



Home Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: [Counter-terrorism](#), HC 933

Tuesday 10 March 2015

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Members present: Keith Vaz (Chair); Nicola Blackwood, Mr James Clappison, Michael Ellis, Paul Flynn, Dr Julian Huppert, Tim Loughton, Mr David Winnick.

Questions 171 – 346

Witnesses: **Hussen Abase**, father of Amira Abase, **Tasnime Akunjee**, Solicitor to Abase, Aziz and Begum families, **Fahmida Aziz**, first cousin of Kadiza Sultana and **Sahima Begum**, older sister of Shamima Begum, gave evidence.

Q171 Chair: Order. This is a session dealing with the Committee's ongoing inquiries into counter-terrorism and our revisiting of the report we published last year on counter-terrorism. I welcome to the dais Mr Abase, Ms Begum, Ms Aziz and Mr Akunjee. Thank you very much for coming to give evidence to the Committee today. Could I ask that the doors be now shut?

The Committee and the public are well aware of the circumstances surrounding the fact that your daughter, Mr Abase, your sister, Ms Begum, and your cousin, Ms Aziz, have left the country. On behalf of the Committee, we cannot imagine the anguish and distress that you must have felt on the day they went and must also feel today, because they are still missing. Please accept from us our best wishes at this time and our support for you personally in what you have gone through. It is every parent's nightmare that this should happen. Thank you for coming to give evidence to us. After we hear from you, we will also hear from the Metropolitan Police Commissioner about this and other matters. You are welcome to stay for that. We will then hear from the Turkish ambassador.

May I start with a general question to all three of you? Mr Akunjee, please feel free to come in whenever you want to. Starting with you, Mr Abase, when did you first realise that your daughter had left the country to go to Syria?

Hussen Abase: On 17 February, and I reported it the same day.

Q172 Chair: Did you report it to the police?

Hussen Abase: Yes.

Q173 Chair: At that stage, on 17 February, did you think that your daughter, Amira, had left the country or was she just missing from your home?

Hussen Abase: Missing.

Chair: Missing from your home?

Hussen Abase: Yes.

Q174 Chair: Which police officer or police station did you ring?

Hussen Abase: My wife and I just called 999.

Q175 Chair: Miss Begum, you are the older sister of Shamima. When did you first realise that Shamima was missing and who did you notify?

Sahima Begum: She went missing on the 17th. She didn't come home. We went through her stuff, generally looking for some phone numbers for friends. Then I came across the letter that the police had handed to her. When we found the letter, that immediately raised alarm and we called the police straight away. I called the police, and reported her missing. I also called the phone number that was on the bottom of that letter to say, "I've just found this letter among all my sister's stuff. It hadn't been handed to the family and now my sister has disappeared as well." I think I was quite angry at the time that I made that call.

Q176 Chair: So did you do a 999 call as well?

Sahima Begum: Yes.

Q177 Chair: Ms Aziz, you are the first cousin of Kadiza Sultana. When did you find out and what did you do?

Fahmida Aziz: I speak on behalf of the family—

Q178 Chair: The acoustics in this room are very bad. You will need to speak up to enable all the members of the Committee to hear you.

Fahmida Aziz: On 17 February, Kadiza left for school. She told her mother that she was going to an extended school club that was taking place. She did not return home at the end of the day, so that raised alarm bells for the family. They were querying among each other.

Q179 Chair: You will need to speak up. I am afraid that we cannot hear you at all.

Fahmida Aziz: They queried among each other—among the siblings—as to where she was. That night, they were extremely worried because she did not turn up. The family reported her missing the following morning.

Q180 Chair: When did you all first discover that they might be en route to Syria? At the moment, this sounds as if they were just missing. You called the police. You did what any person would do and dialled 999. When did you first discover that she had gone to Syria or was on her way there, Mr Abase?

Hussen Abase: The next day, we were told that she was in Turkey—Istanbul.

Chair: The 18th?

Hussen Abase: Yes.

Q181 Chair: Was that by the local police or the Metropolitan police counter-terrorism section?

Hussen Abase: All I know is that it was the Metropolitan police. I have no clue where they were from.

Q182 Chair: They told you that she was in Turkey?

Hussen Abase: Yes.

Q183 Chair: And was that the same for you Ms Begum and Ms Aziz? Were you all told on the 18th?

Sahima Begum: We were told on the 18th. Three officers came into the house. We thought it was just part of the routine so we were asked questions like, “Where does she go?” and “How does she dress?” It was about a half-hour conversation and then the officer, James Leek (?), turned around and said, “But we all know where she is.” We said, “Sorry, what do you mean, we all know where she is?” They turned around and said, “She’s gone to Turkey.” That is how we found out that she was in Turkey.

Fahmida Aziz: The family found the letter on 18 February. I think that it was in the afternoon or evening. I cannot confirm that. They were also advised by the police that they may be heading towards Syria. We kind of raised questions with the police in respect of the letter, where it is stated that the previous girl in December was heading towards Syria.

Q184 Chair: Until that time, when you were told that they were going to Turkey, did you have any idea or inkling whatever that your family members—the three girls—were involved in radicalisation or had been radicalised? Had you any idea? Did it come to your attention in any way that they were involved in the kinds of things that it is alleged that they were involved in following this becoming public?

Hussen Abase: Not at all.

Q185 Chair: Nothing?

Hussen Abase: Nothing.

Sahima Begum: Not at all. My sister was into any normal teenage things. She used to watch “Keeping up with the Kardashians” and stuff like that, so there was nothing that indicated that she was radicalised in any way—not at home.

Fahmida Aziz: Kadiza’s family were not concerned about her at all. She was just going to school quite happily, coming home, spending time with her family—just the ordinary things. There was not anything unusual there for the family—

Q186 Chair: You need to speak up, Ms Aziz, otherwise we cannot hear you.

Fahmida Aziz: They were not concerned at all. There were not any signs for them to recognise—any changes.

Tasnime Akunjee: That is the same experience that the school had. They had recognised no indicators at all that the girls had in any way been involved in radicalisation. Indeed, those girls had had some contact with the police between December and February. The police themselves confirmed that there were no indicators or markers of those girls having been of any concern.

Q187 Chair: You mentioned the letter that you found. This was a letter that was supposed to be given to you. It was not given to you; it was given to the girls. Why do you think it was not given to you? Would it have been better if the police had handed the letter directly to yourselves?

Hussen Abase: That is a puzzle.

Q188 Chair: But do you think that the letter should have been given to you directly by the police?

Hussen Abase: Yes, as we are responsible for our children.

Q189 Chair: Secondly, in respect of how the police have handled matters subsequently, you, Mr Akunjee, presumably speaking on behalf of the families, have been quite critical of the Metropolitan police. What, in particular, are the families concerned about?

Tasnime Akunjee: Partly, a degree of misinformation or information that is way behind the media. The families were assigned police liaison officers, who they hoped to get information from about their children. But it turned out that the officers were feeding them information that they were getting from the media, which was rather an unpleasant experience. On top of that, we had a particular officer who—

Chair: Sorry, could I say to the gentleman who is coughing that he might want to step outside and have some water? It is very difficult to hear what is going on. Thank you.

Tasnime Akunjee: There was a particular officer who was involved in the reading of this letter to the children at the school and in handing those letters to the kids. That same officer also now happens to be a liaison officer for one of the families. The families are obviously very concerned about the fact that the letter never made it through to them through independent channels, avoiding the children themselves. But the officer gave the indication that it was the school that should have done so, not him, even though it is a police letter. He never informed the family from the outset, even though he must have known—you have read the letter—that the girls were in Syria.

Rather troublingly, my direct involvement with him was that he had called the families and asked them to come in for a meeting at Scotland Yard. That was after the relationship had somewhat frayed between the police and the families. I had advised the families to ask the officer to contact me. Directly after that, the families informed the officer and the officer contacted me. I told him that that was what I was advising my clients. He then immediately phoned my client behind my back, not realising that I was sitting with them, and effectively advised them not to listen to my advice, at which point I took the phone and asked him, “Are you advising my clients not to listen to their solicitor’s advice? I want to speak to your line manager,” which I eventually did.

Q190 Chair: We will come on to the other aspects, but in respect of the letter, Miss Begum, if you and the other families had received that letter rather than it going to the girls, what would the effect have been on yourself and the others?

Sahima Begum: If we had received the letter directly, we would have contacted the police. We would have found out where this first girl had gone, if they gave us that information, and I would have spoken to my sister. I would have said, “Hold on. If she was a close friend of yours, what do you know? How much information can you give?”

Q191 Chair: And did any of you know of any circumstances concerning the young girl who had gone to Syria from this school in December? Is it right that none of you knew that she had gone to Syria?

Hussen Abase: Yes.

Chair: You did not know.

Hussen Abase: Not at all.

Sahima Begum: I did not know she had gone to Syria, but in December seven girls were questioned about that. One of the other seven girls—I will call her the fourth girl—lives very close to us. She was being contacted by the police, asked to go into the station and so forth. In her words and her family's words, they felt like they were being harassed by the police.

My mum and the fourth girl's mum are quite close, so she kept asking my mum, "Hold on, my child's being questioned about this, that and the other. How come nothing is being said to Shamima?"—my sister. My mum asked me to have a quick word with my sister, to find out if she knew anything, and she said that in that December interview they'd been shown some pictures of the first girl who had gone and they were asked general questions about that. That is the information I got from her. She also told me that the girl had gone abroad, but she did not tell me it was Syria or Turkey; she told me it was Italy.

Q192 Chair: So you are telling the Committee that the lack of that information did not prepare you for what might have happened, and indeed getting the letter directly would have prepared you.

Fahmida Aziz: Absolutely.

Q193 Chair: One of the issues is the three girls' passports. Some people have expressed surprise that they had access to them. If you had had this information, could you have held on to the passports? Mr Abase, who normally keeps the passports in your family?

Hussen Abase: Me and my wife.

Q194 Chair: So how did your daughter get access to it?

Hussen Abase: I don't know. She is trustworthy for the family.

Q195 Chair: Your view is that she just went and took it.

Mr Akunjee, on behalf of the family you have been very critical of the Metropolitan police. You said that they owe the family an apology—is that right?

Tasnime Akunjee: Indeed—yes, I do.

Q196 Chair: Why should the police apologise to the family?

Tasnime Akunjee: Well, in particular the handling of the relationship has led to a fairly critical point where the family have come out in the media and explained that, had this letter been given to them directly, as anyone would have expected, they would have been on notice and that issues to do with foreign travel, Syria or maybe radicalisation would have been floating to the fore. The common experience of parents with 15-year-olds is that they do not know very much about what is going on in their 15-year-old's life, I would imagine. But that would have floated to the fore and maybe they could have addressed it. That was a critical factor.

At the height of that tension, a Met press release effectively called the family liars. It suggested that that information specifically was communicated to the family on 9 December—

Chair: About the missing girl.

Tasnime Akunjee: Indeed, and that became rather a sensitive topic. One would have thought that the police, who we pay and train to gather information accurately so that what they say in court can be relied on, would at least be able to find accurate information about what they themselves had given to the family, in sensitive circumstances, particularly in the context of children and counter-terrorism.

Chair: Thank you very much.

Q197 Dr Huppert: Going back to the letters, is it possible that the girls' departure was triggered by being given the letters, or is that unlikely?

Sahima Begum: It could be possible. We don't know what went through their minds.

