



Oral evidence: [Foreign policy developments](#),

HC 381

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Members present: Crispin Blunt (Chair); Ann Clwyd; Mike Gapes; Stephen Gethins; Mr Mark Hendrick; Mr Adam Holloway; Daniel Kawczynski; Yasmin Qureshi; Nadhim Zahawi

Questions 32-127

Witnesses: **Rt Hon. Mr Philip Hammond MP**, Secretary of State, **Sir Simon McDonald**, Permanent Under Secretary, and **Sir Simon Gass**, Director General, Political, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, gave evidence.

Q32 Chair: Welcome to this afternoon's session of the Foreign Affairs Committee. My thanks to the Foreign Secretary, and to Sir Simon and Sir Simon, for joining us this afternoon. We will get straight into questions.

In terms of the issues we will seek to cover, ISIS, Daesh, ISIL—whatever it is to be called—inevitably heads the agenda, so I thought we would start there and with Syria. In July, you indicated that our policy in attacking ISIL in Iraq, but not Syria, was incoherent, and the Defence Secretary has been extremely robust on this point, not least in the last couple of days. But isn't that British military incoherence trivial and, in terms of the mission, irrelevant when set within the wholly incoherent international policy towards Syria?

Mr Hammond: There are two issues here: there is the question of the international approach to the crisis in Syria, of which ISIL/Daesh is a part, but by no means the whole; and there is the question of ISIL and Syria as part of the challenge of dealing with ISIL—Islamist extremism—in Iraq and, as we now see, far beyond Iraq. If I recall, the point that I was making in July was that there is a military incoherence to carrying out a campaign of air strikes against an enemy on the ground in Iraq whose supply lines originate in the neighbouring country, but being unable to attack those supply lines and control centres in the neighbouring country. There may well be political arguments about that—indeed, there are political arguments, and these were rehearsed in Parliament on 29 August 2013—but, from a military point of view, it is incoherent. It is a single theatre of conflict, and the supply lines run from al-Raqqah, in Syria, into Iraq, where they sustain the ISIL/Daesh forces that are attacking Iraqi forces.

Q33 Chair: But isn't the requirement for military coherence—the eight British aircraft and the supporting functions, such as Predators, air-to-air refuelling and the rest, being able to operate over both Iraq and Syria, which is a perfectly proper military utility argument—very

marginal when set against the wider strategic incoherence of the international community's whole position towards Syria and ISIL?

Mr Hammond: I think the international community's response to ISIL is coherent—it's coherent, but it's limited. It is limited in the sense that we have taken a decision that it would not be appropriate to put coalition ground forces into Iraq and that the coalition's activity is limited to the use of air power and the provision of materials, sustainment, training and mentoring to the Iraqi forces and the Kurdish peshmerga forces. That means that the objectives will take longer to achieve than they might have done if western forces had been injected into Iraq, but the judgment is that the ensuing result will be more sustainable if is delivered by Iraqi forces acting on the ground in Iraq. So I think that is perfectly coherent. There will be many people, and I understand entirely their frustration, who are reluctant to contemplate what General Allen, from the beginning, was contemplating—that it could take years, not months, to resolve the ISIL problem—and frustrated because of the immense barbarity of the ISIL occupation of parts of Iraq, but I think the response is coherent.

If we look at the other part of the question, which is the international community's response to Syria, that is a different challenge, and it is made complex by the fact that the three most important external players in Iraq—Russia, Iran and Turkey—all have very different agendas and, in the case of Turkey, an agenda which is clearly evolving, even as we discuss this this afternoon.

Q34 Chair: I think you described the international response towards ISIL as limited, but coherent as far as it went.

Mr Hammond: It's limited in the sense that we have made a decision, for better or for worse, that we are not going to put western ground forces into Iraq.

Q35 Chair: But can ISIL be defeated without an agreed resolution of the Syrian civil war?

Mr Hammond: I think my view on that is, yes it could. If we were able to attack ISIL across its theatre of operation, from northern Syria, through eastern Syria, into Iraq, it is possible to defeat ISIL in that theatre, as a separate issue from the broader Syrian civil war.

Q36 Chair: Could you paint that scenario for us—how that could happen if the Syrian civil war is continuing?

Mr Hammond: I mean, obviously, we have already talked about the possibility of coalition air strikes—of the UK, perhaps, in the future, deciding to join coalition air strikes in Syria. We will only defeat ISIL in Iraq when there is a ground force that is able to pursue them and inflict serious damage on them, and it is possible to envisage a situation where that pursuit and destruction of ISIL would go on into Syria. I am not saying it is the ideal situation, and I am not saying it is the most likely situation, but I don't think it is a necessary condition of destroying ISIL in Syria that the civil war in Syria is also settled.

Q37 Chair: Yesterday we took evidence from some of the country's most distinguished academics and journalists, who have followed this crisis. Their conclusion was that ISIL won't be defeated until the regional powers—Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia—share our priority regarding its defeat. While the coalition uses its air power to contain and restrain

ISIL, it enables those states to focus on other national priorities, so isn't the coalition—I mean in particular the United States and the United Kingdom, with Canada and the other western powers—policy and our action having the unintended consequence of relieving those key powers of the need to co-operate in order to prioritise and enable ISIL's defeat?

Mr Hammond: I think I have already made reference to the fact that the complexity in Syria is that the three external powers that are the most directly involved and the most influential have complex agendas—in some cases, internally conflicting agendas—and that is what makes the problem in Syria so difficult to tackle. I agree with you that having Turkey, Iran and Russia pursuing separate agendas—in the case of Turkey, a shifting agenda—makes it very difficult to move towards a point where we have a clear response and a clear, agreed approach to moving forward in resolving the crisis in Syria.

Q38 Chair: But in Syria we are at stalemate. That is plain from the ground and the fact that that is likely to continue is the evidence we received yesterday. Part of that is because Iran and Russia are unwilling to countenance the forced removal of Assad. Isn't British and American policy actually contributing to that stalemate?

Mr Hammond: How is it contributing?

Chair: Because of our position, as expressed by the Prime Minister this afternoon at Prime Minister's questions, is to equate Assad and ISIL, and if the removal of Assad is the start point of the United Kingdom's position, the rather uncomfortable truth is that while Iran and Russia are not prepared to contemplate his forced removal we bear a share of the responsibility for that stalemate, and therefore for the continuing bloodshed, the growing migrant crisis and the inability of the international coalition to put together a strategy to defeat ISIL in both Syria and Iraq.

Mr Hammond: The responsibility for the bloodshed lies squarely with those who are perpetrating it. We need to be clear about that. It is ISIL in the areas that they control and it is the Assad regime in the areas that it controls and is bombing from the air indiscriminately. But you have put your finger on what is precisely the problem. Our analysis of the problem is that Assad is a recruiting sergeant for ISIL and any suggestion that western powers were prepared to work with Assad in the defeat of ISIL would redouble that recruiting sergeant effect. At the same time, two of the most influential powers in this equation, Iran and Russia, are apparently not prepared to contemplate the removal of Assad from power at this stage. Our diplomacy is focused on persuading Russia and Iran that their equities can be protected and that the future stability of Syria could be best assured by allowing a transition that did not seek to dismantle the entire regime but that did remove Assad and the group around him, who are manifestly responsible for the bloodshed and the atrocities that have been committed.

Q39 Chair: But the problem with that analysis is that it is not actually shared by the expert commentators who gave evidence to us yesterday. I want to quote to you Professor Eugene Rogan, who, when the point was put to him by Mike Gapes about Assad's behaviour and whether it is possible to co-operate with him in any way, said this: "Don't confuse pragmatism with in any way condoning the methods of the Assad regime. The whole point is to put the needs of the Syrian population first. We all know the statistics you quote, and I agree with you that the man has more blood on his hands than should ever make any of us shake his hand, yet because he is backed by the two strongest powers in this conflict, Russia

and Iran, the demands that he must go are not realistic. So the question is: do you wish to stand on purity and damn the Syria people?”

Mr Hammond: I am sorry, but I do not entirely agree with that analysis because, being pragmatic, we also see, as I have just said, that any sense that the west was prepared to work with Assad against ISIL would redouble the recruiting sergeant effect. We also have legal restraints around supporting or working with a regime that is committing crimes on this scale, or indeed on any scale, and we are very acutely conscious of our legal obligations. Even if it was convenient to us, and I do not think that it is, we do not have the option of just working with Assad; we would be abetting the commission of an international crime.

Q40 Chair: That is not what I would be inviting the British Government to do. As far as I understand it, the start point of the western position—the American, French and our own position—is that Assad must go. By starting at that place, it means that negotiations cannot happen. Effectively, a Geneva III process is blocked, because the critical players in this who are, in the end, probably the regional powers of Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Iran, and obviously Russia standing behind Iran, will not enable a process to happen. That is not inviting the United Kingdom Government to co-operate with Assad; it is inviting the United Kingdom Government, in a sense along with our western allies, to stop stopping the process from starting by dropping our “in principle” objection to Assad, and to opt for the language that I notice is being used by Mrs Mogherini, that it is not possible to envisage a continuing role of Assad in the future. That strikes me as rather more sensible language, which would enable a Geneva III process to start, rather than the position that we have put ourselves in.

Mr Hammond: I do not think that there is a difference between myself and Mrs Mogherini on this issue, however she has expressed it. By the way, I think the Turks also take the position that Assad must go.

The question is about timing. We are prepared to be pragmatic about the process of the transition. In our discussion with the Russians, and now with the Iranians, I have made that clear. We are not saying that on day one, Assad and all his cronies have to go. If there was a process that was agreed, including with the Russians and Iranians, that took a period of months and there was a transition out during that, we could certainly discuss that. What I am not prepared to discuss is what I understand to be the Russian and Iranian position that we need to move to elections in Syria and that it will be for the Syrian people to decide in those elections whether Assad should remain as their President. That is not an acceptable position. In my view, the international community cannot facilitate and oversee a set of elections in which someone guilty of crimes of the scale that Assad has committed is able to run for office. That must be clear: he cannot be part of Syria’s future. I think that was the point that Mrs Mogherini was making.

