week in the House of Commons talked about destroying and defeating it. On the technicality that you describe, we are playing with words here a bit. If you ask the people of Britain what we had agreed to do, it was to get rid of these dreadful people.

Peter Watkins: Yes, which is why one of the objectives set out in the strategy that we wrote down in the memorandum is to defeat ISIL. I suggest I do not go over all that again. Defeating ISIL is one of the objectives.

In terms of the situation on the ground, Ministers have been very clear and have repeated it many times that they will not deploy British combat ground troops. We are not saying that this situation cannot be resolved without the use of ground forces, but that in this sort of campaign those ground forces are best provided by the Iraqis. We are enabling and supporting their ground forces.

Q349 Mr Gray: I understand that, but in our previous discussions we agreed that what we are currently doing will do not much more than contain ISIL—perhaps a little more than that, but not much more. We may or may not ultimately defeat ISIL. We certainly will not destroy them. An argument could be advanced—I am not saying that I am advancing it, but none the less an argument could be advanced—that would say that the only way we are going to defeat them or destroy them is by some form of ground war surge, such as we have seen in Iraq previously and also in Afghanistan. Is there not a role to play for division-strength invasion?

Peter Watkins: First of all, I think one should be wary of drawing parallels with what happened in the past, in 2006-07 and so on. It was a very different situation, and we do not

believe that that sort of simple approach is the one that would work, which is why we have set out a strategy that has a number of strands and puts particular weight on the political strand. From that point of view, I do not think any sort of surge concept is very likely.

The other factor that has to be borne in mind here is that we were able to help the Iraqi Government maintain Iraq's integrity, and therefore it is what the Iraqi Government want that is a key factor in all this, and the Iraqi Government are very clear that they do not want large numbers of western troops on their territory.

Q350 Mr Gray: Of course that is the case right now. My question was simply that one possible military stratagem would be significant troops on the ground, to which a few moments ago you said that you do not think that is very likely. I was hoping that you would say that there are no circumstances now or in the future in which you consider the possibility of a ground war occurring. I am afraid to say that tomorrow morning's *Daily Mail* will read: head of policy at the MoD says, "Ground war in Iraq not very likely." Is it impossible? Is it a bad thing to do? Is there a role for a surge now or in the future?

Peter Watkins: Well, I will repeat what I said earlier. The Prime Minister, the Defence Secretary and other Ministers have said, "We will not deploy British troops on a ground"—

Q351 Mr Gray: I know that perfectly well—after all, I voted for that motion of the House of Commons—but that is not the question. It is very clear that we will not do it for now, but can you conceive of reasons why a military role or a reason for doing that would be a good idea?

Peter Watkins: At the moment I cannot, because we have set out a strategy, and we have explained it to you, in which we are providing specific and limited military activities in support of a politically-led strategy, one aspect of which is enabling and equipping the Iraqi forces in the way that Gordon has set out. So no, I do not see it.

Mr Gray: What about the generals?

Lt General Gordon Messenger: I think you know this, but, to be clear, we absolutely agree that there is a need for ground operations if you are to defeat ISIL; we just believe that it is the indigenous armed forces that should be conducting those. That is entirely at the heart of this. A very important part of what we do there is not making things worse by our actions. We have to be very clear in that, and in many ways we have to err on the side of caution. So if you ask me whether I can contemplate it, no, I cannot.

Lt General Sir Simon Mayall: I would go back to my earlier point when we talked about the solution and defeat. I am confident that if we get the politics in Baghdad right, which will underpin the military operations largely conducted by the indigenous forces, enabled by technical training from C-IED, we can defeat ISIL in Iraq. I have no doubt about that at all. The key, of course, is to strip away from the ISIL leadership and fanatics and foreign fighters the indigenous Iraqi Sunni support, either tacit or overt.

I think that is doable, but that is a political aspect. However, with the right circumstances politically, I have no doubt that what we will do is build a partner capacity. If we can get a non-sectarian army in the fight that can embrace some of the Shi'a militia and the

currently disfranchised or disaffected Sunni tribesmen and rebuild on that and enable the Peshmerga, we could be back in Mosul.

As I said, it does need the conditions set by the politics, hence I say that this is a multifaceted political-military effort, but the indigenous forces, properly enabled by the coalition, are quite capable, in the right political circumstances, of defeating ISIL in Iraq and, thereby, setting the conditions for the overall defeat of ISIL across the region. But it will take time.

Q352 Chair: The Committee will have to move in no more than five minute to private session, but, to conclude and wrap up the evidence that you have given, Peter, you have put a very large emphasis on a modest account of the UK's role. You have talked about it being a long drawn-out process, with the UK playing a small part. You have said, "We haven't used the word victory", "We have never pretended we could do it quickly", "We are not doing it on our own" and "We are a subset of a broader international strategy". Isn't there a serious risk that, the more you talk like that, the less there is anyone in charge, gripping it and taking responsibility, waking up every morning and driving this through?