Tasnime Akunjee: It is speculative. It is something that we have looked at, and it certainly is a possibility. When schoolgirls are effectively asked to—I quote the colloquial—"rat" on their friends and they are being spoken to by an officer, we do not know if they are aware that the officer is from counter-terrorism or not. The letter is headed "Metropolitan police". That may have at least raised some panic in them and caused them either to expedite some plans that they were formulating or to formulate a plan thereafter. All of those are certainly possibilities, but within the minds of 15-year-olds we do not know which one they actually picked.

Fahmida Aziz: The police officer who spoke to the girls spoke to them on two separate occasions. One was in December and the other was on 5 February. However, we have heard from community people that there had been several more conversations between the police and the girls on the school premises.

Hussen Abase: I strongly disagree with the letter being given to 15-year-old girls. The word “police” by itself and “terrorism” or “counter-terrorism”, as global issues—it is a heavy burden for a 15-year-old to deal with that. We also feel that we are neglected as parents. We are supposed to know these things. We are the guardians.

Q198 Dr Huppert: I understand the concern and how you feel the police let you down. Were letters given to other pupils at all, and were those passed on to the parents?

Tasnime Akunjee: As we understand it, similar letters were only given to seven pupils in total. It was a very small selection of students who had this letter.

Q199 Dr Huppert: And were the others passed on to the parents?

Tasnime Akunjee: We have no idea.

Q200 Chair: The seven were all associated with the missing girl. Is that right?

Tasnime Akunjee: That is correct.

Q201 Mr Winnick: The Police Commissioner, as has already been indicated, will be asked about what has happened and why the letters were not sent to the parents. That will be one of the first questions we put to him. But I wonder if I could ask what you believe led the three young females—I think they were born in this country and educated here—to ISIS, which virtually everyone in Britain believes is a murderous outfit. The beheadings that we know about and the sex slavery are everything that is disgusting and evil. Why should they be attracted to it? Is there any explanation you could give for that?

Fahmida Aziz: Reflecting on it now, given that the first girl who went to Syria in December was a close friend of the three girls, in my view it could be because they just wanted to see their friend or have some form of contact. We don’t know. The fact of the matter is that we really do not know. But given the media, the press and everything that is coming to light, that is what I would think.

Q202 Mr Winnick: Is it possible that there was indoctrination outside of school, clearly unknown to the families? As you indicated, if you had known, you would have done your best to dissuade your daughter, cousin or sister.

Hussen Abase: As I know my daughter, it is very difficult to predict why they left this country. That is why we are left in the middle of nowhere. We are really troubled as to why. That is the big question—why the letter was given to them and why they left.

Q203 Mr Winnick: Do you feel that other young females could be subject to what has happened and could be encouraged? Is there a possibility that others may take the same route?

Tasnime Akunjee: It is a very difficult thing to understand, and I would hasten to suggest that understanding a 15-year-old girl's mindset at this time, for people of our age generally, is a difficult thing. Justin Bieber is a difficult thing to understand.

In terms of where the argument goes, there are people who have joined the YPJ from this country. They have gone over and want to fight with other organisations out there against ISIS. That is similarly difficult to understand. To put ourselves into the mindset of 15-year-old girls when we do not know what contact they have had with whom or how they have been led along this path—these parents do not know the answer to that question. In the same way that a parent whose child has been taken away—let's say they fall in love with their teacher and run off to France—does not know how that happened. It is shocking to them.

Hussen Abase: This conversation created a question that never comes through. The letter destructs our daughter, destructs our family and terrorises our children. What we want to know is: apart from this letter, what was the verbal conversation with this child? I know my daughter. She is the kind of girl who, if it is sunset, she will call me to pick her up. How on earth she travelled abroad to join ISIS, is a very difficult question for us to answer—even to predicate. The letter terrified my daughter.

Q204 Mr Winnick: We understand what you are going through, as the Chair said. Every one of us understands very well what you must be feeling and suffering at this moment. My last question is: is there anything that a parent in the locality could do to try to find out if their children are being indoctrinated, bearing in mind what has happened in this case? Would you suggest that the parents should be very much on their guard?

Hussen Abase: Yes. As our situation is, we are mentally disabled. We are focusing on our children coming back home, and not in prison because the children are victims.

Sahima Begum: I believe that, as a family, we monitored what she did when she was on her phone. We made sure that she was reading books. My sister enjoyed reading books so she was reading books on there. When she was playing games we would join in and have competitions so, in that sense, we feel that we monitored as much as we could. Obviously, we missed something out because such a big incident has happened but, as far as we knew, we did what we could to keep an eye on our child.

In retrospect, if we had been given information about this first girl, we would have thought, "A friend of hers has gone missing. This is a friend of hers. Friends have similar mindsets. Is her mindset similar to that?" We would question that. We were never given the opportunity to question it because, in December, when this girl had gone missing, my family only received a call from the school saying that our sister had been spoken to by the police because a friend had gone missing. The word "missing", in my mind, means that she is not at home. I do not instantly think that she has gone abroad. I think that she is hopefully still in the country.

Q205 Chair: In defence of the school, I have spoken to the head teacher and the school has told me that they were instructed by the police not to tell anybody that the young girl in December had gone to Syria. That was kept in the highest confidence. You were only allowed to know that she was missing. Nobody was allowed to know that she had gone to Syria. That is what the school said.

Fahmida Aziz: But the school failed to inform us that there was a police investigation in school. There were several visits by the police officers in school. The school failed us in that respect. The school also acted as an appropriate adult on behalf of the parents at home. Surely they should have had that discussion with the parents at home.

Q206 Chair: That is a very useful point, which we will put to them.

Hussen Abase: Logically, in my view, it does not make sense. If we say, for example, just “missing”, it is not a complete sentence as I understand it. Where? That, as a family, we have to know or we can’t prevent this from happening.

Q207 Chair: We are clear as a Committee. You are saying to us that if you had known about the contents of this letter, you might have been able to—you cannot be 100% sure—prevent them from going. That missing letter was critical to you not taking action.

Hussen Abase: Absolutely.

Sahima Begum: It is not just a missing letter, though. You are saying that the school was told that they had to keep it under wraps. My sister was told that she should not discuss outside what she was spoken to about in the interview. Now, you can’t tell a 15-year-old to hold that kind of information away from her family. It is not just my little sister that has said this to me. I have also asked the fourth girl, “Did the police turn around and say to you, ‘Don’t talk to anybody about this case?’” and she confirmed that that is what she was told by the police. Police cannot tell a 15-year-old to keep things away—if you are going to tell a 15-year-old, “Keep that information away from your parents,” or away from anybody, they need to inform the family as well.

Chair: Of course. We understand that.

Hussen Abase: Imagine what kind of picture it draws to tell a 15-year-old girl, “Between me and you”—this burden.

Chair: Yes. We understand that.

Q208 Michael Ellis: May I express my condolences for what has happened as far as your family members are concerned? May I ask you first of all, Ms Begum, did I hear you say, in

an answer to an earlier question, that earlier in the process you felt that your sister felt that she was being harassed by the police?

Sahima Begum: No, not my sister. Seven girls were interviewed. There was a fourth girl, who my family have contact with. The fourth girl felt like she was being harassed by the police, because she actually wasn't friends with the first girl who left.

Q209 Michael Ellis: But this is somebody in the orbit of your sister, was it? This is a friend or an acquaintance of your sister?

Sahima Begum: An acquaintance of my sister, but one of the seven girls that were interviewed in December.

Q210 Michael Ellis: Do you yourself think that the relationship, prior to your sister going missing and the other family members going missing—was an unhappy relationship as far as the police are concerned, that there was an untrusting relationship or an unsatisfactory relationship as far as the police are concerned?

Sahima Begum: Yes.

Q211 Michael Ellis: Mr Akunjee, you have been quite critical of the police as far as their conduct is concerned. What I am just trying to establish is, there are those that might say that the police can't really win. They are sometimes criticised by some people—I am not saying everyone—that their presence is intrusive in some communities, but then you, as solicitor, have been critical of the police in that they haven't done enough, or that they have misconducted themselves, in this case. So what would you say to those that might argue that, really, the police can't win?

Tasnime Akunjee: No. I have been critical where I believe that criticism is appropriate. All the police had to do was use an envelope, and we might have avoided all of this. So that is my criticism there. On top of that, my criticism is also that where the families have come out and set out their stall—effectively given their evidence, as they are doing today, in front of the media—the police made a mistake: we will call it a mistake, but it is a mistake, in that they alleged that between them and the schools, the family had been informed, effectively calling the family liars. In the media.

Q212 Michael Ellis: But you have also said that it is unrealistic to expect family members to necessarily understand—I am sure many people would sympathise with this—what is going through the mind of a 15-year-old. I think that is what you said.

Tasnime Akunjee: Indeed.

Q213 Michael Ellis: But isn't it also, in that case, even more unrealistic to expect the police to understand what is going through the minds of 15-year-olds?

Tasnime Akunjee: Given that they are tasked with the resources and the powers to investigate crime, and particularly terrorism, they were on notice with the first girl in December having gone to the location. These families were further disadvantaged in terms of understanding their children because the police had put a cap on the information to be given to them both through the school and through the children themselves, by effectively telling them to hush up. So how are the families supposed to work out what is going on in their children's lives when they are not being involved in any process to do with the school or with the police, and they are also, similarly, being specifically excluded from the danger factors around their children? That is the criticism.

Q214 Michael Ellis: The Commissioner will speak for himself—we will hear from him shortly—but is it not possible to argue that the police want to do all they can to disincentivise others from following those who have gone before, and therefore it is not in the public interest, or in the interests of anyone else, necessarily to give all the information that the police are aware of? It is quite routine in police practice to withhold some information.

Tasnime Akunjee: Indeed, but you have heard from the family already that the first thing they did when they saw the letter was call the number on the letter. Had they seen the letter, they would have been on notice. The police themselves clearly were aware that that minimum information should have been delivered to the families, because they attempted to do so, albeit in a somewhat bizarre manner through the actual girls. Given that the police knew that they had to communicate at least that minimum information, they failed to do so.

Hussen Abase: I just want to put a question to you, if I may. If the police are not expected to understand the mind of a young girl of 15, I will say okay, for the sake of argument. But do you think it is appropriate to give them the letter, neglecting the family? Where are we? Where is our position as parents?

Chair: We get that point. We understand.

Q215 Michael Ellis: The passports were within your possession and control at home, and your daughter knew where they were. So you are assuming that your daughter took the passport without your knowledge. Is that right?

Hussen Abase: Yes, of course. She is trustworthy. She is free.

Q216 Michael Ellis: Of course. Do any of the family members know how it is that the flights were paid for? I understand that these three flights would have cost in excess of £1,000, or certainly many hundreds of pounds. Do we know where the money was obtained by two 15-year-olds and a 16-year-old? Ms Begum, do you have any idea?

Sahima Begum: No. I know for a fact that my sister did not have access to that kind of money.

Q217 Michael Ellis: Ms Aziz, do you have any knowledge?

Fahmida Aziz: We don't know how they accessed funds.

Q218 Michael Ellis: Were there any indicators that the girls were perhaps becoming more devout in their thinking, or that they had changed their general conduct? Had you noticed any differences in their behaviour in the weeks and months prior to this happening?

Hussen Abase: No. It was the same as before.

Fahmida Aziz: No. If we had noticed anything, I think we would have been pretty effective in stepping in and querying, but we had not.