Q41 Chair: Could you comment on evidence that we took yesterday from Julien Barnes-Dacey who said that as a guarantor of the regime, Assad is the glue holding it together?

Mr Hammond: That is a line straight from the Russian-Iranian playbook, that Assad is the glue holding Syria together. That is Shamkhani’s line to me, the Iranian national security adviser, word for word. It is Sergei Lavrov’s line, word for word.

Q42 Chair: Does the fact that it is Russian automatically mean that it is wrong?

Mr Hammond: No, but our analysis is that this is one side of the story. Of course Assad plays a role in the regime's structure, but—

Q43 Chair: It was shared by the people who gave us evidence yesterday. We would invite you to look at the evidence we took yesterday.

Mr Hammond: The Committee will take evidence from experts and it should, of course, do so, but now you are asking me for my opinion and the British Government's position, and I am giving you our political judgment that we cannot work with Assad in anything other than the very short term of a transition. We have indicated to the Russians and the Iranians that if there is a sensible plan for transition that involves Assad remaining in some way involved in the process for a period of time, we will look at that and discuss it. We are not saying, "He must go on day one, categorically." Of course, we will be pragmatic in a discussion with them. What we will not concede is that he should be allowed to be a contender for a future major role in the new Syria.

Q44 Chair: Can we turn to the practicality of our policy there? Is it correct that the number of Free Syrian Army and loosely defined western-aligned potential combatants in this civil war that we, the United States and others have trained and employed is actually frighteningly small? We were given a number yesterday and told that we have completed the training and put into employment some 54 people, some of whom are already dead.

Mr Hammond: No, I don't think that number is correct. It is a small number, but my recollection—I don't have the numbers here—is that it is in the thousands.¹

Q45 Chair: When you gave evidence in July, you certainly left the Committee with the impression that training a moderate Syrian opposition appeared to be a cornerstone of our strategy in Syria. Do you now accept that this does not actually appear to constitute a credible and adequate policy for the scale of the challenges in Syria?

Mr Hammond: I think it's a long-term policy, and it has taken us longer to get off the ground than we would have liked, but it is now under way. It requires the co-operation of Turkey to be successful. As I said earlier, Turkish policy on Syria is evolving. We have seen over the last few months Turkey being much more engaged in the Syrian problem, but in a way that is very particularly pursuing its own agendas.

Q46 Chair: Talking of Turkey, if we turn to the international coalition, can you tell us what is now happening to make the coalition—the 62 nations or however many there are—more effective?

Mr Hammond: The counter-ISIL coalition?

Chair: Yes.

Mr Hammond: The process is the same as it was. There are a number of working groups dealing with different aspects—for example, countering the ISIL-Daesh propaganda machine, which is beginning to work. That is co-led by the UK, the US and the UAE. There

¹ See clarification by the FCO: <http://www.parliament.uk/documents/commons-committees/foreign-affairs/150910Syria.pdf>

is another group working on ISIL finances, cutting off financial flows, and there is a group working on cutting off flows of foreign fighters. Those are three strands of work. There is the military operation, which you are aware of, co-ordinated by General Allen. All of that is continuing, but it is a long haul; this is not going to happen overnight. We have always been clear about that.

Q47 Chair: Looking at the competing parties inside Syria, would the success of al-Nusra be any more desirable than the success of ISIL?

Mr Hammond: Let me answer the question in a different way. We would not regard success by al-Nusra as a satisfactory or acceptable outcome. If I were put on the spot to rank the horror of living under ISIL control or al-Nusra control, I would have to think quite hard about that, but both would be unacceptable to us, and we have made that clear to any of our partners in the coalition who have ever been inclined to think otherwise.

Q48 Chair: So what's your view of the support given by Saudi Arabia and Turkey to Jaish al-Fatah, which is a coalition that includes al-Nusra?

Mr Hammond: It includes al-Nusra, but it includes other parties as well. We recognise that the situation on the ground is not as we would like it to be. It is complex, and sometimes compromises do have to be made on the ground—tactical compromises. The history of warfare is that you have to make tactical compromises, but we would not regard a strategic alliance with al-Nusra as an acceptable way forward at all.

Q49 Chair: The complexity of the situation in Syria is apparent to everyone. Isn't this an area where British diplomatic capability, our capacity to co-ordinate, combined with our rather limited hard power, which can't make a difference in isolation—our soft power, diplomacy—is where the nation's main effort in trying to bring others together to produce a coherent strategy ought to be focused?

Mr Hammond: It's part of it. I don't agree with the first part of your analysis. In Iraq, we have conducted more air strikes than any other coalition partner apart from the United States. Our surveillance and intelligence-gathering assets in Syria are making a very major contribution, which again I would hazard is second only to that of the United States. So we are playing a significant role in the military and intelligence battle as well. In terms of working on financial flows, we have an expertise in interdicting clandestine financial flows, which again I would venture is second to none. We have an important role to play there. And we play through our intelligence and security agencies a very important role in cutting off the flow of foreign fighters. Actually—to cover the waterfront—we also play a significant role in the counter-propaganda war, where we, again, like to think that we have some experience and capability to deploy.

Q50 Chair: On Monday, the Prime Minister's justification for the British strikes against Reyaad Khan and Ruhul Amin was legally very narrowly drawn. Parliamentary authority to act in Syria would not actually change the situation of action under international law. What are the legal constraints in Syria if we don't have the permission of the existing Government to operate there and if there is no immediate threat to the United Kingdom in the terms presented by the Prime Minister on Monday?

Mr Hammond: The coalition forces that are operating in Syria are doing so on the basis of the collective defence of Iraq and the challenge that the Iraqi Government are facing from ISIL and its base in Syria.

Q51 Chair: So there would be no justification for operations against elements of the Government of Syria in that instance, which presumably is why they are not happening as far as the coalition is concerned.

Mr Hammond: Not on that legal basis. Different countries, of course, have a different approach to their analysis of the legal basis for action. Famously, the United States has its own legal approach to justifying action.

Q52 Chair: I'm sure you are thinking about when you are going to come to Parliament to seek authority to operate in Syria. It has been very heavily trailed; we're just waiting for the date. Perhaps you might be able to tell us when you expect to ask Parliament for that authority, but why should Parliament authorise a widening of British involvement in this conflict when the overall strategy is yet to be worked out?

Mr Hammond: I don't think the overall strategy is yet to be worked out. Again, we go back to the last questioning at the beginning. We would see authority to attack ISIL targets more widely in Syria as a part of the campaign against ISIL, which at the moment is confined to Iraq. We would see it as driven by a military logic that says you look at the enemy holistically. You look at his supply lines; you look at his support base; you look at his command-and-control nodes, and those are the things you want to attack. At the moment, we are able to attack some of them—those in Iraq—but not all of them, because we don't have authority to attack those in Syria. The logic of extending our mandate to cover ISIL targets in Syria would be very clearly a logic in support of the mandate we have in Iraq for the collective defence of that country.

Q53 Ann Clwyd: Can I ask you for an assessment of how successful the current policy of attacking ISIL in Iraq is, particularly when Mosul still seems to be under ISIL control? We were given the impression some months ago that the liberation of Mosul was fairly imminent. It does not look like that.

Mr Hammond: On the question of Mosul, General Allen, whom I have a lot of time for, has always been very cautious about the timing of the retaking of Mosul. There have been people in the Iraqi Government who have been, shall we say, more bullish. Of course, it is also true that the Iraqis have had their attention deflected by challenges in al-Anbar province. But General Allen always said it would be next year that Mosul could sensibly be targeted for retaking.

I am going to ask Sir Simon Gass to say something about General Allen's view, because I know he met him recently. Before I do that, to answer your first, general question—how successful do I assess the intervention in Iraq has been—it stopped ISIL's advance dead. If we go back 15 or 16 months, we were looking at an apparently unstoppable surge across Iraq, down the river valleys, towards Baghdad, with Baghdad appearing to be under imminent threat of falling to ISIL. Coalition air power stopped that advance dead: it forced ISIL to change its tactics, from acting like a conventional army to a guerrilla force operating in small cells, moving by night, making them far less effective and making them

less able to control the territory that they have taken in a conventional manner, and it has allowed a breathing space for the Iraqi forces to be regrouped, retrained and rebuilt.

That process has not gone as quickly as any of us would have liked. In the meantime, the use of coalition air power is holding ISIL in check. But we have always been very upfront about the fact that coalition air power will not roll ISIL back; it will merely hold them in check. It has got to be Iraqi boots on the ground that do the hard slog of rolling them back and clearing and holding Iraqi territory.

Simon, could you say something about that?

Sir Simon Gass: Briefly, I just wanted to update the Committee. I have talked to our American colleagues quite recently. In terms of the military situation, there are areas of success. If you look at Tikrit now, for example, a city where ISIL murdered about 1,000 people and where huge numbers of people were driven out of the city, you can see it now returning to something approaching normality: commercial life is resuming, there are attempts to clean up the streets, and so forth.

Of course, there is still a substantial military operation to retake Ramadi, and that is making progress, albeit slowly, because we know that ISIL are very expert at IEDs, booby traps and house-to-house fighting, which means that you can either go quickly and potentially lose a lot of people or you take it progressively and you achieve your result in a more steady way.

In the north, of course, there is still a certain amount of fighting around Baiji, which is really the extent of the conflict line. As the Foreign Secretary said, there is clearly a plan to retake Mosul, but it does require a lot of shaping operations: we have to make sure that the Iraqi security forces are in a condition where they will be able to have success there, and the training of those forces that is going on is now leading to trained units appearing on the battlefield.

So without wishing to overstate the amount of success in Iraq, it is certainly not an entirely negative picture in terms of retaking territory from ISIL.

Q54 Ann Clwyd: Can you give us some idea of how much of Mosul is free of ISIL and how much still remains in the hands of ISIL?