We have had evidence after evidence where people say, "Not my game—that's the Foreign Office," or, "That's going to be done by DFID," or, "We think that's going to be done by the United States," or "We're a small part of this." Who is owning this? Who in the British Government is waking up every morning and gripping this?

Peter Watkins: First of all, just because we are but one country that is contributing to a large international coalition, that does not mean that we are not trying to do it very seriously. I hope that, in the evidence that we have given, we have shown that we have thought about this in a comprehensive way. We see a number of strands of activity that are mutually supportive, and the military activities are very much calibrated and synchronised to support them. That does not mean that we are not taking it very seriously. It gets very high level attention in Government all the time. This is very much an area that is under the watchful eye of the National Security Council, which is the primary organ that brings together the contributions of the different Departments. We work closely together under that oversight.

Q353 Chair: Okay. Peter, to take you at your word that you are doing this very seriously, it is difficult for the public to see that. The situation in Iraq and Syria is presented to us by you as one of the most dangerous situations that the United Kingdom has faced for two decades. It is potentially more dangerous than the situation we faced in Afghanistan, yet the resources committed to it are minimal.

We put £10 billion into Afghanistan, but when we look at what you said on paper about your commitment and your resources on the ground, we see you boasting about the fact that you are putting £1 million—like Dr Evil—into backing Jordan and its QRF. That is not 1% or 0.1%, but 0.01% of the kind of resources that we would normally put into this.

There seems to be a huge mismatch between our talking about this being an existential threat to global security and to your grand visions of an inclusive Government, and the actual resources going in on the ground—40 machine guns, £1 million into Jordan, 14 people deployed in training and one assistant defence attaché. I understand that this is not the surge—this is not 150,000 people—but surely if we were really serious, we would have much

larger teams, much more investment and much more focus. It is all very well that the Prime Minister is putting in his time at the NSC, but where are the resources? How can we believe that you are serious if we can't see the resources?

Peter Watkins: Mr Chairman, I don't think this is the sort of strategy or campaign about which one should take a simple quantitative approach to the resources. One cannot solve this problem by throwing enormous amounts of manpower and money at it. It is a very complex situation. As we have described, we seek to work with the Government of Iraq, in particular, and other Governments. We are providing relatively niche support where we know we can add real value and, as Gordon Messenger said, where we don't run the risk of making things worse. I think you should be judging what we do in this area not by simple quantitative metrics, but by the quality and the precision of what we are offering.

Q354 Chair: I would argue that it is going to be very difficult for us to judge this at all. You say that we shouldn't judge you by resources, but at the same time you are saying that we are part of a much broader coalition and that it is much more complicated. You are claiming credit for things such as setting up an inclusive Iraqi Government, but it is very difficult for us to be sure that Britain played much of a role in that at all, as opposed to the United States, Iran or any other player. I am not sure how on earth we are supposed to assess the seriousness of it.

Peter Watkins: I wouldn't claim credit for everything that has happened, but we are a participant in a broad coalition and we are contributing. Therefore, we should not expect to be doing everything. It would be inappropriate for us to do everything.

Q355 Chair: To finish, perhaps we could ask you to put on paper a statement of how you would expect to be measured and how we can really judge the seriousness of it. If it is not going to be by resources and the inclusive Government, how do we know whether you are really leaning into this? How do we really sense whether this is a priority? How do we really get a sense of staff resources? If that is not easy to do today, perhaps you can provide something on paper to give us a sense of that.

Peter Watkins: I hope you would have a sense of it from the range of things that we are doing, which, as I said, are all designed to contribute to and support the various strands of the strategy.

Chair: That brings the public evidence session to a close. We are now going to move into a private session. Thank you very much to the public. There is a danger of a vote coming. Could the public please leave the room, and could the witnesses please stay? Thank you

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

Q356 Derek Twigg: I wanted to ask the question before, but I will ask it now, if you don't mind. I understood your answer to Richard Benyon before about the reported Iranian air strikes. Is it your view that these air strikes would actually have a negative rather than a positive impact, in particular given comments about the Sunni population? Is it a dangerous step, in terms of what is happening in Iraq now?

Peter Watkins: I don't think the air strikes are, but the closer involvement of the Iranians with some of the Shi'a militias could be.

Q357 Derek Twigg: Why would the air strikes not be a problem?

Lt General Gordon Messenger: Because if they were counter-ISIL, that is—

Q358 Derek Twigg: So that would not upset the Sunni tribes that were trying to get on board in terms of fighting ISIL? That would not have a political impact on or enrage them in any way?

Peter Watkins: If they are well targeted, no.

Derek Twigg: If they are well targeted.