Q219 Michael Ellis: Just one other question, if I may. As far as the internet and social media are concerned, do you think that they had a part to play in this? Were any of your family members heavy users of social media? Is it within your knowledge or belief that that may have had a part to play? Do you think there is room for more regulation in this area?

Tasnime Akunjee: I think it is the Government that is encouraging the uptake of hyperspeed broadband. What would you like?

Q220 Michael Ellis: Mr Akunjee, if you will just bear with me, I am asking the family members: did you notice whether there had been heavy use of social media by your family members beforehand? Do you think it is anything to do with that? Do you think that could have had a part to play?

Sahima Begum: *indicated dissent.*

Hussen Abase: I have no clue. I am not from that area. I do not use technology that much.

Q221 Chair: It has come into the public domain that one of the girls was a heavy user of Twitter and was following 70 extremists on Twitter, which presumably came as a complete and total surprise and shock to all of you. I would not know who my 17-year-old daughter follows on Twitter. It is just not something parents would do, presumably. You wouldn't have known this.

Sahima Begum: *indicated dissent.*

Q222 Chair: Can I ask you about the future and your message to other parents, before we come to the end of this session? Do you know about the Government's Prevent strategy? Do any of you have any idea what this strategy is? Have you ever heard of it, and do you know anything about it?

Sahima Begum: I personally had not heard about it until, obviously, the situation that has now come up. Now we know about it. I understand that risk assessments by Prevent—Prevent ask for risk assessments or something—need to be done on certain situations. I assume that when the first girl went off, the seven who were being interviewed should have had risk assessments done on them. That wasn't done then, but I do now have the school knocking on the door asking to have a risk assessment done on my other sister, who happens to be attending the same school. I just feel that if those protocols were put in place at the right time, we would have known more information.

Fahmida Aziz: Your younger sister and Mr Abase's youngest daughter are both in the same school and, even given that all this has happened, they are still waiting for the risk assessment to take place, which should have been instant.

Q223 Chair: It should have been instant. Where would members of community go—we talk a lot about the community and what the community can do to help—if they had concerns about their daughter or their son being radicalised? Who would you go to in those circumstances? You wouldn't go to the police necessarily, would you? Is there someone you could turn to to talk about these issues?

Fahmida Aziz: The school. We would like to be in a position to approach the school in circumstances like this.

Q224 Chair: And that would be the best for members of the community? There is a line called the anti-terrorism hotline, but very few parents would pick up the phone and ring up the anti-terrorism hotline if they had concerns about the radicalisation of their children. There needs to be somewhere else for them to go to, and you are saying that it should be the school. Is that right?

Hussen Abase: As for me, I don't know the symptoms even—what radicalisation is.

Q225 Chair: Sure, because it has never come before you.

In respect of the Turkish authorities and what happened in Turkey, once you knew that that your daughters had gone to Turkey—once you had been told this—was your expectation that they would have been followed out there by the relevant authorities, be it the police or someone else? We have seen the CCTV footage; they were obviously in Turkey in that bus station for a considerable period of time before they crossed the border on Friday. I am talking about the gap between Wednesday and Friday. What is your expectation? What would you have wanted to see happen in those 48 hours?

Sahima Begum: We were told that there were police on the ground in Turkey looking for them—this is information that we were given by the Met police. Obviously, we were concerned. We’d been told that our kids had gone off to Turkey. We were constantly asking, “Do you have people there looking for them?” We kept being told, “Yes, we do. Yes, we do.” When the footage came out of the bus station, we were thinking, “Hold on. We reported it straight away. We were told that pictures of all three girls were being distributed in Turkey and everybody knows about it now.” But if that was the case, they would have been seen by somebody, because they were there for a considerable amount of time. Obviously, that message hadn’t been passed on. In this whole situation that we have come through, messages aren’t getting passed on. Somewhere along the line, someone is missing something out.

Q226 Chair: The Turkish authorities are very clear—we will hear from the ambassador shortly—that they were not notified until Friday, and therefore they couldn’t activate their various investigation systems. Is that what you have been told?

Hussen Abase: No. Who fills that gap? We, the same day, report. The Turkish say Friday, but we report the same day. That gap—blank.

Q227 Chair: Mr Akunjee, an apology from the Metropolitan police—that is what you seek?

Tasnime Akunjee: Yes. I was hoping that relations can be built, and relations can be built after they have broken down only after an apology, I would have thought.

Q228 Chair: Secondly, in terms of the liaison officer, in view of what has been said about the Prevent strategy, is that someone who can work with your clients and the community, or would you like to see someone new and more senior in there who is able to deal with this issue, which has obviously been all over the world? It is not something just in London; everyone in the world knows about these three girls.

Tasnime Akunjee: It is abhorrent behaviour in the extreme for a police officer who is not legally qualified to advise an individual not to follow their lawyer’s advice. I would say that that officer needs to revisit his training.

Q229 Chair: Miss Aziz, you obviously want your cousin back as quickly as possible.

Fahmida Aziz: Of course, yes.

Q230 Chair: What would be your message—each of you—to other parents and other relatives in the same situation as yourselves? What would be your message today to them?

Fahmida Aziz: To other parents? To other people? It is very difficult. I am a parent myself—I have got two young kids. As a parent, I think it is crucial to have

communication with the school and I think it does boil down to us. We need to maintain a certain level of communication with the school, but it has got to be a two-way street. If the school do not initiate it, of course we have to initiate it.

In respect of our sister, my cousin, for her safety, we want her to come back. We want her to be safe. We are hoping that she is safe wherever she may be. The ultimate thing is that we need to still rely on services who can help us deal with this and bring them back safely.

Q231 Chair: Miss Begum, what would be your message to parents and members of families in similar positions? They must be very anxious, especially the parents at that school. It is a big school, is it not? There are lots of young girls there.

Sahima Begum: It is a big school. It is a very respectable school. Both my sisters have gone there and we have never had any complaints about the school. It is an amazing school. It is high achieving. They get all the support they need in terms of bringing them up to the potential that they have.

I feel so let down by the police because we gave them everything, every step of the way. We gave them all information and they were just feeding back information that we had given them. My liaison officer was the liaison officer that handed them the letter. I think it is completely ridiculous that they assigned him to the same case because ethically I don't think it is right. That question kept coming up—why did you hand the letters to the girls? His response was that they did not have contact details. The school were very helpful. I went to the school to take my sister to school, because she has to carry on. I asked the school whether they provided contact details. They said yes, on the day we provided contact details.

Tasnime Akunjee: Sorry, just to be clear, that was in December.

Sahima Begum: This was in December. The school handed them the contact details. I believed the school. The liaison officer kept turning round and saying paperwork was being pushed around. I don't like the idea of my mother's address being pushed around from here to there.

Q232 Chair: Mr Abase, if you had a message to give to other parents like yourself in the community, what would it be, following the awful circumstances that you have had to put up with over the last week?

Hussen Abase: Simply, I would say, be vigilant not to fall into the same trap as we fell into.

Q233 Chair: Mr Akunjee, finally, with you. You have given two of the things that you want—an apology from the police and a new liaison officer. Is there anything else that could help the families and that could point us to the way in which the Prevent strategy could work in the future?

Tasnime Akunjee: Sure. In terms of safety of children, last year under schedule 7, we managed to stop for no reason at all 60,000 people and ask them questions, but this year we have three 15-year-old girls who somehow should have been stopped but managed to get on a plane and go abroad. I think that is a key issue and that is just about pure safety for children, not just within the terrorism context.

In terms of the future, I think my experience of the Prevent strategy is that none of these girls, none of the seven, appeared on any sort of high-level—

Chair: List.

Tasnime Akunjee: List, yes, within the Prevent criteria. It is my view that it is a defunct document. It is also self-contradictory in places. I would suggest that new partners in Government are sought to get a clear read of what the situation on the ground is. Frankly, some of the organisations that are feeding into Prevent are simply feeding in information that is reflective of nightmares.

Q234 Chair: Do you think more should have been done to get them back once they were in Turkey? Do you feel that the efforts were not muscular enough?

Tasnime Akunjee: I think the problem is how we look at these kids and these families. It appears that they simply were not taken seriously or looked at seriously. There was no real effort behind the communication structures. I have worked in cases, in the terrorism context, where a person has got on a plane, on a flight to Turkey; the family has then called the police in the same way that this family did, and there is a response team waiting on Turkey's side, deflecting them back—that is within two hours. That is capable and proved from previous experience and cases in a similar context. That simply did not happen here and the idea that police are saying, "We told them 24 hours later," and Turkey is saying three days—24 hours is an unacceptable period of time.

Chair: Thank you.

Q235 Paul Flynn: How do you expect the police to have advance knowledge that these girls had been radicalised when their families did not see anything?

Tasnime Akunjee: That would be because the first girl was known to the police to have gone over to Syria. The police knew this in December and they were already speaking to these other girls and then giving letters to them, asking them to be questioned formally by their parents. So they were clearly within the nexus of interest on these issues. The minute they disappeared, surely the police would have thought, "Oh! Here we go. The December girl has gone off to Syria, we know this,"—the police—

Chair: What you are saying is that there was no connection made.

Paul Flynn: How did the police get the information that they had disappeared? How quickly after they went did the police realise they had disappeared?

Chair: I think we have had evidence of that; it was Tuesday.

Q236 Tim Loughton: Isn't there also a role at the airport here? I remember that a couple of years ago, my daughter, who was then 16, was returning from Portugal and she was detained on the other side—arriving at Gatwick airport—and I received a phone call, which was slightly embarrassing because at the time I was the Minister for Children, before they would release her to me. That was absolutely right, but surely there should be some reciprocal questions asked at the check-in when you have got three children, unaccompanied, going on a plane. Questions could have been asked: “Why are you, unaccompanied, getting on a plane. Is there something more to it than that?” Do you think some more checks could have been made by the airline?

Tasnime Akunjee: Sorry—is that on the Turkey side?

Q237 Tim Loughton: No, no—when they checked in at the airport here.

Tasnime Akunjee: In terms of check-in, I am sure that we have all had that experience of putting your passport through and having a computer read your face. And one of the girls was actually using someone else's passport. How she got through that is a failure in the actual software, or the computer mechanism, there; it was not even the same passport.

Q238 Tim Loughton: There is the passport check-in, and now of course you can do it electronically in many cases, but when you have face-to-face contact, which I presume they did, with the Turkish Airlines desk, and when the member of staff working there checked their details and saw that they were three unaccompanied children, should there not automatically have been questions asked as to why three 15 and 16-year-olds are travelling unaccompanied, and what the purpose of their visit is?

Tasnime Akunjee: I absolutely agree with that, but in my experience of airports, I think the staff there are under a fair bit of pressure, given the amount of volume that goes, and their main questions are, “Does your luggage fit the actual standard size?” That is really more their focus; they are looking downwards and not upwards.

Q239 Chair: But you agree with Mr Loughton that there should have been better checks?

Tasnime Akunjee: Absolutely. When it comes to the safety of children, it should be our primary concern.

Q240 Nicola Blackwood: Mr Akunjee, you said that you had been involved in cases before where there was a very quick response when a child or an unaccompanied minor had gone abroad—

Tasnime Akunjee: It was not a child or a minor; it was a young adult.

Q241 Nicola Blackwood: In what context was that case? Was it a missing child? Was it an abduction case?

Tasnime Akunjee: It was a terrorism case.