Mr Hammond: My understanding is that the city itself is still under ISIL control. Some of the surrounding areas, particularly to the north, will be under peshmerga control, but nobody is claiming otherwise than that Mosul is still under ISIL control.

Q55 Ann Clwyd: And is the peshmerga force still a substantial member of the Iraqi army?

Mr Hammond: The peshmerga that are not part of the Iraqi army operate as a separate force. The Kurdish authorities have made clear that, although the peshmerga will act in the area adjacent to Mosul, they are not likely to take part in an assault on Mosul itself. That would have to be carried out by Iraqi forces, not Kurdish forces.

Q56 Ann Clwyd: Yesterday, there was some discussion about the future for Syria. There were some suggestions about no-fly zones, and the point was made that a ceasefire should be agreed by all sides before no-fly zones are put in place. How do you see that?

Mr Hammond: Yes, that would be great. A ceasefire would be fantastic. We would go with that.

Q57 Ann Clwyd: Who is working on that? What are the diplomatic efforts?

Mr Hammond: Staffan de Mistura, the UN special envoy, has been working on the idea of a ceasefire. It is easy to sit in a room and talk about these things, but they are a bit more difficult to implement on the ground when there are so many parties involved and so many shifting alliances. The Chair referred to one such alliance earlier that, frankly, can involve some very strange bedfellows coming together. There are tactical alliances around particular towns or cities that are being defended or assaulted. It is a very fluid and complex situation, and I am afraid that I regard the prospect of achieving a ceasefire as being probably further away than the prospect of getting Russia, Iran, Turkey and the western powers to agree on a way forward.

Q58 Ann Clwyd: What do you think about Turkey's attack on the Kurdish groups in Syria—and on the Iraqi Kurds—who for instance liberated Kobani? Is that Turkish attitude helpful? How do you see that?

Mr Hammond: I think the Turkish attacks have mostly been in Iraq, not Syria, but clearly this is an additional and very significant complication to the situation. The military people have always thought that the involvement of Turkey would be key to resolving the situation in northern Syria, and the fact that Turkey has an agenda that, frankly, is different from the agenda of any of the other players, because it is focused on its own tensions with the Kurds as much as it is focused on tension with ISIL and with the Syrian regime, is a complicating factor. And it is just one more complicating factor. Each one of the significant players here has a different set of agendas, and we are only going to move forward when we can find common threads to which all the players can sign up so that we can act together accordingly.

Q59 Ann Clwyd: Finally, can I just ask you about a statement that was made in the House that there will be independent monitoring of drone strikes, or that there is independent monitoring? Nobody can find out precisely what that meant. It was suggested that some legal people might be doing it. Who is going to be doing that?

Mr Hammond: Who made the statement you are referring to?

Ann Clwyd: It came from your side of the House.

Mr Hammond: The situation is that we have a very robust process for authorisation of any such action, as the Prime Minister made clear on Monday, and then there is a whole set of rules of engagement. Once it moves to the military phase, a whole set of rules of engagement has to be complied with, and there is a rigorous process for monitoring that and for assessing outcomes. That is how it works in the Ministry of Defence.

Q60 Ann Clwyd: But it is not independent.

Mr Hammond: I am sorry. I am not sure what was meant. I am not sure who said it, first of all, and I am not sure what was meant by “independent monitoring.” No, I am not sure.

Ann Clwyd: I will try to find out who said it, but I was there when it was said.

Q61 Daniel Kawczynski: I am pleased to hear you say that you would not deal with President Assad, in contradiction of some of the evidence we heard yesterday from some experts. It was disappointing to see the Austrian Foreign Minister on a trip to Tehran saying the direct opposite: that we need to engage with Assad.

My question is twofold. How united is the European Union on the issue of whether we should deal with Assad? You said that even the United Kingdom might deal with him in some transitional phase. I would be appalled by any engagement of our country with that brutal tyrant. What would that consist of?

Mr Hammond: We don’t have a proposition yet, but if the Russians and the Iranians—unlikely at the moment—were to turn up tomorrow and say, “We are prepared to countenance an arrangement whereby there are elections in six months’ time, with international monitoring. In the meantime, there will be an interim regime and the existing players will continue to play a role within it”, I am not saying we would accept that, but we would certainly be prepared to discuss it. We wouldn’t rule it out up front. We wouldn’t say, “We can’t contemplate such an arrangement.” We would have concerns, and there would need to be measures in place to ensure that the actions against the Syrian population cannot be continued and that Assad and his cronies cannot use that power to continue the campaign against the Syrian people.

There are two options here: there is either a political solution and a transition, or there is a military solution with one force or another taking control of Damascus. We believe that a political solution would be better, which will inevitably mean making some compromises and perhaps doing some things that we would not be ideally comfortable with, but which get us to a better place. What I was trying to convey in answer to the Chairman’s questions is that our position is not so ideologically pure about the need for Assad to go that we wouldn’t be prepared to discuss with the Russians, Iranians and others how some kind of short transition under international supervision could take place.

Q62 Mr Hendrick: Foreign Secretary, you said that there are two ways of this resolving itself: either a political solution and then a transition, or a military solution. Those giving evidence yesterday overwhelmingly said that each of the sides involved in the Syrian conflict wants victory and can see it within their sights because they have been resourced from outside—whether from Iran, the Saudis, the Russians or wherever. That feeds the idea that there will be a victory by one or other of the groups that are there.

Coming on to the original question about success, you said that success in Iraq will be the result of air strikes and Iraqi boots on the ground. Given that you say the conflict in its wider sense is one conflict, even though it is two countries, won’t success in Syria be measured by the same criteria—Syrian boots on the ground? You questioned the Chairman’s assertion from the evidence session yesterday and said that there are not dozens of Free

Syrian Army troops being trained, but thousands. How many thousands need to be trained up and by when for victory to be in sight for the side we are backing against Assad?

Mr Hammond: Let me challenge the premise of your question. We don't believe that a military solution is the way forward in Syria. There has to be a political solution and an agreement on an inclusive political entity to take Syria forward into the future. It may well be that some elements believe that military victory is still possible. Frankly, on the regime's side, I rather doubt it. The regime itself has said publicly that its level of ambition is now limited to holding the areas that it currently holds. It no longer even aspires to control and govern the whole of the country. For the incumbent Government, that does not sound like belief in military victory.

There may be groups among the extremist oppositionists—the Islamists—who believe that they can achieve victory, but we do not think there is going to be a clean and clear-cut military solution. The involvement of the Russians, the Iranians, and now, to some extent, the Turks, suggests to me that it will be unlikely that any one side will be allowed to gain a clear military victory, so the solution has to be political. The challenge for us is how to deliver that. I agree with you that we are not going to get that by talking nicely to the players in Syria. Essentially, this is going to have to be a decision made by the sponsors of the key players in Syria, and, in particular, Iran and Russia deciding to call the shots with the Assad regime to make it clear that there has to be change. They can do that; they can make a phone call. Russia and Iran could have a discussion today, make a phone call to Damascus tomorrow, and change the future of this situation.

Q63 Mr Hendrick: In terms of British air attacks, how much difference do you think a dozen Tornados will make over and above what the Americans are already doing at the moment? Secondly, given the complex and fluid nature on the ground, how will our forces differentiate between the variety of groups that are operating there on the ground at the moment?

Mr Hammond: I will answer this question. I am concerned by, in the line of questioning, the repeated confusion between the challenge of dealing with ISIL in Syria and the wider problem of the Syrian civil war. If we seek Parliament's approval to engage in targeting ISIL forces in Syria, it will be as an adjunct to the operation we are already carrying out in Iraq. It will not be in order to play a role in the Syrian civil war. These are two different issues. Of course, ISIL is involved in both.

Q64 Mr Hendrick: You can't disentangle them.

Mr Hammond: But I do not envisage that we would want British air strikes to get involved in complex three-way fights in north-western Syria where regime forces and other Syrian forces are involved. What we are looking at in particular is ISIL's command and control nodes around al-Raqqah, where the organisation is run from and where it has supply lines running north. We are unable to attack those lines of supply and command and control nodes at the moment. The military logic drives us to believe that there could be utility in having greater freedom.

Q65 Mr Hendrick: Are the Americans currently unable to attack those supply lines?

Mr Hammond: No, the Americans are able—

Q66 Mr Hendrick: What can you bring that the Americans don't?

Mr Hammond: I think we had this discussion at the last meeting. We are currently flying operations in Syria, and, where we are identifying targets—for example, through our intelligence-gathering missions—we are having to then task US assets to take action. That is inefficient and sometimes leads to available targets not being attacked. It just does not make sense. It is surely self-evidently obvious that if you have a military force comprised of different components, and the different components have different permissions, some are able to act in one place, but not another. That undermines the utility of the overall force.

Q67 Chair: We will look forward to the Government coming forward with the scope of the request to Parliament. You did not say when you were looking to do that.

Mr Hammond: As I think the Prime Minister has made clear, we are continuing to look at this question. We think there are arguments for it, but we are clear that we require parliamentary authority. We will only bring such a proposition to Parliament when we are confident that the circumstances and the evidence that we can bring forward in support of our request are likely to find favour in Parliament.

Q68 Chair: The final question on this issue is from Stephen Gethins. Then we will move on to the happy subject of the Foreign Office budget.

Mr Hammond: Then I really will have to get my tin hat on.

Q69 Stephen Gethins: Just to follow up on Mr Hendrick's question, you mentioned earlier that the air strikes in Iraq have worked because you have had boots on the ground and forces that you can rely on there to make that effective. The last time that you were here, you talked about having boots on the ground as well to make the Syrian strikes most effective. I am still not clear about where you see those boots on the ground coming from but—I know this is a tricky issue—would you commit today to giving us an update or providing an update to Parliament on where you see those boots on the ground coming from before you put the vote on air strikes to Parliament?

Mr Hammond: I am sorry but I think that, again, we are confusing two issues. By the way, I didn't say that air strikes in Iraq have been successful because of boots on the ground. I said that air strikes in Iraq are only able to hold the line. It will require boots on the ground to roll back ISIL on the ground and we have always recognised that fact.