Lt General Sir Simon Mayall: I would say exactly that. Their version of collateral damage and their targeting process, compared to ours or the Americans, would, I suspect, be out. They would be more concerned for protecting the Shi'a militia than they would be about reducing civilian casualties, and therefore it could, Mr Twigg, have exactly the impact in terms of creating the conditions under which we could have an Iraqi security force advance back into Sunni-dominated territory.

Q359 Derek Twigg: I understand that. Quickly; where would you put our understanding of the region—now, today—compared to what it was at the end of our involvement in Iraq and the last episode we were there? Better? The same? And what is the evidence for it, if it is?

Peter Watkins: Of the region—

Q360 Derek Twigg: I am saying Iraq and the region.

Peter Watkins: Right. Of the wider region, I would say our understanding is better, because we have been engaging with the wider region more systematically over the last four or five years. Our understanding of Iraq is inevitably not as good, because we have not had the same level of presence in Iraq as we had up to about the end of 2010. But of course, one of the reasons why we did not maintain our presence or continue with our training programmes were the difficulties we were having with the Maliki Government. I was involved in negotiating one or two agreements, and it was difficult. There came a point when we decided it was not worth it.

Q361 Derek Twigg: Going back to the Chairman's question to you earlier on about the lack of Arabic speakers and that sort of resource—because I think you said six at the lower level—

Chair: Level 3.

Derek Twigg: Level 3, yes. How does that compare to when we went into Iraq in 2003? Have we got more, about the same, or less than we had then?

Peter Watkins: I think I would have to give you a note in terms of effect, but almost certainly fewer, because obviously when we were more engaged with Iraq we were training more Arabic speakers than when we—

Q362 Derek Twigg: But we were already short then. We were already short when we went in.

Peter Watkins: Yes, of course, but then—

Q363 Derek Twigg: So we are still short.

Peter Watkins: But we had not been engaged in Iraq in large numbers since the middle of 2009.

Q364 Derek Twigg: But that does not alter the fact that this is an important part of the world. Going back to Simon Mayall's point before, I find it astonishing. But anyway, a note would be very handy on that.

Peter Watkins: The priority of our language training programme was obviously training Dan and Pashto.

Q365 Richard Benyon: Is there anything you can tell us in this forum, rather than the public forum, that we should be aware of before we go there about levels of corruption in the Iraqi army and what measures are being taken by the new Government to address that? Someone was talking earlier about ghost battalions and corruption at a high level.

Peter Watkins: I read the evidence that you received from Emma Sky. I thought her comments about the damage that was done to the institutions of the Iraqi army in the latter days of the Maliki Government were absolutely spot on. So, almost certainly—I cannot prove it—there was conduct and behaviour that we would regard as pretty reprehensible. In terms of your forthcoming visit, I think this is an area that you might like to ask: what practical steps are being taken to reduce the risk of corruption?

Lt General Sir Simon Mayall: ***

28 generals have been removed; a Defence Minister was in, who is a Sunni, who I think you will meet—Khaled al-Obeidi—who is doing his damndest there.

Of course, the establishment of a national guard is an acknowledgement that a largely Shi'a-dominated security force cannot provide the security for people in the areas in Anbar. It carries risks—it risks alienating the Shi'a—but I think Abadi is absolutely clear why suddenly the whole fabric of a Shi'a-dominated Government, just by demography and elections, was threatened so rapidly by ISIL destroying five divisions outside Mosul. There are many on what he can do to tackle it, but he has taken some very early measures—which I am sure that he will lay out for you—which are at least a good indication.

Q366 Mrs Moon: We were told that one of the reasons that the Shi'a were so hated in the Sunni areas were barrel bomb attacks, indiscriminate arrests, and intimidation of Sunni tribes. Has that stopped or diminished, or is it still ongoing?

Lt General Sir Simon Mayall: Abadi will tell you that he gave orders for no more indirect fire or aerial bombardment of Sunni areas. This is where Maliki failed to spot the threat that was coming out of Syria to Mosul and was prepared to tackle legitimate Sunni grievances in the Anbar region with military force, not negotiation. As you say, they are

singularly ill-equipped to take that on and resorted to heavy-handed effects. The idea is, of course, a political underpinning that allows the security forces to be viewed as a national asset, not a sectarian instrument. I think Abadi is trying to do what he can with that. If you go to al-Assad air base at the moment, you have Sunni tribesmen, Americans and Shi'a militia operating together under an anti-ISIE banner. There are some green shoots that will give you some encouragement, but these are slow steps. That is why it will take some while before you see some major efforts on the ground from a truly national set of security forces.

Chair: A huge thank you to all three of our witnesses. Many apologies-the Division bell is ringing, so we are stopping four minutes early. Thank you for your time. We might like, if it is all right, to come back to you again after the visit, and perhaps we could then do a more classified conversation.