Q242 Nicola Blackwood: So there have been cases where the system has worked. What do you think was different about this case? Why do you think the system didn't work this time?

Tasnime Akunjee: I have been critical in this particular case because there is just no communication across the board, either with the families or with those agencies in the airports, where they should make checks and communicate information about small children boarding planes, or indeed the police and the communications, or lack of, through the post.

Q243 Nicola Blackwood: And did the case that you were involved with before involve Turkey itself?

Tasnime Akunjee: It did, yes.

Q244 Nicola Blackwood: Mr Abase, I was very worried when I heard you say that even now you wouldn't know what symptoms of radicalisation to look for, and I just wanted to ask all of you this: do you feel that enough is being done to make parents aware of what the indicators of radicalisation are, so that if they see these things, first, the alert can go up and they can say, "Okay, there's a problem here," and, secondly, they would know where to go to or what to do?

Chair: Mr Abase? Do you agree with Nicola Blackwood?

Nicola Blackwood: Do you think there is enough being done to make sure that people are aware of the indicators? There is enough being done or there isn't?

Hussen Abase: No, there isn't.

Sahima Begum: I have the same view; I don't think enough is being done. If parents were more aware of things to look out for, then maybe parents would keep an extra eye on their kids.

Q245 Nicola Blackwood: Where do you think the best route is for that to come from? From schools, or community groups, or the police? Where is the most trusted group?

Sahima Begum: I think schools would be the most trusted group, because we trust them enough to send our kids there.

Q246 Nicola Blackwood: Do you agree, Miss Aziz?

Fahmida Aziz: I agree. Children are obviously spending the best part of their day in school. As far as I am aware—I have two children going into two different schools—following our situation Tower Hamlets are now delivering certain workshops and things like that in the borough. So we can be hopeful that things will improve for other families.

Q247 Nicola Blackwood: So schools need to have a clearer line of responsibility in preventing terrorism?

Fahmida Aziz: Absolutely.

Nicola Blackwood: And they also need to know more clearly what their role is in terms of parental consent when police are involved in counter-terrorism activities.

Chair: Miss Aziz, Miss Begum, Mr Abase and Mr Akunjee, thank you very much for coming here. You are welcome to stay for the rest of the session, when we will have the Commissioner and the Turkish ambassador.

Witnesses: **Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe**, Metropolitan Police Commissioner, and **Assistant Commissioner Mark Rowley**, Metropolitan Police, gave evidence.

Q248 Chair: Commissioner and Mr Rowley, thank you very much. I am sorry, we are running a tiny bit late. Commissioner, this is one of your—I was going to say normal—visits to the Select Committee when we examine you from time to time on various issues. Mr Rowley is here for the first part of the evidence session, which will deal with counter-terrorism, and we will then go on to other issues such as Yewtree.

We have just heard what can only be described as damning evidence from the families of the three girls who have gone to Syria, with severe criticisms of the way in which the Metropolitan police have acted. There was a failure to communicate with the families and a failure to hand letters to families which might have alerted them to the fact that the girls might go to Syria. We heard evidence that a liaison officer tried to get the families not to listen to the advice of a solicitor. At a time when the Metropolitan police need to be reaching out to communities, here was a big opportunity to show the Muslim community in particular

that they were on their side. They were trying to stop this radicalisation and try to discover where these girls had gone.

At the start, do you want to take the opportunity to say anything on behalf of the police about how the case has been dealt with? The family want an apology, because they think things could have been handled much better. What would you like to say about that, Commissioner?

Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe: First of all, we are sorry if the family feel like that. Clearly it is a terrible situation they find themselves in, having lost their daughters in such a horrible way. You can only half imagine what a parent is going through at this time. In that sense, I am sorry that they are in that situation.

I am also sorry that the letter we intended to get to them did not get through, because clearly that failed. It was intended for them, it failed, and for that of course we are sorry. I do not think we would go as far as saying, “Therefore, that caused the girls to go.” I don’t think there was anything more we could have done to prevent that, because at the beginning we were trying to get information from these girls about a further young woman who had left in December. That was the principal reason for us talking to that family.

With hindsight, obviously we now know that these girls were planning to go. And neither the family, the police, the school, nor anyone else realised that. That is the sequence of events, but the circumstances the parents find themselves in is a terrible situation and they must be worried sick about how their girls are.

Q249 Chair: They are, and thank you very much for that apology. I think that will go a long way to helping restore trust. Nobody is suggesting that, if the parents got the letter in December, somehow we would not be sitting here today talking about these three girls. The issue for the parents and the families is that, if they had the letter, they would have been alerted to the possibility that something might have happened to them. I spoke to the school earlier today, and they were very clear that they were under instructions from the Metropolitan police not to tell anyone in the school that the girl who went in December had gone to Syria. As a parent myself, if my child’s school informed me of that, I can just imagine the likely reaction in my household as to how to look after, watch and be very vigilant concerning my child. I am sure that would apply to any parent. Do you accept that the core failure to communicate that letter, which is what the family said was absolutely crucial, is something that really does need to be revisited? When you have situations of this kind in future—the past is the past, and we are thinking about the future—it is vital that everyone involved, schools and parents, knows what is happening. It cannot necessarily be kept in the shadows. Tell them the unvarnished truth and they can prepare.

Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe: As you have mentioned, with the benefit of hindsight we are going back to review what happened in this case. The dilemma is often, first, how much privacy the individual expects. Of course, their family may not wish for that information about a girl going to Syria to be shared, and in these three families’ cases they haven’t even had that opportunity—it has been in the public glare for obvious reasons. We always have to think about that. It is privacy for the individual involved, and then you have to get the balance right between warning people and not worrying

them. Together with the school, I am sure we will sit down and work through whether we could have dealt with it better in either keeping the young people at that college informed or, alternatively, keeping the families informed. I don't know whether Mark wants to say anything more about the letter.

Mark Rowley: Thinking about the context, this is a sizeable investigation that continues. Obviously, it started with the first girl who went in December and then has the parallel case of the three girls who have gone more recently. Massive amounts of CCTV have been recovered, and there have been massive amounts of work on financial data and communications data. In that context, one line of inquiry was speaking to that first girl's friendship group. They were spoken to in December, and subsequently one girl came forward with some helpful information. She was seen, a statement was taken and some useful material was gathered. That investigation has moved on apace. In fact, we have arrested two people for child abduction in relation to that first girl, and the case of the Scottish woman who has been reported overseas is well advanced. Work is going on potentially to prosecute her if she ever returns.

All those strands of work are very productive, and one line of inquiry was the wider friendship group. Out of that came the contacts with the girls repeatedly, and the officer who followed up in February was, I think, doing a belt and braces job. They had given very little in the first meeting in December, and he was determined to follow it up and go through a full interview with each of them. He met them, and the letter going to their parents simply said, "I would like to have a longer conversation with your daughters." Could it have been delivered in a better way? Of course it could have been, but I think it was a very simple intention as part of a massive investigation.

Q250 Chair: Mr Rowley, it's not just that, is it? I am not trained, and you are the nation's lead on counter-terrorism. Just with common sense, if I was dealing with a school where somebody had gone to Syria and she was part of a friendship group, I would want to tell the parents of the others almost immediately. I would want to bring them into my confidence. I would want to explain what might happen so that, at the very least, they could take away the passports, which were subsequently used for these girls to travel. I wouldn't just use it as an ordinary investigation. This is a huge propaganda coup for ISIL and a big blow to the credibility of what this Committee has said in the past is the best police service in the world. It needed that letter to go to the parents and for the parents to be told that this was a situation. The letter should not have been handed to a 15-year-old girl.

Mark Rowley: It is a very simple line of inquiry in an investigation, and I don't see, as you do now with hindsight, that it was obvious that these girls were going to go missing. If parents can't see changes in behaviour that involve stealing from parents, changing appearance and taking hold of a sister's passport, if people in the community don't spot this and if we don't see signs of it in schools, I think it is very hard to expect police doing an investigation to spot these signs.

Q251 Chair: Of course, but you have partners in this, and one of the partners is the school. The school was instructed not to tell anyone. Indeed, when I spoke to the school earlier today,

they went through the seven levels of Prevent, which are the seven issues that need to be looked at to see whether there is an issue on Prevent for a particular child—the at-risk issues. They found that only in respect of one of the girls did one of those issues apply. Where are your partners in this if it happens again?

Mark Rowley: I am not sure I follow the question. The school have looked at it and themselves found it difficult to see any signs of radicalisation with these girls.

Q252 Chair: But the school was told not to inform anyone that this child had gone to Syria. There is a difference between radicalisation and someone actually getting on a plane and going to Turkey to join ISIL. There is a big difference between radicalisation and someone taking those steps, is there not? Or am I just wrong?

Mark Rowley: No, absolutely. Clearly, the first girl has made a dramatic decision and has travelled off to Syria to join ISIS. That is very worrying and concerning. I do not believe that there was any intent to keep it secret—far from it—but there is the balance in terms of privacy, as the Commissioner has outlined. The fundamental focus has been about hunting down and trying to find that first girl, because we are worried about her safety. She has gone to a war zone. That is our biggest concern. All those lines of inquiry have been very fruitful. They have delivered arrests and intelligence. As one of those lines of inquiry, we spoke to her friendship group. If someone in the school had said, “There is something strange going on here,” of course it would have generated more actions, but to expect the police during an investigation to have a lens on these issues that families, schools and the community do not have is unrealistic.

Q253 Chair: If we look at the three girls, when you were notified on the Tuesday that they had gone missing, did alarm bells ring that these three girls were all part of the group of seven that had been interviewed last December? Did someone notice, and think, “My goodness, there could be a problem here—they could have gone to Turkey”?

Mark Rowley: That was picked up very quickly. In terms of the sequence of events, broadly, the three girls left their families having deceived them about what they were doing that day. They get flights at lunchtime, reaching Turkey by late afternoon. Two of the families realise that something is amiss that evening, when the girls are already on the ground in Turkey. One family came to us the next morning. We of course were looking at these missing people, doing record research—

Q254 Chair: This is the 17th—the Tuesday?

Mark Rowley: Yes, Tuesday evening and then Wednesday morning. That research involves looking at all sorts of data and information out there, including obviously the pattern with the previous girl. With the flight manifest we find evidence that they have flown out of the country, albeit one—

Q255 Chair: Did you discover who paid for the tickets?

Mark Rowley: Yes, we have information about how the tickets were bought. They were bought for a large amount of cash at a local travel agent.

Q256 Chair: And you know the travel agent?

Mark Rowley: We know the travel agent. We worked our way through that, and by the mid-afternoon—I think it is about 3 o'clock or 4 o'clock—on the Wednesday we are looking to kick off inquiries in Turkey, and we make contact through the liaison officer situated in the Turkish embassy here in London and also speak to the British consulate in Istanbul. So we try to kick those inquiries off very quickly.

Q257 Chair: Sure, but why did no one then go out there to see whether they could find these girls? These are three young British citizens who have got on a plane and gone abroad, and you contact the liaison officer in London.

Mark Rowley: We had an officer on the ground the day after that.

Q258 Chair: So you sent someone out?

Mark Rowley: I have a small network of officers based in critical countries around the world doing counter-terrorism work and we had one—we are increasing that office—based in Turkey. As it happened, it was his leave period, so he cancelled his annual leave and rushed back to Turkey, and was there a day or so after we reported it.

Q259 Chair: On which day?