Q70 Stephen Gethins: Which cuts across to Syria as well; that logic could also apply to Syria.

Mr Hammond: In the east of Syria, in the ISIL strongholds in al-Raqqa, the ability to attack from the air would, in our judgment, enhance the utility of the military mission. In the end, the objective is to defeat ISIL, which means that we have to get to the controlling brain, as it were.

Q71 Stephen Gethins: So will you bring something forward to Parliament before we finally approve—on the question of boots on the ground and in training?

Mr Hammond: No, I can't commit to bringing something forward to tell you where or how this campaign will play out in the long run. At the moment we are attacking an enemy in Iraq. If we formed the judgment that that air-based military operation would be more efficacious if we were able to attack ISIL targets in Syria as well, we will ask Parliament for authority to do that. That is all that I can say at this stage.

Chair: Thank you. We should now move on to the subject of the budget. I don't know why you need your tin hat on for this, Foreign Secretary. I think that you can be reasonably sure that this Committee will be rather sympathetic to you. At least, I hope that we and our outlook will be. You might need your tin hat were the Treasury here but they are not present.

Q72 Mike Gapes: Can I take you back to the report published by our predecessor Committee at the end of the last Parliament? We pointed out that the cuts that were imposed between 2010 and 2015 were severe and went beyond just trimming fat, and capacity now appears to be damaged. As I understand it, you are about to have a further round of cuts. There has been speculation—you may wish to confirm or deny it—that up to about 20% of your budget might get chopped. If that is the case, we are no longer talking about any fat at all. We are talking about priorities and very difficult choices. Would you update us, please, on the latest proposed figures on the cuts that you are likely to experience over the coming years?

Mr Hammond: First, you will indulge me for 15 seconds if I just remind the Committee of the background. We inherited a completely unsustainable budget deficit, which itself was undermining our national security, national credibility and influence in the world. The idea that somehow we do nothing and maintain our influence is for the birds. We had to deal with this situation to regain credibility. We have regained credibility by putting in place a plan that will eliminate the deficit before the end of this Parliament but we now have to act to do that. That requires further tough decisions, including departmental spending cuts. All non-protected Departments have been asked—I do not think that it is any secret—by the Treasury to model cuts at 25% and 40% of our DEL budgets. We are going through that exercise now. That does not mean that cuts of those amounts, or any amount between them, will be imposed, but it indicates that that is the range of options that the Treasury wishes to consider.

Q73 Mike Gapes: In the previous discussion, you talked about the importance of our diplomatic network—our diplomatic services—and in a previous statement you said that it is the “crown jewel of the Foreign Office's capability”. Our budget in this country, diplomatically, is already less than that spent by the French. We spend only one 10th of the US State Department for a country that is certainly not 10 times the population of the UK—more like six times, maybe seven. Will you give us some idea in detail of how you can make further reductions on the scale of 25% or perhaps 40%—the figures you have used—without significantly reducing the size of the diplomatic network?

Mr Hammond: First, let me make the point that we should be targeting efficiency first. I will not pretend to you that we could take out those kind of percentages by being more efficient—we have already done a huge amount of efficiency gain—but when you compare our budget with the budget of the French Foreign Ministry, we operate a network of roughly the same size as the French Foreign Ministry and we do it with fewer people and with a budget that is 25% lower. We should be proud of the fact, and not beating ourselves up that we have a smaller budget, that we are operating a similarly sized network more efficiently,

with fewer assets. I would be prepared to argue for the effectiveness of our diplomacy anywhere where we go head to head with the French.

Let me deal with your specific question. Further efficiencies can be made, and I am busily identifying them now. My new Permanent Secretary will be particularly focused on this area. There are always more efficiencies that you can make. Ask any organisation—you go through this process, you go back five years later, technologies have changed, the way you work has changed, the world around you has changed and there are further efficiencies that you can make.

We also have to look at lower priority activity that we would be prepared to sacrifice without inflicting serious damage on the output of the organisation. That comes to a question of priorities. To answer your specific question, I used the phrase “crown jewel”, and I will use it again today. The network, in my view, is the crown jewel—or there are two crown jewels in the Foreign Office: there is the network and the policy brain. The ability to maintain the network at its current level and to sustain that in the future, and the ability to have a sufficient density of policy-making capacity here in London so that we can lead the foreign policy-making process across Government and beyond are the key to the Foreign Office’s *raison d’être*. Everything else is subordinate in my view to those two priorities. One thing that we will do is look at how, in any given outcome scenario of the spending review, we would manage its impact in a way that protected the network and protected the central policy-making capability.

Q74 Mike Gapes: In recent years there has been a significant reduction in the numbers of UK-based staff overseas and an increasing reliance on locally engaged staff. Do you think that that can go much further?

Mr Hammond: No. I do not believe that there is much further scope. In many of our small posts we have only two UK-based Foreign Office staff. We may have many more non-Foreign Office UK staff on the platform. We are pretty close to the irreducible minimum of UK-based staff on the network.

Q75 Mike Gapes: Therefore, you would agree then perhaps that increasing the reliance on locally engaged staff cannot go much further, particularly because you might harm the institutional knowledge and capacity to feed into the resources that you need at the centre.

Mr Hammond: Yes, I think the innovation of expanding the role of locally engaged staff was the right thing to do. It has been broadly successful, and locally engaged staff make a huge contribution.

I probably should share this with the Committee, because it is slightly counter-intuitive and it surprised me. When I first heard the term “locally engaged staff”, I imagined that we were talking mostly about people from the local population of whatever country we were present in. What I have discovered as I visit our posts abroad is that a significant proportion of locally engaged staff are British nationals who happen to be living in that country, perhaps because their family lives there or their spouse is working there. Sometimes it is people who have gone there to be employed not on London terms, but on locally engaged terms.

Q76 Mike Gapes: We have met them all over the world. We know that they work hard for their country, are paid less, have fewer pension rights and less security. We understand how you make the savings.

Mr Hammond: But many of them are British.

Q77 Mike Gapes: On whether you are then trying to make savings elsewhere, does that mean that you are talking about reducing the number of posts to continue a process? For example, we have significantly reduced the number of posts in Europe over recent years. Is a reduction in the numbers of posts now being looked at? If you have minimum numbers in some places, clearly you cannot cut the numbers. You then have to make hard choices about not being represented in some countries.

Mr Hammond: I would hope not. As I said, I regard the network as being a crown jewel. We may wish to look at some of the subordinate posts in some countries.

Q78 Mike Gapes: You mean consulates.

Mr Hammond: Yes, consulates general and so on. We have cut down on the number of consulates in Europe because we have found that the 24-hour call centre model works effectively. We have to be flexible and innovative about this, but the last place we would want to go is reducing principal overseas posts.

Q79 Mike Gapes: How are you going to gather the evidence that you need to make decisions of this kind? Is there a special process that you are going through, or a special unit? Are you asking some particular individuals or groups to look at this? Given that international priorities shift, a country that is peaceful at this time might suddenly be a place that is receiving 20,000 refugees in three days.

Mr Hammond: One of the things that we are already working on and have to do more of is the ability to surge staff between posts and between functions in the Foreign Office in London, so that we have a more flexible structure that can respond to the reality that priorities can change and change very rapidly. We need to be able to respond in a way that is appropriately agile.

Q80 Mike Gapes: May I ask you about another area of the budget? At present, there is still an FCO grant to the British Council. Is that one of the areas that you may well be getting rid of? If you do, what are the implications for the branding of the British Council and the sense of its identity with the soft power of our country?

Mr Hammond: The British Council plays a vital role in projecting UK soft power, but it has been generating an increasing proportion of the resources it needs to do that. I should have said earlier that the exercise that the Treasury has asked us to do is in relation to the non-ODA departmental resource budget. The ODA resource budget is in a different category because the amount of ODA available across Government will increase as the economy grows in size, due to the 0.7% GDP—

Q81 Mike Gapes: To be spent on local government housing, apparently. Is that right?

Mr Hammond: Some of it will be spent in support of refugees being re-housed in the UK during the first year, in accordance with OECD rules. What that means is that I am talking to the British Council about a further reduction in non-ODA funding grant in aid and looking at the options for the British Council to spend more ODA funding. Where we will probably end up—I don't know if it will happen in this spending review or a future spending review—is with a British Council that does not receive non-ODA grant in aid but receives more grant in total from the Foreign Office. However, a much larger proportion of that, or all of it, will be ODA. That means that the British Council will need to generate its non-ODA spending from its own recyclable resources while using grant in aid for its work in ODA-eligible countries.

Q82 Mike Gapes: Would you accept that there is a danger that you end up over-relying on protected funds such as ODA, and that that, in a sense, will steer the direction, rather than having a strategic, comprehensive view, which you would have had if you had the resources that were not targeted or protected in that way?

Mr Hammond: What we have to recognise is that by making a decision to spend 0.7% of our GDP on ODA, we have made a decision to focus resources on ODA-eligible countries. That is a decision that we have collectively made as a nation.

Q83 Mike Gapes: But I am not talking about the Department for International Development's spend; I am talking about FCO spend. And the question is this: if the FCO is relying on ODA funding to fund certain things, does that not then shift the focus and priorities of your Department?

Mr Hammond: It clearly means that we can only bid for ODA funding to do things in ODA-eligible countries. It's a new stream of funding available to the Foreign Office, to address the priorities that we find in ODA-eligible countries. And many of the challenges that we are dealing with, particularly conflict and stability-type challenges, present themselves in ODA-eligible countries.

Q84 Mike Gapes: Finally, may I ask you about the BBC World Service? From 2014, the funding of the World Service was taken away from your budget and the responsibility for it was given to the BBC. As a result, the licence fee payer is now responsible for funding the World Service. As you know, the BBC is going through a very difficult long-term review, and I was struck that on Monday the new director-general of the BBC implied that he might seek public funding to support new services, including a Korean language service for North Korea, a Russian service and some other Arabic services. Have you had any discussions with the Treasury about whether the Foreign Office might start to go back to the question of funding the World Service, reversing the decision that was taken two years ago?