Mark Rowley: I cannot remember whether it was the day after or two days after.

Q260 Chair: While reassuring the parents and the rest of the public, you saw images of these girls go into that bus station in Turkey. They weren't in a hurry—they walked in very casually, sat down and waited a considerable length of time. I understand you only had that footage afterwards, but bearing in mind the fact that you had three young British citizens who were the centre of all this attention from a school that had a pupil who had gone to Syria, did you not feel that more could have been done by your officer in Istanbul to try to track the three girls into that bus station? It appears that that is a well worn route for people who want to go from the United Kingdom to Syria.

Mark Rowley: He has done an enormous amount of work with the Turkish police. The Turkish police have committed a really significant amount of resource on this investigation and have been working very hard. I am briefed on some very substantial progress they have made in relation to the investigation, which is very encouraging. His relationship with them as a British police officer there is very strong. Of course,

his role is to work with them, to assist and ask for their help. He can't go on the ground and do surveillance and investigate—that is not lawful.

Q261 Chair: He has to work with the Turks?

Mark Rowley: Yes.

Q262 Chair: But looking at that footage, as I did and the public did, did you not think, as the top counter-terrorism officer in the country, “We nearly stopped them going and we could have done something else to make sure they didn’t go?” They were sitting in that Turkish bus station for so long. The parents were obviously very upset. You had a number of officers involved, you actually could have prevented them getting to Syria.

Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe: I’m not sure that that’s reasonable. As Mark has indicated, when we operate in a foreign country, we do not operate on the ground any more than we would expect the Turks to come and try to find someone missing from Ankara in London. It wouldn’t be appropriate. They do not have the powers, nor do we in Turkey. What we do have is a duty to share the information as quickly as possible and to try and encourage them, among their many priorities, in a huge country, to consider this a priority.

Our best advice is that they took some urgent action. Of course, they would be no clearer, presumably, about where these girls went after leaving the airport, without making significant inquiries, such as looking through CCTV. Everybody says that is very straightforward until they have gone through some 200 hours of CCTV to find these people. It takes time. So I would not judge the fact that they weren’t discovered early. Of course, we would all have hoped to have discovered them before they travelled to Syria, but it is a big country. These were three people they were looking for on behalf of the British state and I’m sure they also have many priorities. I think, from our assessment, that they have done an awful lot. Sadly, it wasn’t effective.

Q263 Chair: Are there lessons to be learned in terms of co-operation with Turkey? They are a friendly country and we do a lot of work with them. The Turks are under huge pressure—there are foreign fighters coming from western Europe on one border, and on the other border there are refugees coming from Iraq and Syria. Can we do more to help the Turkish Government?

Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe: We could always say that we could do more.

Q264 Chair: What more, practically, would you like to see happen?

Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe: It is not easy to articulate. You have set out very clearly the context in which they operate. They have a border with a warring state. They are trying to control that border. There are issues on that border, as you know, with the Kurdish population, which doesn’t make it very straightforward for them, and, of

course, they are trying to manage a huge population of which this is just part of their threat. I have to say that, generally, we have a good, professional relationship with them as police officers and as a security service. We do a lot to work together and, as you say, our primary aim has been to prevent terrorism. We are trying to stop people—generally young men, but not only young men—leaving to become terrorists in Syria or Iraq. That has been our principle aim. With this latest surge of young girls and women going, I think we have to have an open mind about the purpose of them leaving. Is it for terrorism, or is it because they are victims?

Q265 Chair: How big is the surge? The figure has been put at 50 young women and girls who have gone there.

Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe: I think it is 22 in the past 12 months.

Q266 Chair: Twenty-two in the past 12 months. I see. And these are the only parents who have come out in this way, so publicly, about the loss of their child? Is that right?

Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe: I believe so. As far as I am aware.

Mark Rowley: We have had good co-operation from communities. One of the increasing trends of the past year, which is very welcome, is community leaders from Muslim communities stepping forward and trying to confront the evil propaganda that is coming across from ISIS. We have had 87 missing people reported to us by families. Those families have come forward and engaged with the police because they trust us.

Q267 Chair: Just how do they report them? They don't ring the anti-terrorist line, do they? How do they do it?

Mark Rowley: It ranges from the anti-terrorist line to local police calls coming through normal routes. Then it is down to local officers.

Q268 Chair: Eighty-seven?

Mark Rowley: Eighty-seven families have come forward. Twenty-six of those are in relation to women. Sixty-one of the 87 were young people under 21.

Q269 Chair: Is this trend of British citizens going to become foreign fighters increasing or decreasing?

Mark Rowley: It has been a pretty steady flow. The numbers of girls within it has tended to be one or two a month and every now and again it leaps up to be a handful and goes back down again. It is a fairly steady picture, but it is very concerning. They are all tragedies, potentially.

Q270 Michael Ellis: Commissioner, do you feel sometimes that the police can't win? From some quarters the police are accused of being too intrusive and now it seems that in other quarters the police are supposed to know when young people are being radicalised when family members perhaps don't know that? Do you think that sometimes the police can't win?

Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe: I think that it is the nature of our role. Sometimes it is quite difficult to get that balance right. It is quite difficult here for a couple of reasons. One is that all of us—the Government and perhaps Parliament—are challenged by the complexity of this ISIS attraction for both terrorists and young women. It is pretty hard to understand why they are attracted to it, and therefore it is rather hard to have strategies to intervene in it. If you just look at London, this is a big city. There are 1.25 million Muslims living in this great city, and spotting the ones who are interested in travelling abroad in these horrible circumstances is hard. We then have to intervene.

We have done an awful lot of work with people who we believe are at risk of being radicalised. Hundreds of people have been put into the Channel programme, and it has had some success. But the scale is big. We know that at least 600 or 700 people have already gone to Syria; that is a minimum, not a maximum. Those are the ones we know about by now. It is a real challenge. I do not think that any of us can underestimate that in complexity or size. We are doing our best, but only by working with schools, parents and others will we make a real, lasting intervention. The police are the last resort when it comes to the law.

Q271 Michael Ellis: Talking about working with schools and parents, do you think that the police went a bit wrong with the letter that was apparently written to the girls instead of the parents? Was the letter addressed to the parents and given to the girls to pass on, or was it actually addressed to the girls?

Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe: I'm afraid I don't know.

Mark Rowley: It was expected to be given to the parents.

Q272 Michael Ellis: So was it addressed to the parents or the girls?

Mark Rowley: I cannot remember how it was headed, but it was expected to be given to the parents.

Q273 Michael Ellis: And were the children that it was given to—it was given to more than just these three girls—told to hand it to their parents?

Mark Rowley: Yes. There were seven girls who the school identified as being the friendship group of the first girl who went in December. It was that wider friendship group whom we met in early December and then had the follow-up meeting with in early February.

Q274 Michael Ellis: Presumably, the letter could have been sent in the post. I accept that that would have slowed it down by a couple of days, but it might have guaranteed its arrival at the parents' addresses.

Mark Rowley: As the commissioner said, in hindsight that would have been better. Of course, after the first meeting, the deputy head spoke to the parents and said that there had been a meeting with the police. So there was some expectation that the children would pass it on, but they did not.

Q275 Michael Ellis: And what about this money? You say that you have found the travel agent and that they accepted a large sum of money in cash. How much was it?

Mark Rowley: It was well over £1,000.

Q276 Michael Ellis: Over £1,000 in cash was handed over by three teenage girls. Do we know how the girls got that money?

Mark Rowley: We think it is linked to theft from families—taking jewellery from one of the families.

Q277 Chair: Taking jewellery from their families—is that what you are saying?

Mark Rowley: Yes.

Q278 Michael Ellis: I see. We work quite closely with the Turkish authorities, I presume, and they have substantial challenges of their own, as we do in this country. Are you happy that, generally speaking, relations between the police in London and Ankara are satisfactory and work well?

Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe: Yes, certainly. At the moment, it works well. From time to time, there will always be tensions—usually between priorities. Everyone always has too much to do, but generally it seems to work pretty well. Our inquiries to them about people arriving for terrorism, which more recently are the missing girls, seem to have been tracked seriously. But it is quite a challenge for them in terms of volume. We are just the UK, but we have seen hundreds and thousands of people around Europe travelling through Turkey, so it is quite a challenge for them to deal with many countries making similar requests.

Q279 Michael Ellis: And that is accepted. As far as the sequence of the girls' departure is concerned, if I understand the evidence that you have given correctly, two of the girls were reported missing on 17 February, which was a Tuesday. We now know that they caught a flight at lunchtime on that day. Is that right?

Mark Rowley: Yes.

Q280 Michael Ellis: All three of the girls?

Mark Rowley: Yes.

Q281 Michael Ellis: But at the time that the flight departed, one of the girls had not been reported missing.

Mark Rowley: None of them were reported missing at—

Q282 Michael Ellis: None of them were reported missing at the time the flight departed?

Mark Rowley: Correct.

Q283 Michael Ellis: But two of the girls were reported missing later that same day?

Mark Rowley: That evening, yes.

Q284 Michael Ellis: And the flight was at lunchtime?

Mark Rowley: Yes.

Q285 Michael Ellis: The third girl was reported missing the following day, is that right?

Mark Rowley: The following morning, that's right.

Q286 Michael Ellis: The following morning. The police notified the Turkish authorities on that following morning, the Wednesday morning—

Mark Rowley: In the afternoon.

Q287 Michael Ellis: The afternoon. How were the Turkish authorities notified? Were they notified via the embassy in London?

Mark Rowley: We used two routes. We spoke to the British consulate in Istanbul, but the main direction was—in the same way as we have police officers in liaison posts around the world, the Turks do—the police officer in a liaison post in their embassy. We went through him.

Q288 Michael Ellis: That is a normal protocol, is it?

Mark Rowley: If our overseas liaison officer had not been on a short break with his family, it would have gone through that route, but it is perfectly proper to go through this route. We asked the liaison if he would take the inquiry and pass it on to his colleagues back home in Turkey. He was more than happy to do so.

Q289 Michael Ellis: That was done on the Wednesday—

Mark Rowley: Afternoon, yes.

Q290 Michael Ellis: Afternoon. When you say you passed information to the Turkish authorities and, for that matter, the British consul in Istanbul, did you include descriptions of the girls, perhaps photographs of them and particulars of what had occurred?

Mark Rowley: Yes. Certainly all their personal details, because of course we want the authorities to check any manifest for any travel within the country. Turkey has a registration system in terms of hotels and that sort of bookings, so we wanted them to check against those things—

Q291 Michael Ellis: And did it include photographs?

Mark Rowley: I think it included photographs as well. I will have to double-check that, but I am pretty sure it did.

Q292 Michael Ellis: Are you satisfied that the normal protocols were followed in terms of notifying the relevant authorities, British and Turkish, in respect of these three girls?

Mark Rowley: Yes. And, as I say, the Turks have been very helpful.

Chair: We are all praising the Turks.

Q293 Mr Winnick: We will obviously ask the Turkish ambassador about what happened or did not happen in Turkey and, moreover, about the Turkish airlines in so far as he has any responsibility—he probably hasn’t—but I take it, first of all, that the first lesson from all this unfortunate event is that parents in future, from now, will be notified directly. The letters will not be handed over to the pupils.

Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe: Yes, of course. That is one of the things that we learned. In similar circumstances—although each is different—we take the Chair’s first point. How do we notify other people in the school? Secondly, how do we notify those closest to the girls? We are reviewing how we will do that in future. We will have to work with schools to see how best to do it.

Q294 Mr Winnick: Indeed. I think there is a general recognition that what happened was a mistake.

If I may widen the questioning for a moment, the Prevent programme is intended to prevent people from being radicalised and doing what these three did—going to the notorious outfit ISIS, which we know is founded on terrorism and every other evil that one can imagine. As you know, Commissioner, in the past few days a former police commander has been reported as saying that “the lack of Muslim staff in the ranks of the Prevent scheme is hampering efforts to stop vulnerable young people, particularly women, from travelling to Syria to join Islamic State” or ISIS. Is there any justification in that criticism?

Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe: To some extent, yes. We have about 50,000 people, with 32,000 police officers, of whom about 11% are from minorities. We have over 300 Muslim officers. So it is a relatively small percentage, given that in London, as we have already said, there are 1.25 million Muslims out of a population of 8.6 million. Obviously, the number of Muslim officers is then smaller by the time we get to the counter-terrorist command. It is a constant challenge to recruit people from different communities, so I think that there is no doubt that Dal Babu’s comment that we want more Muslims to be part of the police and in particular in this area, is true.

Q295 Mr Winnick: He is very critical; he says that the Prevent programme is a “toxic brand” run mainly by white police officers with “little understanding” of Islam, gender or race. He says that the people involved have few or no roots in the communities that they are trying to support—in other words, to stop people being radicalised, engaging in terrorism and the rest. In effect, what can the Metropolitan police do at this stage to meet such criticism?

Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe: Before we go to Mark, I will say one quick thing. Generally, I do not think you have to be from a group to be sensitive to or work with a certain group, whether that is a racial group or a belief group. The police have to work with all groups. We have already said clearly to this Committee that I want better representation from all members in London, so I accept that general point. The second thing is that we do an awful lot of training to sensitise our officers and educate them on the beliefs of different people and how their cultures develop. That is pretty hard to do in London, where more than 300 languages are spoken, and that does not take into account all the different beliefs and the various groupings within them. I think there is a limit to how much we can train all our officers, but Mark can perhaps say a little more about what we do.

Mark Rowley: The first point I would make is that in this context we risk conflating Prevent with tackling Islamism and the sort of terrorism we are talking about. Prevent is a much wider programme. It covers, for example, extreme right-wing ideologies and other extreme ideologies. I just make that point.

Whether Prevent is the right label, I will leave for others to judge, but in terms of what we need to do and whatever strategies we have in the future, we will want to work with communities to help identify people who are being radicalised and who are becoming extremist. We will want to find ways to tackle that, whether that is policing

interventions or, more likely, interventions by other providers or by mental health services. I cannot imagine that we would ever have a strategy whereby we were not trying to prevent radicalisation and extremism. Likewise, I cannot imagine that we would have a strategy where we were not looking to the community for help in terms of information and support in fighting terrorism. I see evidence of us succeeding on both fronts. It is, of course, not perfect, and I would not pretend that it was; it is always going to be messy and difficult, because it is a complicated issue.

Over the past year, we think our Prevent interventions have potentially dissuaded 70 people from travelling to Syria. It is a bit of a subjective judgment, but we can see interventions that look to have had that effect. We have recently doubled our work with schools and higher education colleges. A lot of that is because Parliament has just brought in legislation that recognises their greater duties to do so. Prevent has been looking for help, and we have been helping them with that, and the police have been helping with that role.

Q296 Mr Winnick: The police are being criticised and politicians are being criticised, but I ask both of you to be perfectly frank: what more could the Muslim community do—particularly the community leaders and, on the religious side, the mosques—to stop the poisoning of young people with a form of belief that is totally un-Islamic, as we know, and has nothing to do with the Islamic religion, but a great deal to do with murder, evil and terrorism?

Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe: For me, the Muslim community needs to do even more of what it has been doing since August of last year. As ISIS swept through Iraq, we saw terrible things on YouTube and the TV, including beheadings. There is no way that anyone can justify that. We have seen Muslims from various branches of Islam come forward and condemn that and say that it is not about Islam and has nothing to do with the Koran. That has to be said clearly and repeatedly. If I am honest, there have been times when Muslims could have spoken before and they have not. I praise their bravery, but they need to be as brave in the future.

Frankly, politicians also have to speak more clearly, because this is not about, as you have indicated—

Q297 Mr Winnick: In what way should politicians speak more clearly?

Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe: Politicians need to be braver in saying that this is about politics, not religion. This is about people trying to seek influence in various states and for me it has very little to do with religion. That is the mask under which it hides, but the thing is about politics. The more clearly that point is made, the more it allows those who are promoting good faith to be clear about their role, too. For me, we all need to be clear and be brave enough to condemn.

Chair: We will come back to Prevent later, because I have some questions on that, but let us go first to James Clappison.

Q298 Mr Clappison: Commissioner, you rightly said a few moments ago that you found it hard to see how anyone could be attracted to the ISIS cause and you have spoken about some of the vile activities that have taken place. When it comes to blaming people for what has happened, however, surely we should be looking at the people who are responsible for radicalisation, rather than the police or the wider Muslim community. Are you pursuing any lines of inquiry against any particular individuals who may have been involved in the radicalisation of these three young girls?

Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe: We have certainly got numerous lines of inquiry about people in-country who we believe are trying to radicalise people—not towards Islam, but towards terrorism. That is a clear line of inquiry, and we see that even in our prisons, where we are trying to stop radicalisation. We have also seen it in the community.

The second area, clearly, is the internet. There is some evidence that in this case, as we have already indicated, some of the radicalisation took place online. We are taking down around 1,000 sites a week that we believe are contributing to that context. I have to say that on the internet that is a very small impact, but it is a very significant effort.

Q299 Mr Clappison: Are you able to get at the individuals who are behind it?

Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe: Occasionally. As we say, I think that in one case there was a link back to Scotland, so you can see that sometimes with people in-country using the internet, but it is pretty hard if they are abroad. Nevertheless, we are determined to pursue that. To take your principal point, we are not only dealing with the consequences; we are trying to deal with the instigators.

The final point, of course, is that it is a constant challenge for Parliament as well as for the police, because people adapt their behaviour to the law. Often, they will stay just on the right side of the law, because they are wise enough, sometimes on legal advice, to be very clear about what they mean but not make legal incitement. It is a constant dynamic, but we do think we are having some success.

Mark Rowley: I would just add to that. On this case, we have made some progress with the first girl and having two people arrested for child abduction who were potentially involved in helping her to leave the country. We are also making good progress on a Briton who is overseas in Syria, influencing people over Facebook and the internet.

More generally, we have been looking at people who are extremists in communities, as the Commissioner describes, and trying to find evidence of where they are stepping over that line from being unsavoury to being illegal. We have one big investigation that is ongoing, on which we are making good progress. We will keep chasing people down. We have a lot of people who are outside the country, perhaps in Syria, and who are using social media to try to radicalise others. We try to get to a point where we are

charge-ready, so that if they set foot in Europe or any friendly western country, we are ready to bring them back here and sort them out.

Q300 Mr Clappison: We have seen a number of people travelling to Syria and Iraq, but in this particular case, the girls concerned have made a huge and terrible mistake, but they are very young girls compared with the other people. Without going into the other cases, with this particular case, do you have any reflections on where we are now, and how we could get them back to this country safely?

Mark Rowley: It is important to say that it is every case on its merits. We have no evidence in this case that these three girls are responsible for any terrorist offences. That is important, because they have no reason to fear, if nothing else comes to light, that we will be treating them as terrorists if they come back to this country.

Q301 Chair: In other words, if they return, they will not be returning to jail; they can return to their families—is that what you are saying today?

Mark Rowley: Yes.

Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe: Yes.

Q302 Chair: And that is your clear statement to them.

Mark Rowley: Absolutely.

Q303 Chair: I am not suggesting that they are watching the proceedings of the Home Affairs Committee, but the message should go out that if they return, there are no terrorism issues here.

Mark Rowley: Yes.

Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe: That is a vitally important point, because in the past, when people have gone for, we believe, terrorism, sometimes they have changed their mind. Do you encourage them to come back, or do you condemn them to stay there? In this case, however, it is very clear.

Mark Rowley: There is a difference between the person who has been running around northern Iraq and Syria with a Kalashnikov, has a touch of the seconds and wants to come back and apologise; that is very different from three young girls for whom we have no evidence to suggest that they are involved in terrorism.

Chair: Colleagues, we have a vote coming up shortly. Can we do the terrorism section and then release Mr Rowley?

Q304 Tim Loughton: To make it absolutely clear, you are viewing the girls as victims rather than perpetrators.

Mark Rowley: We always stay open-minded, but at the moment we have no evidence and no reason to speculate.

Q305 Tim Loughton: Can I go back to the mechanics of their journey? Notwithstanding Mr Ellis's comment about the police never being able to win on this, can you remind me of the journey that they took?

Mark Rowley: They have flown from Gatwick to Istanbul, and then they have gone across land from there.

Q306 Tim Loughton: To?

Mark Rowley: I cannot recall the names of all the cities and things.

Q307 Tim Loughton: Well, we think they went to Gaziantep by bus—is that not right?

Mark Rowley: I cannot recall.

Q308 Tim Loughton: Having been there, that is the obvious route across a very porous border into Syria. I want to concentrate on the time between them disappearing and arriving in Istanbul, and then arriving on the Syrian border by a very open and conventional route. Why were steps not taken that might have intercepted them between them being way up in the north of Turkey and way down in the south of Turkey on the obvious way to get from Istanbul to Gaziantep, or one of those places along that border? Having been there, the airports are shut most of the time, so the bus journey is the obvious way to go. When you had that intelligence, you would have liaised with the Turkish police. The first place, surely, that they would have gone would have been to a bus station. As we now know, they were there. Would it not be the logical priority to then eliminate their routes and try to intercept them?

Mark Rowley: There are many routes that people can take, but I do not think that it is right for me to try to explain all the work that the Turks have done in support of this case to try to identify where the girls were.

Q309 Tim Loughton: It is perhaps something that we will take up with the Turkish ambassador. Coming back to this country, people going from this country, usually as loners, into Syria is quite a high-profile issue at the moment, is it not?

Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe: Yes.

Q310 Tim Loughton: Young girls, in particular, going missing—nothing to do with terrorism, but in the light of recent cases about child sexual exploitation—is a high-profile issue at the moment, is it not?

Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe: Of course.

Q311 Tim Loughton: So therefore a group of young, vulnerable girls disappearing should trigger alarm bells very quickly, should it not?

Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe: Yes.

Q312 Tim Loughton: The point that I am trying to make is that here we have high-value targets—girls who, for child sexual exploitation issues or possible terrorism-linked issues of going to Syria, should have been way up on the radar as a high priority the minute that their absence became known. Yet were they?

Mark Rowley: Their absence became known after they had flown.

Q313 Tim Loughton: Sure, at which point they become the No. 1 priority, as is dealing with your colleagues in Turkey to try to intercept them; but we are not clear that that actually happened.

Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe: There is a general point, which I think that you are making as well. As young, unaccompanied children or young people, particularly girls, travel, perhaps to Turkey, how much notice is taken of that in the general transport through airports? Of course, as you know, the Government—well, Governments of various hues—do not have exit controls, so there is no general control at airports or sea ports. Therefore, you are falling back on two opportunities: the airlines themselves, and the possibility that our officers who are based at airports could intervene if we saw something suspicious. Take Gatwick or Heathrow. Tens of thousands—indeed, millions—of people travel through these places. Children travelling unaccompanied are not as unusual as we might imagine. But some countries have regulations in place to regulate that.