Mr Hammond: No.

Q85 Mike Gapes: Is that likely?

Mr Hammond: I don't think that that would be a discussion that we would be likely to have. It may be a discussion that the director-general of the BBC has had with the Culture

Secretary; I don't know, but I suspect that that would be the correct channel for such a discussion.

Q86 Mike Gapes: So you wouldn't envisage a position where part of the funding for the World Service would come from the BBC and part might come for some new language services from a grant in aid from the FCO, as was the previous arrangement?

Mr Hammond: It is not inconceivable, but quite honestly facing the challenges that we are facing in the spending review, we are not exactly looking for new bids for grant in aid funding from the Foreign Office right at the moment. However, it may be that the BBC has ideas to work up bids or proposals; it is certainly entitled to do so. But the way in which the World Service is funded, and perhaps as importantly, the scope and extent and direction and alignment of the World Service agenda, are important subjects that we and the BBC need to consider. The director-general's intervention on Monday was a helpful step in that, ahead of the charter renewal process next year.

Q87 Mike Gapes: In the last Parliament, we asked your predecessor about the question of a Korean language service to North Korea, and at that time the view that we got was not a very positive one. It was thought that there would be some possible political problems, or that it would not be particularly effective. Do you have a view about whether the BBC World Service should be broadcasting into North Korea?

Mr Hammond: If there were no resource constraint, I think that the BBC is, generally speaking around the world, a very highly valued resource. It has maintained the reputation for impartiality in a way that has made it a very strong brand. I would always prefer to see a BBC service in a country in a local language, rather than there not be such a service.

Q88 Mike Gapes: So that's a yes, is it?

Mr Hammond: But in a resource-constrained environment, if you ask me whether I thought broadcasting to North Korea was a top priority, I would have some doubts, because I suspect there are other channels of information being broadcast into North Korea, including I am told, having just come back from there, widespread availability of South Korean domestic broadcasting material, albeit that it is illegal to receive it in North Korea. I understand that it is not unknown for people illegally to receive such broadcasts.

Q89 Daniel Kawczynski: I have a quick question on my favourite subject, which is UKTI. I wrote a report in 2012, having interviewed hundreds of British SMEs to get their perception of the level of service they are getting from UKTI. I will send you a copy of that report because there is a great deal of dissatisfaction among British SMEs about the traction that they are getting from UKTI. With all the issues of budget for the Foreign Office, can I ask you for your evaluation of what changes, if any, will be made to UKTI in terms of funding, its structure and its accountability? I very much hope that you will be the Foreign Secretary who makes the tough decisions needed to get an effective UKTI going.

Mr Hammond: UKTI now has a separate budget allocation. It is a body that answers to both the Foreign Secretary and the Business Secretary. The new Trade Minister, Lord Maude, is conducting a review of how UKTI operates and will be making recommendations

for reform of how it operates. We will look at those and consider them across Government. We recognise that there is a need to change the way that UKTI operates.

I think it is probably fair to say that we look enviously at the models that some of our competitors have for supporting smaller businesses in foreign markets, which are often based not on central Government machinery but chambers of commerce. This is a different model. We do not have statutory chambers of commerce in the UK in the way, for example, that Germany does. Therefore, we do not have the density of the chamber of commerce network and we do not have the level of affiliation. I was told that only 10% of British businesses belong to a chamber of commerce, whereas 100% of German businesses belong to a chamber of commerce by necessity.

Part of the work that Lord Maude has commissioned is a comparative study of how our competitors support their businesses, including small and medium enterprises. We very much recognise that there needs to be reform to make UKTI work in all its phases: upstream, as we have called it, in terms of encouraging UK enterprises to export and encouraging them to take the plunge into the market; and downstream, working effectively on the Foreign Office platforms around the world to roll the pitch for British business and to identify specific market opportunities that British companies can exploit.

Q90 Chair: May we encourage Lord Maude to import Daniel's expertise on that?

Mr Hammond: I am sure he is aware of your report.

Chair: If we can now move on to the migrant-refugee crisis, I ask Stephen Gethins to lead us off on this.

Q91 Stephen Gethins: Foreign Secretary, I am sure you will agree that the refugee crisis that we have seen over the past days, weeks and even years is a European problem and I am told we are working with our European partners on these issues. In the coming days, the European Commission will host a meeting to distribute 160,000 refugee places. I think that builds on 40,000: it is 120,000 and 40,000 from previously. Will the UK be taking part in that meeting and will you be travelling to it?

Mr Hammond: We will not take part in the quota system that is being proposed until we have the Justice and Home Affairs opt-out. This is more properly a question for the Home Secretary, but I will do my best to answer it. We have made it clear that we, because of our Justice and Home Affairs opt-out, will not take part in the quota allocation system. We have doubts about whether it is the best response. We have, however, as you know, made a separate commitment to take a significant number of Syrian refugees—20,000—and to take them directly from the place where the most vulnerable are: the camps in and around Syria. We are not convinced that simply reallocating the fit and the able, who get through what is a pretty brutal filter of making their way from Syria to Europe, is the best way to deliver a humanitarian response. What we are proposing to do is take 20,000 of the most vulnerable—those who are perhaps not able to make that highly risky journey to Europe—and offer them a place of safety here. We still believe that, for the majority of Syrians and for the sake of the future of Syria, the best response in most cases is to provide generously for the support and security of those people as close to their homes as possible.

If I may, I will take the opportunity to pay tribute to the extraordinary generosity of the Turks, the Lebanese, and the Jordanians, who have taken in literally hundreds of thousands of refugees and have borne this burden for many years. I think we should be proud of what we have done to support them. We are the second largest donor after the United States. We have just increased the level of our spending by another £100 million to £1 billion. We continue to believe in supporting these populations close to their point of origin, in the hope and belief that we will resolve the problem in Syria in due course, that there will be a new Syria to rebuild, and that we should be encouraging these people to be part of Syria's future and not simply to disperse into the comfort of western Europe and north America, leaving the future Syria denuded of its most capable citizens.

Q92 Stephen Gethins: Sure. Although I do not speak for other colleagues on much, I am sure that I speak for other colleagues in praising the extraordinary generosity of the people of Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. Ordinary people, often, have taken people into their homes. I am glad that you mentioned that, Foreign Secretary, but let me focus in on the European issue for a moment. Are you saying that if we have 160,000 refugees in Europe, that is not our problem, and that we should take them from source rather than work with our European partners to deal with those already here?

Mr Hammond: We want to work with our European partners—of course we do—but it is about how we can best contribute. The 160,000, or whatever, that are already in Europe are by definition safe. They are in the European Union. They will be protected in the European Union. What we are proposing to do is take 20,000 vulnerable people—people who would not be able to make their way under their own steam to the European Union—and offer them protection in the UK. We think that does two things. It is a genuinely humanitarian response, getting to the most vulnerable, and we also think that it avoids creating a pull factor. You will have seen, as I did, articles in the newspapers this morning, suggesting that the announcements that have been made about reallocating people around Europe are already generating a new wave of emigration towards Europe. The message that the door is open will inevitably drive the people traffickers to yet further efforts, and we have to be very careful to act in a way that is responsible and delivers effect to those who need it most, rather than to those, perhaps, who need it less, because they are already in a place of relative safety.

Q93 Stephen Gethins: But people are not going to stop coming to Europe. Isn't there a question of European solidarity? The United Kingdom is in relative terms a rich European country and a big European country. Are we leaving our colleagues in Hungary and Poland and elsewhere to bear the brunt of this crisis rather than showing a bit of solidarity with them and—dare I say it?—building some friends and influence during your renegotiation efforts?

Mr Hammond: Of course, we want to work with our European colleagues. I think you will find that our friends in Poland are pretty resistant to taking any of these migrants.

Stephen Gethins: Refugees.

Mr Hammond: The huge bulk of them will end up in Germany, because Germany has made a very generous offer towards them. We want to work to try to ensure an orderly process in Europe. If we can help with support to border security arrangements, of course we will.

We will work with European colleagues on addressing the upstream problems. Clearly in Syria we have already rehearsed the upstream problem—there is a very particular issue there—but they are not coming only from Syria; the majority of migrants arriving in Germany, I believe I am right in saying, are from the western Balkans. So there are different drivers and we can absolutely work together with European Union partners to address the drivers of migration in upstream countries and we are doing that.

Q94 Stephen Gethins: On the issue of the 20,000 you announced the action last week. It is welcome, but it looks like it is just the start—the UK could take more. Is it just a start? Could more be taken?

Mr Hammond: I should just say that Sir Simon McDonald, who has the benefit over me of having just ceased to be the British ambassador in Germany, tells me that it is 40% of refugees in Germany coming from the western Balkans, so I will just correct the record there.

The Prime Minister said, I thought very clearly, on Monday, although he was challenged many times in the House, that he thought that the number of 20,000 was about right—he thought that we had got it about right. That represented a response that was about right.

Ann Clwyd: Over five years.

Stephen Gethins: There are 5 million refugees.

Mr Hammond: That was the Prime Minister's response on Monday and I tend to agree with him.

Q95 Stephen Gethins: So you think 20,000 is an appropriate response over five years?

Mr Hammond: If I may say so, you are falling into the trap of looking at only part of our response. I said earlier and I spent some time elaborating the view that what we are doing in supporting refugees in the region is equally important. I think a response that says, "We will be the largest European donor by far to providing safety and support and succour in the region, and we will take 20,000 of the most vulnerable"—these will be women, children, people who are sick and people who have suffered particular trauma—"and we will bring them here and deal with their needs, which will sometimes be complex," is a more measured and generous response than simply saying, "We will take a quota of able-bodied young men, something like half of whom have got graduate-level education." We are dealing with the real humanitarian crisis here.

Stephen Gethins: Let me finish up because I know you want to move on and other colleagues will want to come in on this. I think, Foreign Secretary, I did acknowledge the work done by your Department and also the people of Jordan and Lebanon and Turkey, who have a huge burden to bear. You say it is equally important, but this is still an important part and at the moment there is a huge amount of criticism, which I do not think is unfair, that the UK is not playing its full role from a European context. 20,000 over the next five years represents something like—

Mr Hammond: Where is that criticism coming from?

Stephen Gethins: —six families—

Mr Hammond: Where is that criticism coming from?

Stephen Gethins: Everywhere: humanitarian groups—

Mr Holloway: Not the public.

Stephen Gethins: You haven't seen my postbag yet.

Mr Holloway: You haven't seen mine.

Stephen Gethins: Humanitarian organisations and other groups want the UK to do more. I think working with our European partners and showing them a little bit of solidarity would be a good place to start.

Chair: I think that is a point rather than a question.

Q96 Mr Holloway: I totally see where people like Stephen are coming from—the good will that that is based upon. As a Tory “rebel”, I do not always support the Government, but I have to say that I think on this, the Prime Minister and yourself are completely spot on. Presumably, your effort is designed to help the many rather than the few by helping people in that area.

Mr Hammond: We can certainly help a lot more people by helping them in the region than we ever can in Europe. Our point, and this is the UK's position, is that there are some people who need to be brought here because they are particularly vulnerable, and that is what we have now committed to. There are others who can be supported in the region. What we are seeing across Europe is people, most of whom, because they are almost by definition not the most vulnerable—they have been able to get themselves from the region to Europe, which is a pretty arduous journey—could be supported in the region but who understandably, and I do not blame them personally for this, prefer to try to get to Europe.

If we are looking at how to make the most of our resources to provide the maximum humanitarian response, the way we are seeking to do it is to maximise impact in the region and bring the most vulnerable to our own country for protection. It is not just housing them; some of these people will have suffered deep trauma and will have psychological scars and physical scars that need to be healed and dealt with. We have the capability to do that here in a way that we could not do in the region. I am afraid I think we have got the balance about right. Although there clearly is plenty of scope for different views on this, we have to make a judgment. The judgment that we have made is that accepting 20,000 of the most vulnerable here while stepping up our programme of providing support in the region is the right balance.

Q97 Mr Holloway: Some years ago I lived undercover in the Sangatte refugee camp in France, and my overriding feeling from that time was that the vast majority of people in that camp were economic migrants. Don't get me wrong; if I came from a poorer country, I would do exactly the same as them. What sort of analysis do you or Sir Simon have of the percentage of people who are currently on the move within the European Union—what percentage of them are people who come from countries where there is currently war, as opposed to those who come from countries that are less wealthy than our own?

Mr Hammond: I am not able to give you a figure. Clearly, those who are coming from Syria almost entirely will be people who are fleeing the effects of war. But it is also clear that not all the people arriving are from Syria. There are people, I am told, from Afghanistan and from Pakistan. Turkey, I understand, has a policy of not requiring visas from citizens of Islamic countries, which creates an opportunity for people traffickers but also for enterprising individuals who are seeking to move towards Europe from other parts of the world.

Although I think we all understand the motivation of those coming from Syria, and it is very easy to understand that, there will be people from other parts of the world who are seeking to join in this flow of humanity and to try to obtain a better life for themselves in Europe. We all understand, and this is the complexity here, and at an individual level we can all empathise with people wanting to improve their standard of living and create better conditions for their families. At an individual level, that is an entirely admirable thing to want to do. Equally, we understand that collectively, we cannot accommodate all the people in the world who would rather have a European living standard than the standard of living that they currently enjoy. We have to distinguish between those who are fleeing persecution and the effects of war, and those who are simply seeking better economic conditions.

Q98 Mr Holloway: So would it be fair to say that you and the Prime Minister see what a lot of European leaders do not see, namely that potentially hundreds of millions of people could be motivated to move into the European Union if we give the impression—well, it is more than an impression; it is a reality—that the doors are currently open?

Mr Hammond: I should have said, of course, when we are talking about Syrians, Afghans and Pakistanis we are talking about people using, mainly, the eastern Mediterranean route. The central Mediterranean route, which was the focus of attention until very recently—people coming across from Libya—is dominated by Africans. There are some Syrians in there as well but it is dominated by Africans—Somalians, Eritreans, Nigerians, Sudanese—and our judgment is that the majority of them are economic migrants.

So clearly there is a very large potential pool of economic migrants and we have to tackle it in three ways. We have to be clear and robust about our threshold for granting people admission and settlement in the European Union. We have to help reinforce border controls in countries of origin and in countries of transit, and we have to invest, through our aid and development budgets—and not only the UK's; I would urge European Union partners to focus their aid and development budgets—on investing in the countries of origin to reduce the push factors.

Of course it is not as simple as people leave a country in which they are settled and they have grown up, just because they could have a higher standard of living in another country. They do not, by and large. They leave the country of origin because they do not have any standard of living at all. They cannot get work. They cannot support their families. So creating conditions where people can enjoy some prospects of being able to support their families, even though it may be at a much lower standard of living than they would enjoy if they were settled in the European Union, is likely to have a very positive effect on migration flows, and I think it is a sensible thing for us to do.

Q99 Mr Holloway: I had an email from one of my constituents today and the broad thrust of what they were asking is if the Italians or the Germans issue travel documents, or take in lots of people—inevitably they will become citizens of Germany: 800,000 people from Syria—and, more broadly, if the European Union is open, and economic migrants as well are issued with European passports, presumably those people could all settle in the UK if they chose to, if they have European papers.

Mr Hammond: Of course under the current system of free movement once they are nationals of EU member states they would benefit from the rights available to EU nationals of free movement, yes.

Q100 Mr Holloway: So if we remain members of the European Union we could theoretically see many hundreds of thousands of people from less wealthy countries of the world, and also refugees, coming into the UK. So we would take more than 20,000.

Mr Hammond: Well, theoretically. Clearly we are one of the richest countries in the EU and, while there is concern about movement of migrants within the EU into the UK, it is not the case that the poorest countries in the EU have emptied as Britain has filled up. So clearly the number of people who have moved because of the gradient of national income, as it were, is limited.

Q101 Mr Holloway: Not in my constituency.

Mr Hammond: Bulgaria still has a lot of people in it, even though Bulgarians' GDP per capita is far lower than Germans' or Britons'. So it is an impact at the margin; but of course you are right that those 800,000 people, if they turn up in Germany and they eventually become German citizens, will add to the 80-odd million people already in Germany as people who potentially could choose to come to the UK. I am told it takes years to get German citizenship.

Q102 Mr Holloway: How many years? The British public would like to know.

Sir Simon McDonald: On average, over 10.

Q103 Nadhim Zahawi: Foreign Secretary, you anticipate that there will be bumps along the road in the course of implementing the Iran deal. What are your greatest concerns both about the terms of the deal itself and its implementation?

Mr Hammond: I am comfortable with the deal. I think I have said this to the Committee before, but I believe that, by approaching the negotiation—in a minute, I will pass over to Sir Simon Gass, who led the British team in the negotiation in Lausanne and then Vienna—on the basis that we don't trust them and they don't trust us, it took us a very long while, but it means that we have a deal that is robust.

I also take the view—this is my personal view—that we would not have a deal at all if the Iranians had not taken a decision at some point that the cost to Iran of continuing to defy the world by pursuing a nuclear weapons programme was just too great and it was not in their national interest to do it anymore. I am clear in my mind that Iran has taken the decision to abandon that route—not for reasons of altruism, but because it judges that it is in Iran's national interest to abandon it.

I am confident that the deal, once it has gone through Congress in Washington and passed through the Majlis in Tehran, as we now understand it will have to, will be implemented. Iran will not gain any sanctions relief until it has carried out the steps of compliance required under the agreement—until it has removed the core from the Arak reactor so that it can no longer produce plutonium; dismantled the majority of its centrifuges; abandoned a large part of its R and D programme; exported 90% of its stock of enriched uranium; and so on. We have a robust inspection regime in place and I am confident that the nuclear deal will be implemented and delivered on.

What I was referring to as bumps along the road is the potential for a broader rebuilding of a relationship with Iran. Iran is a major power. It is an important country in the region: it has 70 million people, it has the world's second largest gas reserves and fourth largest oil reserves, and it is an industrialised country with an educated population. We cannot ignore them. We do need to engage with Iran and Iran needs to engage with the world, but we do not see eye to eye on many issues. We will continue robustly to challenge Iran on the issues where we disagree with them, and they will continue robustly to challenge us where they disagree with us. I envisage that it will be a difficult relationship, but it is better to have a difficult relationship than no relationship.

Q104 Nadhim Zahawi: So how do you respond to critics who say, “Well, Iran is still free to continue to research and develop more advanced centrifuges”—the IR6 and IR8—or that, although Iran will sign the additional protocol for the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, it will still have 24 days from a request from the IAEA? Iran must now provide the IAEA with information about the military dimension of its past programme, but if that answer is not satisfactory, no one will know what the answer is because it will not be made public and there is no way of knowing whether they have given the full answer. Also, the restrictions on the production of fissile material will last only 15 years. What is your response to the people who say these things? As you say, if we start from a point where we don't trust them and they don't trust us, do we trust them enough to give them the ability to research and develop other more technologically advanced centrifuges?

Mr Hammond: All those issues were discussed at enormous length. Clearly, had we simply been invited to write a list of all the restrictions to which we would like Iran to be subject in perpetuity, and that was that, we would have included more things than are included in the deal, but it was a negotiation—it was a deal. We are confident that the safeguards and restrictions we have are adequate. I am going to ask Sir Simon Gass to answer some of those specific points, because he was the man who was sitting up all night poring over the numbers and expert opinions—

Q105 Nadhim Zahawi: So we are going to blame you, Sir Simon, when it goes wrong.

Mr Hammond: That's what I am lining him up for.