Q314 Tim Loughton: But is that not the point, Commissioner? Great work has been done to tackle child sexual exploitation—I am using this as an analogy—by notifying hotels, so that if they suspect something when girls turn up with odd people, there is a notification. Should the same work have been going on already, given the high profile of this, with travel agents—for example, when they get cash and passengers give dates of birth that mean that they are 15 or 16 year old—and airline desks in airports? However usual it may be, it is still fairly unusual for three unaccompanied 15 and 16-year-olds to arrive at a Turkish Airlines desk in the middle of term time, unaccompanied, going to a country that we know is high-risk for people going for such purposes. Is work being done with those airlines—we don't have those

passport controls, but that is another issue—so that people who come face to face with high-value targets ask questions?

Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe: Your question suggests some research to see how frequent it is. If it is so regular that we would be inundated by people worried while travelling, we will not be able to intervene. Your question as to what more we could do is good. Of course, many people can book on the internet. They do not have to go to a travel agent. Once they know that travel agents may report, they will avoid it. They can turn up at an airport and buy a ticket, which is often an indicator of unusual travel.

The question of what more we could do, particularly with travel arrangements, to spot these youngsters is a good one. However, we have been quite surprised at how many young people travel unaccompanied at very young ages. Certainly, in at least one country—I think it is Portugal—the only way that a 13 to 17-year-old can travel is with the notarised support of their parent. I am not arguing that that should happen here. I made a remark that in many countries of the world, young people routinely travel unaccompanied. They rely on the airline for their safety.

Q315 Tim Loughton: My 16-year-old went unaccompanied to Portugal and back. The only time that she was detained was by immigration at Gatwick airport coming back. Do you take my point that if it is not happening already, it urgently should be? If they are booking over the internet, the travel companies at the other end, which have to get those details about date of birth and passport numbers, should be asking questions as well.

Mark Rowley: The Home Office are looking at two things—

Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe: Sorry. I think your general point is right. The only caution I would put in is that if the police get inundated with hundreds or thousands of requests a day for us to check out the validity or sincerity of that travel, that would be impossible.

Q316 Tim Loughton: But we are not talking about hundreds or thousands, are we?

Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe: But we don't know.

Q317 Tim Loughton: Well, in order to pay online, you need to have a credit card, for which you need to be over 18. So again, there are all sorts of alarm bells.

Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe: The broad point is that we don't know. What I do know is that there are many youngsters travelling. What I don't want to be faced with is a huge list every day of "Can we"—or, frankly, UKBA—"check out these young people?". So I agree with your general point. I am not disagreeing with that; it is a pragmatic approach.

Chair: Thank you. I think it would be helpful if you wrote to us in the future about this.

Q318 Nicola Blackwood: Assistant Commissioner Rowley, I want to follow up on a comment that you made right back at the beginning of the session. You said that hindsight is 20/20, and that if the parents, school and local community could not spot the signs of radicalisation, how could police officers? But in the evidence that we heard before you came in, the Minister answered that he would not know what the symptoms of radicalisation were anyway, that was echoed by the other family members. It is also something that we heard from the family of Thomas Evans, who of course is a foreign fighter who went off to Somalia to fight with al-Shabaab. What more can be done to communicate to family members the indicators of radicalisation, and what might give parents and family members the signs of radicalisation?

In this particular case, when it was known that one child in the school had gone to Syria, even if that particular piece of information could not be communicated to other families, why was more general information about the signs and things to look out for not communicated to the families and the school more generally? Do you have the mechanism to do that quickly and in a targeted manner?

Mark Rowley: I will try to cover that ground. First, in terms of the signs, a lot of them are fairly obvious. They are about a change in attitude towards—*[Interruption.]*

Chair: I am going to stop you; there is a Division. We will start immediately when we return on your answer to Nicola Blackwood, and I will start as soon as we have a quorum. I am sorry; the politicians have spoken clearly and called a vote, so we will have to wait for that.

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

On resuming—

Chair: We have a quorum so we can recommence the inquiry. If you could hold the answer to Nicola Blackwood for a second. Mr Flynn has a question, then we will go back to Nicola Blackwood.

Q319 Paul Flynn: You mentioned the way that politicians have reacted to this totally unexpected situation. None of us expected people to be radicalised in this way, and it is quite right that you were critical. Many of the questions that have been asked this afternoon have been from the point of view of perfect hindsight. Three very intelligent young women who plotted in a very devious and intelligent way. They collected the money together and managed completely to deceive their parents. In those circumstances, do you think it is sensible to be critical of the police? Are we expecting of the police a level of efficiency that is unreasonable and unobtainable?

Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe: I think there is a limit, but I have to be careful that I am not too defensive and say that we can't blame the police. We have our role to play

and, professionally, if we have information I would expect that we act on it. We can see the horrible situation the family are in, and I am sure that they have must have replayed many times, “Could we have spotted something here?” I don’t think it is easy. We see that people who leave are often more strict and observe their religion. They often say things that make people start to worry a little about their interests and whom they support. That is a natural, almost political thing, let alone a radicalisation thing. The point was made to us about what more we could do to tell schools and parents what to look for, and I think that looking for people who are becoming more devout. There is nothing wrong with being devout, but there seems to be something when behaviour changes very quickly. I think that is worth spotting. Secondly, particularly with young people, control of finance, if that’s possible. Thirdly, control of passports. Those three things.

Q320 Paul Flynn: Do you think there’s a danger in trying to seek perfection? It is one incident, but there is a series of many incidents. Hundreds are going on, and things always go wrong. On this occasion, are we in danger of making the police risk averse and less efficient rather than more efficient?

Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe: It is certainly a possibility because the numbers aren’t big. Each one is a disaster for the family, but they are not very big given that we have talked about, broadly, 700 people, which is still a relatively small number of people. There is a danger that we concentrate our resources where relatively few people are affected, but the difficult thing is that we are talking about one of these girls being 15. As has already been said, it is a pretty disastrous outcome, in our view, for this girl now to be in a place where no one can easily recover her or the other two 16-year-old girls who are with her. That is a pretty disastrous outcome, because we all believe that they don’t have mature judgment.

Mark Rowley: We have more than 300 investigations at the moment in the counter-terrorism command in London. Many of those investigations involve people aspiring or plotting to kill people. This investigation is very important, but it has to be set in that context. I take your point about a doctrine of perfection. If we have a public standard that either an operation is completely perfect or it is completely awful, it is a polarised and unreasonable debate. I think our officers did a good piece of work here and, in hindsight, one or two things could have been done better, but they did a good piece of work.

Paul Flynn: Can I ask you a brief question about the Daniel Morgan case?

Q321 Chair: No you can’t, because that is not to do with terrorism. You can ask the Commissioner later.

Finishing off counter-terrorism and the questions put by David Winnick, Dal Babu was pretty critical of the way in which you are operating, was he not? He described Prevent as a “toxic brand”. He raised this issue, raised by Mr Winnick, and I am putting it to you this time, Mr Rowley, rather than the Commissioner. At the top of the counter-terrorism command, there were people who don’t really understand the community and, in respect of Islamic

radicalisation, they don't really understand what it is to do with them. Do you accept that? You will clearly not know all the details of this, will you?

Mark Rowley: I would not claim to be an expert on the history of Islam, but I don't see Prevent as a toxic brand. I have a counter-terrorism command that is pretty much as diverse as the rest of the Met. We know that needs to improve across the organisation, but we are not opposed to it. We are very determined to follow the lead of the work that the Commissioner has pushed across the organisation. There are people with different views about Prevent but, fundamentally, we are seeing more people stepping forward, more people giving information to the police and more families coming to us looking for help, so I see a lot of evidence of trust in the police. I also see some challenging debate, which is perfectly understandable.

Q322 Chair: We don't expect you to be an expert in Islam. This is not a surprise question because what Dal Babu said was on the front page of the *Evening Standard* yesterday. Would you know the difference between Sunnis, Shi'as and Salafis?

Mark Rowley: There are issues about the original—

Q323 Chair: But would you know the difference between those groups?

Mark Rowley: There is a difference between the original succession around Mohammed, and the different beliefs about who would take the lead following his death, and that has created a schism that has lasted an awful long time.

Q324 Chair: Do you think that what is going on here is about the schism that started 1,400 years ago?

Mark Rowley: No, I don't at all. You asked me a question about Islam, and I have given you a very basic answer because I don't pretend to be an expert. This is about a small group of people who are behaving more like a cult than a religion. It has the same degree of mischief and the same degree of violence, and they are using propaganda to get people to follow them. We should focus the debate on terrorism, but we are focusing on whether senior police officers have a sophisticated knowledge of the difference between Shi'a and Sunni Islam.

Q325 Chair: But do you not take his point, which the Commissioner seems to have taken, that you need more people from the community within counter-terrorism command so that you are able to get members of the community not as agents, as some of the community think Prevent is, but as people who are on the same side? We want the Muslim community to regard us as being on the same side, don't we?

Mark Rowley: One hundred per cent. We want the counter-terrorism command, just like we want the Met, to be reflective of London. We want it to be 40% from different minority groups. As you know, we have changed our recruitment criteria across

London to be more reflective of London. We are pushing the boundaries as far as we can. Some of us have argued in the past that we could go further if the law were changed. I am very keen on it.

Q326 Chair: And people such as Mr Babu could be helpful. He wrote a report about this that I understand has not yet been implemented.

Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe: Yes. Dal has been a great chief superintendent for the Met, and he has done a great job. If he says something, it is usually quite sound. He has got good judgment, so I listen to what he says. I don't agree with him entirely, for the reasons Mark set out. I think the point about whether people can differentiate between Sunnis and Shi'as is quite narrow.

Q327 Chair: I am just putting to you what he said yesterday.

Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe: I realise that. To be fair to Dal, if somebody asks for advice and is seeking to get information and to be educated, I don't think that is a bad thing. To then say that that means people just don't understand is wrong. Of course you need to understand, but I don't think you should condemn people for asking for information.

Q328 Chair: Sure. Just closing this section on families, Mr Rowley, I think there is work to be done. I think somebody should meet the families and try to restore the trust that they need. They need the Metropolitan police, and the Metropolitan police needs to work with this family. There are particular issues, which you can see in the transcript of the hearing, that need to be addressed, but I am sure that you want to move forward with the full confidence of the family in this particular case, which is not there at the moment.

Mark Rowley: We absolutely do. I think we have the same aim, which is to get those three teenage girls back to London.

Chair: We do. Thank you very much, Mr Rowley. I know that you have other work to do. Unfortunately, we are going to keep the Commissioner a little longer to talk about other issues. I know that Mr Flynn wants to raise Daniel Morgan. Thank you so much, Mr Rowley.

Mark Rowley: Thank you.

Witness: His Excellency Mr Abdurrahman Bilgiç, Turkish Ambassador in London gave evidence.

Q329 Chair: Your Excellency, we have only a very few questions for you today, which of course relate primarily to the case that you have heard. I want to start by thanking you

sincerely for coming here—I know that you are extremely busy—and by reiterating a point that I and others have made to our previous witnesses: relations between our two countries are solid.