Sir Simon Gass: Let me deal, albeit briefly, with the four points that you raised. On research and development, this was a difficult part of the negotiation. Iran has a substantial number of people involved in its nuclear industry and it clearly wanted to maintain the argument that, when the restrictions are lifted, it will be able to follow a civil nuclear programme with electricity generation and so forth. We put restraints on the research and development programme, so that it will not undermine a break-out period of at least 12

months, for at least 12 years. After that period, Iran will be able gradually to increase its research and development—that is true—but, as with everything in this agreement, we need to contrast it not, as the Foreign Secretary says, with a perfect world, but with the world that we would have lived in had we not got an agreement. The truth is that Iran had already installed advanced centrifuges, which they will not be able to use and will not be able to complete their work on. We have really pushed the research and development programme a long way down the track.

On the inspection period, the additional protocol is itself quite an intrusive mechanism, but it works in a way that ultimately refers problems to the board of governors of the IAEA. What we introduced in this agreement, which is really quite unprecedented, is the 24-day time window, which is your backstop if things go wrong. As others have said, when you are processing uranium, you cannot remove the traces of uranium within 24 days or indeed 24 weeks. Everything can still be traced and the inspection process we have is more intrusive than the additional protocol.

On the past military dimension, the IAEA has agreed a work programme with the Iranian Government, which they need to pursue in order to allow sanctions to be lifted. I do not think that anybody believes that we will get a complete understanding of anything that has ever been done in Iran, which was probably never going to happen, but I think we will get a pretty good sense of what past activities have been undertaken.

Lastly, on your point about 15-year restrictions, this agreement has different time scales within it. Some things happen after 10 years and some after 15 years. The limit of 300 kilos on the low-enriched uranium stockpile is for 15 years. The limit of 3.67% enrichment is for 15 years. There are other provisions related, for example, to uranium processing that last for 25 years and some, such as the additional protocol, have no limit.

We are pretty confident that we are dealing with this problem very substantially for a long period of time and that Iran will have every incentive to abide by its non-proliferation treaty obligations for much longer than that.

Q106 Nadhim Zahawi: Clearly, we are committed to the deal. Foreign Secretary, are we paying a price for losing support from and influence over some of Iran's neighbours, who are less happy with the deal?

Mr Hammond: I think we have to distinguish a concern, which is perfectly legitimate, from Iran's neighbours about Iran's behaviour in the region or neighbourhood from concerns about the deal itself. I think most of the regional countries, when they have understood how the deal works, are reasonably comfortable that it will be effective in preventing Iran from developing nuclear weapons.

There is a line of attack that says that the Iranians will always cheat. I heard that when I was in Israel a couple of days after we did the deal, and I expect that I shall hear tomorrow when I meet Prime Minister Netanyahu that the Iranians will always cheat.

Q107 Nadhim Zahawi: But it is not just Israel saying that. Other countries in the region would probably say the same thing as well.

Mr Hammond: There is a suspicion of Iran. We have approached this deal on the basis that we do not do it on trust and that we do it on the basis of robust mechanisms. We started with an assumption that they are going to try to cheat and we put in place mechanisms to ensure that it will not work.

The more serious challenge from our interlocutors in the region is that you should not do a deal with Iran because they are doing bad things in the region. I have some sympathy with that line of reasoning, but it is flawed because the deal that we have done is a deal to lift sanctions that were put in place specifically because of Iran's illegal nuclear programme. If Iran now ends that illegal nuclear programme, and we can verify that it has ended it, we must, in all conscience—if the integrity of the international system is to stand—lift the sanctions that are related to that programme.

Now, what some of our interlocutors in the region would really like is for those sanctions to be rolled over to deal with Iran's broader behaviour—"Okay, you're not doing nuclear weapons, but there are lots of things you are doing that we really don't like, and we want you to change that behaviour as well." We share that view that Iran should change its behaviour in the region, but we recognise that we can't use the international sanctions that were put in place because of the illegal nuclear weapons programme to address Iran's other behaviours. We will, however, continue to press Iran on its behaviour in the region, as will other countries in the region and other international powers, and we hope that, as Iran re-engages with the world, it will rethink the way it wants to engage in the region.

There are people who will say that that is a naïve view, and we will have to wait and see, but it is self-evidently the case—the lesson of history—that when you isolate a country, as we have done with Iran for very good reason, it is likely to become more bellicose in its behaviour than if it is fully engaged with, trading with, enjoying investment from and exchanging students with the rest of the world. That is what we have to hope: that this re-engagement will strengthen the moderates in Iranian society and give Iran more of a sense of having a stake in the region and wishing to re-engage in the region as an important nation state and important player in the region, rather than as a destabilising force in the region.

Q108 Nadhim Zahawi: In your recent visit, did you manage to talk with the Iranians about some of those incursions, or interference, in neighbouring countries?

Mr Hammond: Yes, and we have a different point of view from the Iranians; we see these things differently. We see Hezbollah and Hamas differently. We see the situation in Bahrain differently. We see the situation in Yemen differently. And that is perhaps not surprising. But the fact that I was in Tehran, talking to the senior players about how we see these things differently is a step forward. Again, we have to hope that, as Iran re-engages with the world, just as it did on nuclear weapons, it will start to make decisions based on its assessment of its own national interest to modify some of its behaviours. That is not going to happen overnight, and Iran will be doing so for reasons of national self-interest, not for reasons of regional altruism. But responsible nations acting in their national enlightened self-interest within the international rules is a game we can all play, even where we don't agree with the policy objectives of the nations in question.

Q109 Nadhim Zahawi: Is there a plan B if the US Congress manages to deny the US Government support for this deal?

Mr Hammond: Well, the numbers today are looking like the President may not even need to use his veto. We are clear that he already has more than enough support to sustain the veto. So I don't think that is a contingency we need to plan for now. We do, however, know that, in the Iranian system, the Majlis will have to vote on this deal, and there are plenty of people in the Majlis who are picking holes in the deal, as there were plenty of people in the US Congress who were picking holes in the deal. But I am pretty confident that it will get approved both in the US and in Iran, and move forward to implementation over the next couple of months.

Q110 Nadhim Zahawi: You reopened the embassy two weeks ago. We took evidence from your predecessor that there were obstacles to reopening it. They were very specific obstacles. Can you share with us how those were overcome and who managed to overcome them?

Mr Hammond: These things are always a judgment call and you have to balance the different priorities and agendas. Our judgment was that we have moved far enough on the key issues. The situation on the ground has changed far enough and the assurances that we have received were reassuring enough that, on balance, it was now right to reopen the embassy, to obtain that greater level of dialogue with the Iranians and to support British businesses in pursuing business in Iran as that country opens up.

Q111 Nadhim Zahawi: Very specifically Foreign Secretary, because I want to push you slightly on this, was the equipment that we needed to get into our embassy cleared without interference? Did we receive assurances from the more hard-line elements about the security of our staff? Have the Iranians agreed to take back their nationals who overstayed in the UK—something that was reported to be a precondition for opening the visa section in Tehran?

Mr Hammond: On all of those areas, we have made sufficient progress that we believe that we can now move forward. None of these were ideological positions; they were practical issues where we needed to see practical ways forward. In all areas, we have found practical ways to proceed, which have allowed us to go ahead and reopen the embassy. That does not mean to say that we will not have continuing and robust discussions with the Iranians about some of these issues in the future, but we are confident that there has been a conscious decision in the Iranian system to accommodate the reopening of the British embassy in Tehran, and we should not underestimate the significance of that for the Iranian regime. Britain enjoys a special place in Iranian mythology. It is probably fair to say that we carry unique historical baggage. To take the decision to push ahead and facilitate this was a serious political decision made within the regime. Somebody has decided to use some political capital to do it, so I think that we have to regard that as a real commitment.

Chair: I do not think that we will get a specific answer out of you, so we will now move on to the final section, on Egypt.

Q112 Yasmin Qureshi: Obviously we are concerned about some of the things that have been happening in Egypt over the past number of years, after the uprising started, and also the invitation that we understand has been given to President Sisi to visit the UK in the foreseeable future. A number of people are concerned about the human rights abuses and the things that have been done by Sisi's Government over the past few years. I want to ask about three specific cases. The clearing of the Rab'a al-Adawiya sit-in in Cairo on 14 August 2013

led to the deaths of about 1,000 people. I understand that there was an agreement that a full inquiry would be carried out by the Government under Sisi, but it does not appear that anything has happened in relation to that. I understand that Human Rights Watch have applied to the UN human rights council to ask for that inquiry to be carried out. What are our Government and the FCO doing either to push for an inquiry or to ask the UN to get involved in this?

Mr Hammond: First, we share your concern about many of the things that are happening inside Egypt, and we raise those issues regularly with Egyptian counterparts. Indeed, the Egyptian Foreign Minister was in my office yesterday and he is meeting with the Foreign Office junior Minister today on specific consular cases. But we also recognise that Egypt is a very important country with a huge population, a vital component of stability in the Middle East and arguably one of the most important countries in Africa, and that Britain's national interest, as well as the best interest of the Egyptian people, requires us to engage with the Egyptian Government. We cannot ignore a country of 90 million people not far from our doorstep, so we engage with them. We judge that engaging with the regime and talking to them about these issues is more likely to elicit a positive response than refusing to engage with them and shouting at them from a distance.

Personally, I have had discussions with President Sisi, and I have found him willing to engage and talk in a calm and detailed manner about the most difficult subjects for him. He is someone who is willing to engage and discuss. Our judgment is that by engaging with Egypt, recognising that it faces some very big challenges, such as economy and security, and that we have a huge amount of shared interests, particularly the security challenge, and by working together, we will get a better outcome for the UK and the Egyptian people, and a better chance of addressing some of the very significant human rights problems, particularly our concern that the political space in Egypt is shrinking rather than expanding as it should if we are to have a long-term sustainable situation in Egypt.

Q113 Yasmin Qureshi: I am one of those people who believes in talking to people; I think you need to speak with people who disagree with you. I am not coming from the perspective that we should not be talking to them, but I think people would like to know this. There has been discussion. On the issue of the inquiry, for example, has any real answer been given by the Egyptian Government? Is it the case that they accept it and will do it in a few years' time, or in a year?

Mr Hammond: Yes.

Q114 Yasmin Qureshi: Any concrete response?

Mr Hammond: I have not got the briefing here, but I am happy to write to the Committee. We have discussed specifically the question of the inquiry, but I need to check the record before I write to you.

Q115 Chair: Foreign Secretary, I was there three times in July and September 2013. It was the fig leaf under which we were going to re-engage with the Egyptian Government that they were going to commit to an inquiry of their own, which would be internationally overseen. What has happened?

Mr Hammond: As I have just said, I recall that we have discussed this incident, but I would need to check where we are in terms of what commitments have been made and what is currently happening. I will write to the Committee. I do not have the briefing papers with me.

Q116 Yasmin Qureshi: May I also ask about two other issues? There are specific cases in which 183 people have been charged with the murder of 16 police officers in what I would very much call a kangaroo court, and they have all been sentenced to death. Has there been any discussion about this mass execution and kangaroo trial?

Mr Hammond: First, I don't think mass executions have taken place. They have been sentenced.

Q117 Yasmin Qureshi: No, but one thing that I would like to know is whether we know how many people have actually been executed so far as a result of that sentence being imposed. Are we taking up the issue of how the trial has been carried out? Before I became a Member of Parliament I was a criminal lawyer. I know the issues involved in having big trials, but trying 183 people in one go is quite hard work.

Q118 Chair: I think there have been occasions on which more than 183 in one go have been sentenced to death.

Mr Hammond: I have discussed these issues both with President Sisi and, much more regularly, with the Foreign Minister. The Egyptians take the position, which you would recognise, that there is a judicial process in which they cannot interfere, but there are also executive powers that only come into play once the judicial process, including the appeals process, has run its full course. My understanding of the trial you are referring to is that those sentences are now subject to appeal. President Sisi's position, in discussions I have had with him, has been consistently that he cannot intervene while a judicial process is ongoing, while reminding us that he has an executive power of clemency once the judicial process has ended.

Engaging with the executive power where there is a separation between the judicial process and the executive, and making clear that we expect those executive powers to be used to achieve acceptable outcomes, even where the judicial process does not throw up an acceptable outcome, is the right way to engage and certainly the best way to try to get a result. Simply bludgeoning the Egyptian Government over decisions being made by trial judges is not going to achieve the objective. Again, I recognise and we have to live with the fact that we will be roundly condemned for talking to people while these processes are going on. My judgment is that the most likely way for us to have any influence on this process is to engage.

Yasmin Qureshi: Without putting words in your mouth, I understand from what you are saying—

Mr Hammond: Did you say you were a trial lawyer before?

Q119 Yasmin Qureshi: I understand from what you are saying—please disagree with this if I am wrong—that once the judicial process is over and it gets into the executive issue of

clemency and mercy, President Sisi is saying that at that point, he will be exercising that power. Are you saying that you are pushing for that to happen?

Mr Hammond: No, what I am saying is that at that point, we have the relationships built and the ability to access the decision makers. If our relationship is strong and growing, we have hopefully the leverage to make our voice heard.

Q120 Yasmin Qureshi: Coming on to a third issue—do confirm if this is correct—we understand that about 40,000 people have been detained in prison over the last year or so, and some are being tortured. That is what Human Rights Watch is saying. Are you able to give us any idea of how extensive or prevalent that is, and if that is accepted as the situation?

Mr Hammond: I would not disagree with the number. I do not have an exact number, but I would not disagree with that number. Egypt is facing a counter-terrorism crisis, but our consistent advice to the Egyptians is that by confusing their counter-terrorist response with a broader political clampdown, they are making a mistake that will ultimately mean the policy is unsuccessful.

We consistently explain to the Egyptians and to others that our own experience is that the way to deal with a terrorism threat is to focus on isolating the hard-core terrorists from the soft-core passive supporters, and that clamping down on the soft-core passive support is not in the end a successful strategy. We do not think that rounding up tens of thousands of people is a credible counter-terrorist response. We explain that quietly and patiently, using examples from our own history. We try to persuade, to encourage and to inform in a way that we hope will lead to a more productive and constructive approach in the future, but we can only do that by engaging.

Q121 Yasmin Qureshi: Can I clarify or reiterate that I and many people here would agree that engagement is the way forward? Obviously, these issues have arisen and there is an opportunity.

Mr Hammond: I understand that.

Q122 Chair: Finally on Egypt, given the seriousness of the potential indictment around the actions of the Egyptian Government in August 2013, there is some suggestion that there might be third-party action to seek to detain President Sisi, should he ever come to the United Kingdom, on charges of crimes against humanity. Do you have any concern about that if he does come to the United Kingdom?

Mr Hammond: Yes. It will not happen. As a Head of State, he will come with special mission status and exemption. That is the basis on which Heads of State visit the UK—and, indeed, Foreign Ministers.

Chair: I am sure that gives you some comfort—not that it needs to! Yasmin, you have one further question on one of the subjects we have covered, and then, I think, we are home and dry.

Yasmin Qureshi: Following on from your point about the fact that we need to engage with people and have discussions, and I totally agree with that, we had a discussion earlier about Daesh, or ISIL, and the issue about Saddam—sorry, Assad.

Mr Hammond: I famously did that on “Newsnight”!

Q123 Yasmin Qureshi: I think we could all do it. On Assad, would you agree that we hear about all the people leaving—the mass exodus from Syria that has been taking place over the last number of years—and the way it has been reported in our media is that a lot of it is somehow linked with Daesh, whereas we know that in reality a lot of the people fleeing Syria are fleeing from the urban areas and it is because of the barrel bombs being dropped by Saddam, with nails and chlorine—*[Interruption.]* Sorry, Assad. There is also the military conscription that he wants to do; people are running away from it. Although obviously there is a need to deal with Daesh, do we not feel that other solutions should be looked at in relation to Assad? I know you said there is a distinction to be made in terms of not wanting to get involved in Syria itself, but things like no-fly zones—

Mr Hammond: What sort of—

Yasmin Qureshi: For example, a no-fly zone, in terms of—not necessarily—

Chair: Yasmin, let’s have an answer to this precise point, because I don’t want to reopen the first 45 minutes of the session.

Q124 Yasmin Qureshi: Okay. What about a no-fly zone, for example?

Mr Hammond: The problem with no-fly zones is that they work only if someone is prepared to police them. Syria has a sophisticated air defence system, provided by Russia and probably operated in part by Russian technicians. I am not aware of a competent air force that is offering to police a no-fly zone. A no-fly zone that exists only on paper, like a yellow line without a parking warden, does, I’m afraid, undermine credibility. If we are going to talk about no-fly zones—I say “we”; I mean the United Kingdom. If we are going to talk about no-fly zones, we had better be clear that we are prepared to share in policing them, and I don’t think we are.

Q125 Mike Gapes: On that point, I accept that Syria has an air defence system—

Mr Hammond: State of the art.

Mike Gapes: And the Russians are intimately involved in the operation of that system, but would it not be possible to engage by firing from aircraft carriers parked somewhere in the Mediterranean and just taking out one or two of the helicopters that are currently dropping the barrel bombs? Assad doesn’t have a limitless number of helicopters; he doesn’t have very large numbers. I was told—I don’t know whether it is true—he has maybe 60 or so; it may be more than that. But the fact is that a symbolic shooting down of one or two of his helicopters might encourage the other pilots not to be flying them—saving the lives of very large numbers of civilians and perhaps reducing the number of people who feel they have to leave Syria in order to live.

Mr Hammond: That is a different strategy from a no-fly zone—seeking to destroy the air assets that Assad is using to bomb Syrian people, and it is a perfectly possible military strategy. I do not know whether you are suggesting an appetite for such action on the part of the UK. I would be surprised—

Mike Gapes: I am not saying the UK alone; I think the UK, France, the United States and other countries should make it very clear that they want to stop the barrel bombing of the civilian population in Syrian cities.

Mr Hammond: That is very interesting, but it was your party that proposed—

Mike Gapes: Let's not get into that game, because I am quite prepared to vote for military action. I have said that publicly.

Mr Hammond: Maybe you should.

Mike Gapes: Maybe you should get all your colleagues to vote.

Mr Hammond: If I may follow up, Syria's defence systems are sophisticated and I think that there is a slight temptation to forget that, because in all the actions that have taken place, the Syrians have not ever engaged with allied aircraft. They have clearly made a decision not to engage allied aircraft because those aircraft are not targeting Syrian Government forces; they are targeting ISIL forces. However, the Syrians have sophisticated capabilities, both air defence and coastal batteries, and it would be a very big decision to start using coalition assets to directly attack Syrian Government operational assets. That would be a major step, and I think it would need to be thought about extremely carefully. I suspect that Parliament would have a very strong view on that.

Mike Gapes: I agree.

Q126 Chair: My only observation would be to see if their anti-ship missiles systems work with that particular strategy

Mr Hammond: They do.

Chair: We have one final question on Egypt that I would like Ann Clwyd to ask.

Q127 Ann Clwyd: When this Committee last visited Egypt, we met with the President, and we discussed the constraints on freedom of expression in Egypt and particularly the imprisonment of the al-Jazeera journalists. He gave the clear impression that it was an embarrassment to him, and something that had happened before he came on the scene and that he wished that it had not been so. Are you making any progress in continuing to discuss with the Egyptians the fate of the al-Jazeera journalists who have just been sentenced once again?

Mr Hammond: I think this goes back to my earlier exchange with Ms Qureshi; there is a distinction between the judicial and executive parts of the system. The new sentences that have just been handed down are judicial sentences. I have not yet discussed this case with our Egyptian interlocutors since then; Mr. Ellwood will be having that discussion this afternoon. I will be interested to hear from him what he has heard about the current executive thinking about this process. None of this is quick, because the Egyptian justice system does not necessarily work very quickly, but I have no reason to believe that the President's position, and he told me very much the same as he told the Committee, has changed.

Chair: Given the number of people they have sentenced to death, it is probably just as well.

Secretary of State, Sir Simon and Sir Simon, thank you very much indeed for your time this afternoon.