We appreciate greatly the assistance that Turkey gives to the United Kingdom in the fight against international crime. In particular, your predecessor enabled us to visit Turkey on numerous occasions to look at the fight against illegal migration as well as the problems that you have with international crime. Clearly, Turkey is a hub for people who leave the United Kingdom and, therefore, for those who go to fight in Syria. Can the Government and the United Kingdom provide you with anything more to try to track these young British citizens who travel from the United Kingdom through Turkey and end up in Syria?

Mr Bilgiç: Thank you very much, Mr Chairman and distinguished members of the Committee. It is with pleasure that I accepted the invitation to meet you today in the context of, as you already mentioned, the good relations between Turkey and the UK as allies. Despite that, I should say that it is not in our diplomatic traditions to attend Committee meetings. I consider this an opportune occasion to have your views regarding certain matters that are of interest to my Government.

Q330 Chair: Would it help if I started with a couple of opening questions? In respect of the case you have heard of these young girls who travelled from London to Istanbul—we really appreciate your sitting through all the evidence—Mr Loughton will want to pursue the issue of the airlines with you, because we invited Turkish Airlines to come, but they said that you would represent the interests of Turkey. Once a British citizen gets to Istanbul, for example, in the circumstances of these three young girls, can you track them once you are informed that they are there? Is that an easy process? Is there a well-worn path from Istanbul to Syria?

Mr Bilgiç: I think the primary obligation is on the shoulders of the source country. Those individuals should be stopped in the source country before exiting it. As you said yesterday and today in Parliament, there is enormous pressure on the shoulders of Turkey; our neighbourhood is not a rose garden. Under certain circumstances, there might be some incidents that you cannot stop, but if we have timely and detailed information—photos, travel documents and whatever—well before individuals' arrival, it is easy for us to track them.

Q331 Chair: Sure. In this particular case, the Deputy Prime Minister of Turkey has said that the information and requests for assistance only came through from London on the Friday, even though the girls had left the United Kingdom on the Tuesday. Can you help the Committee with any information about that? Is that correct?

Mr Bilgiç: I do not want to play a role between two politicians, and I will not comment on previous statements from both sides, but I can give you some exact, sharp details.

Chair: Please do, and could you speak up a little, because the acoustics are very bad in this room.

Mr Bilgiç: With pleasure. The three girls, the victims, who flew to Turkey, left the UK on 17 February at 12.40pm local time. They arrived at Istanbul Atatürk airport on the same day at 18.40pm local time. The other day, the liaison officer at our embassy received a telephone call about a missing person case, but no details were given to him, including a name. No name was mentioned.

Q332 Chair: None of girls' names were mentioned.

Mr Bilgiç: But an e-mail was sent to the security liaison officer in our embassy in London on 18 February at 19.55pm, after office hours, only to be seen by him the day after. So that was Thursday—the following day.

Q333 Chair: So, the e-mail was only picked up on Thursday morning.

Mr Bilgiç: Yes. I will not comment further on that, but let me give you some further details, because what I have are sharp details.

Chair: We just want the facts.

Mr Bilgiç: The diffusion and notification messages on these three girls were published on the Interpol database on 22 February.

Chair: That was the Sunday.

Mr Bilgiç: The British embassy in Ankara sent the first note verbale—a French term, but the note is in written form—regarding these girls in the evening of 23 February to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. To my best knowledge, and as I have been informed—

Chair: On 23 February. On the Monday afterwards.

Mr Bilgiç: Yes. I mentioned the chronology—the dates and exact timings. That is why I said 12.40pm and 19.55pm.

Let me also say that we have very good relations with the British authorities. It is getting better and better. The sharing of information is increasing, but there is still a lot to be done. For example, you asked me in your first question, which I am now coming back to, what else we can do. I have heard here today that letters were sent as early as December to the school of these girls. If we had known those names—we have no-entry lists and we have information. In our no-entry lists, we have more than 12,500 persons. So if we have timely information, as we have such lists, it is quite possible. Just to tell you what happens in that case—some people arrived in Istanbul from the UK and were denied entry, based on these lists. So it is functional. Up to now, more than 1,150 persons have been deported.

Q334 Chair: Very interesting. Your Excellency, you heard the evidence of the police, who said that they could not send anyone over to Istanbul to try to track down these girls, because it is a foreign country and you do not want British police officers running around all over your country. Does the Turkish Government know the route being taken by those who come from Britain and end up fighting in Syria? Is it a well-worn route? You were able to find the CCTV footage of the girls in the bus station for the British authorities. Do you know the route being taken? Did you know that that particular bus station is used? Is that information communicated to the British?

Mr Bilgiç: This is important, because we did not have those names, so we did not know that. Turkey receives annually 35 million tourists, so it is not easy, but if we have official information, we can do something. It is right that we have CCTV footage in Turkey. We try to understand. As you have probably emphasised, there should be a facilitation network, because these girls probably know who to call and where to go. We have CCTV footage in Turkey, but if you have CCTV footage here at Gatwick airport, why not work on that together—both sides? It would be very helpful.

Q335 Chair: Yes, of course, but in respect of the facts of this case, are you telling this Committee that the Turkish authorities were not given names of any individuals? You are saying that that was not put on until 23 February, when it arrived in Ankara, but it was put on the Interpol database on 22 February, which was a Sunday. The first time you all had the details was when an e-mail came on the Wednesday evening, after office hours, and was only picked up by your officials the next morning. It just does not seem to me that it was transmitted to you in an urgent way.

Mr Bilgiç: Well, I gave the exact details.

Chair: I understand that, and I am grateful.

Mr Bilgiç: The following day, after working hours, it was seen by the liaison officer.

Chair: We understand why you therefore got the footage on Friday.

Mr Bilgiç: Imagine. In Istanbul you can fly to any other destination.

Chair: Of course, yes.

Mr Bilgiç: You can use the train, you can go by bus; there are many border cities and border towns, not only Gaziantep, but many other cities.

Chair: Yes.

Mr Bilgiç: And there are many bus operators over there for all these towns, so imagine the huge task.

Chair: Of course, but you managed to find the CCTV footage, which we're very grateful for. Mr Loughton has some specific questions about the airlines.

Q336 Tim Loughton: The route they took was from Istanbul to Gaziantep by bus.

Mr Bilgiç: I don't know how and by which route they went. I saw the footage, I saw them on TV at a bus terminal, but I don't know which route they took.

Q337 Tim Loughton: Presumably we do know that.

Mr Bilgiç: Gaziantep or another border town, I'm not sure.

Q338 Tim Loughton: Presumably we do know that, because if you've identified them at a bus station, presumably somebody has asked the person where he sold them a ticket to.

Mr Bilgiç: Of course, it is known now, probably.

Q339 Tim Loughton: And if it was Gaziantep, it is a very long journey, isn't it, on the bus?

Mr Bilgiç: Yes, but still, I gave you the details. Do you think it is possible, still, to find them and prevent them?

Q340 Tim Loughton: The point we are trying to make, which the police weren't able to help us with, is that if there had been an urgency in communicating about these missing girls, the most obvious route which could be traced, if we knew they'd gone to Istanbul, was to get the bus down to Gaziantep, as the major border town there. We are just trying to ascertain whether the police transmitted this information in a timely manner. The obvious starting point for Turkish police would be to check with the bus, which actually turned out to be where they'd gone.

Mr Bilgiç: I would like to bring to your kind attention, just to give you an idea, that the border line with Syria and Iraq is more than 1,300 km. It is more than from London to Inverness. Imagine such a geography. And there are many cities. There is Kilis.

Q341 Tim Loughton: I know—I have been there. I understand.

Mr Bilgiç: And 52% of the population is now Syrian. There is Mardin, Urfa and many other settlements with different bus operators, so it is not so easy.

Q342 Tim Loughton: I understand that, and in the limited time left we don't really have time for a geography lesson. We know that there is a very large population of Syrian refugees, which Turkey has generously played host to. The point I am trying to make is that it is not as though it appears that they went surreptitiously by car on back routes; they went by the most obvious and transparent route.

In terms of the airlines, given that this is a topical issue and an alarming issue of people travelling from the UK and other European countries, have your airlines been briefed to ask questions if they are confronted with young kids such as this? Why would they be travelling unaccompanied to Turkey in school term time? Questions should have been answered. Will Turkish Airlines, which could not be here today, be answering those sorts of questions in London?

Mr Bilgiç: It is only the director-general of Turkish Airlines who is not here today, but I know the answer, I know the details and I will give you the exact information. Turkish Airlines has four times been chosen as the best airline in Europe.

Q343 Tim Loughton: They are very good.

Mr Bilgiç: So they know how to deal with this, in all senses, including co-operation with local authorities. In this case, when we look at local laws and the regulations on unaccompanied minors aged between 13 and 17, we have recommended practice 1753, which provides that only those children yet to celebrate their 12th birthday are automatically classed as unaccompanied minors. Passengers who are 12 or over but under 16 can be treated as unaccompanied minors upon request, but only if that request is made in advance of the date of scheduled travel. Only then would the processes for unaccompanied minors be applicable. That is quite clear.

Chair: Thank you. That is very helpful.

Q344 Tim Loughton: Can we talk about border controls more broadly for Turkey? Clearly there is also a problem with refugees and asylum seekers from middle eastern countries accessing Europe through Turkey, and a route from Turkey into Greece is where many of these people are coming. We have seen many of them end up in Calais. Have you significantly beefed up your border controls, for both incoming as well as exiting people?

Mr Bilgiç: Yes. First of all I have to say, once again, that we have more than 1,600,000 refugees. It is not easy. It is not so simple. It is not just a matter of sheltering them; it is health care, education, everything—and, of course, free of charge. That is why we have spent more than \$5 billion. When we hear about immigration issues here today, we thank you very much for your references to Turkey's sacrifice.

Chair: I assure you, your Excellency, that this Committee has gone to Parliament and argued on the Floor of the House, to the Prime Minister, for more support for Turkey on your border.

Q345 Mr Winnick: Ambassador, I would also like to associate myself with the apologies—it is most unfortunate that you were kept waiting and one hopes that that will not be repeated on other occasions. We recognise the refugee problem that you undoubtedly face, which has been quite well publicised in this country. Nevertheless, do you feel that more could be done

at airports to interview clearly young people—we are talking about three females who are 15 years of age— when they arrive in Turkey unaccompanied?

Mr Bilgiç: Well, first, I should say that since the eruption of the Syrian crisis, in addition to the standard counter-terrorism practices, intelligence activities have been fully intensified. Qualified personnel and additional equipment are deployed to different cities at the border. Border security is fortified, with additional personnel and equipment—weaponry, armed vehicles, night-vision devices, thermal cameras. Certain parts of the border have been lit, and walls built at various points. Trenches have been dug and numerous sections have been fenced. Turkish security units are on alert 24/7 and operations continue against smugglers, who are also known to assist illegal crossings of foreign fighters.

We must not lose sight of the fact that full control of land borders is always a complicated issue anywhere in the world, and even more so when there is a vacuum of authority and more than one terrorist group on the other side of the border.

Q346 Chair: Thank you, that is very helpful. A final question from me: can Turkey do anything to help bring these girls back? Can we have a very quick answer?

Mr Bilgiç: Yes, in close co-operation. Our authorities can work together on these issues. If we have a better understanding of facilitation networks, we can find, we can trace, and we can find a way, I hope.

Chair: Ambassador, thank you so much for coming. I am sorry that we have overrun so much on this, but as you know a lot of questions had to be asked. I am extremely grateful.