



Home Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Migration crisis, HC 427

Tuesday 24 November 2015

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Members present: Keith Vaz (Chair); Victoria Atkins, James Berry, Mr David Burrowes, Nusrat Ghani, Mr Ranil Jayawardena, Tim Loughton, Stuart C. McDonald, Mr Chuka Umunna, Mr David Winnick

Questions 150 – 206

Examination of Witness

Witness: **HE Konstantinos Bikas**, Greek Ambassador, gave evidence.

Q150 Chair: Your Excellency, thank you very much for coming. This is a formal session of the Home Affairs Select Committee to look at the issues of migration as well as border controls. I want to start with the points that have been made in the public domain about the Greek border. There was great concern that the Greek border is porous and therefore people coming into the European Union who have crossed that border may be those who are to be engaged in terrorism. I particularly want to raise the case of Abdelhamid Abaaoud, the man who was in part responsible, we hear from the French police, for the atrocities that occurred in Paris. How was he, someone who was known to the French police, able to cross the Greek border without Greece informing France that he had entered the EU?

Konstantinos Bikas: Let me start with the first question you posed with regard to the supposedly porous borders of my country. The borders could be land borders or sea borders. When we are referring to land borders I do not think there is any question that it might be porous because there is a fence between Greece and Turkey so there is no discussion about that.

The sea borders have a particularity. The particularity is that when there are people arriving at your border you have to rescue them if they are in need and there is no effective way of stopping them unless you take violent measures that are not accepted by international law. It suffices, honourable members of the Committee, to look at one of the many videos that are on YouTube to see how this happens. We have a boat, a small boat or an inflatable boat, loaded with people. You can see in a boat that takes 10 people, 40 or 50 people loaded there, and they come from Turkey and reach the sea border of Greece so the coastal authorities of Greece have to rescue them.

Q151 Chair: Yes, and this Committee, having visited the border of Greece and Turkey seven years ago, is on record pressing the EU and the British Government for more resources for Greece.

Konstantinos Bikas: We appreciate that very much.

Chair: We have done that over a number of years. We have all seen the videos. They are horrific. But specifically on the point of this terrorist who was able to enter the EU through the Greek border without the Schengen information system kicking in so France was aware of it, how did this happen?

Konstantinos Bikas: We are talking about two persons who are supposed perpetrators. They came on to the island of Leros and there they were checked. One of them had a European Union passport and the other one had a Syrian passport.

Q152 Chair: Let's take first the European passport holder. How was he able to get through?

Konstantinos Bikas: According to the Schengen regulations, our authorities are responsible for checking the passport, photographing the person and if the person is not coming through a normal entry point, which was the case, for also putting that person into the EURODAC system, which means that his fingerprints are taken and they are put immediately on the system. So what happens in a case like that, when the passport is checked or when the fingerprints are checked and they go into a base, if there is an alert, there is a red flag or something like that that crops up—

Chair: On the computer?

Konstantinos Bikas: On the computer. Say it crops up and says, “Mr So and so, red alert”, something must be done with this person.

Q153 Chair: The authorities, like the British authorities or especially those in Schengen, would feed you this information. It would go on the Schengen information system and if someone re-entered through Greece there would be a flag that would come on the computer to say that they were wanted by the French authorities.

Konstantinos Bikas: Exactly. If the persons are wanted by the Schengen authorities, there should be a flag that should crop up.

Q154 Chair: Why did it not happen in this case?

Konstantinos Bikas: They were checked; there was no flag there.

Q155 Chair: So you are telling us that the information that these people were people of interest to the French security service was not on the computer?

Konstantinos Bikas: It was not on the computer. It didn't come up on the computer. It was not on the computer. So these people, the person with the European passport, passed. There was no red flag for this person.

Q156 Chair: So in respect of the person who had a Syrian passport, there are reports that Greece is putting those with Syrian passports at the top of the queue in relation to migration issues. Is that right?

Konstantinos Bikas: In this specific case the passport of this person was checked and nothing cropped up again. So the person went in. But the information went into the Schengen system: the information that these two persons entered at that particular place at that particular time and that their fingerprints were on the EURODAC system. That information goes there immediately.

Q157 Chair: So in relation to the Syrian passport holder, you had no reason to suspect that it was a false passport?

Konstantinos Bikas: I would not even know yet, even now. We did not receive information from the French authorities that this is or could be a falsified passport.

Q158 Chair: There is also anecdotal information, and perhaps you can confirm this for us, that a lot of fake Syrian passports are being issued. Do you have the capacity in Lesbos or in any of the entry points to deal with fake passports, to identify fake passports?

Konstantinos Bikas: There are different kinds of forgery with fake passports and I am not a specialist in that, but I would think that it is not possible every time to discover if a passport is fake. Fakeness can relate either to the paper or to the person or to the authority. So you might have an authority that proceeds with a passport, this passport being a valid passport, but the person that issued the passport was at fault, in a false situation.

Q159 Chair: Does Greece have the equipment to deal with knowing the difference between a genuine Syrian passport and a fake passport at the border? Do you have the equipment, do you have the resources to be able to buy the equipment, to be able to test this?

Konstantinos Bikas: I will start by saying that up to now officially we have not received from the French authorities the information that this is a falsified passport.

Q160 Chair: Nobody is asking. I don't know whether it is. But do you have the capacity?

Konstantinos Bikas: The capacity, yes.

Q161 Chair: In respect of this case, as far as you are concerned, it was a genuine Syrian passport.

Konstantinos Bikas: We do not have the information if it was falsified or a genuine passport. Officially we don't have that information.

With regard to the other question—I cannot be more specific, because there will be more elaborate machines, more elaborate means, I do not know that—but definitely there is a check and if the passport is seen to be falsified or there is a suspicion, this person will be put aside.

Q162 Chair: You have had hundreds of thousands of people entering Greece, as we saw ourselves when we went to your border; there were a 100,000 seven years ago. Now of course it is hundreds of thousands, up to even a million if you look at the numbers. There are 2.5 million in Turkey, 2.5 million in Jordan, so the possibility of even more coming. What more do you need from the EU?

Konstantinos Bikas: Thank you for the question. I very much agree with the numbers. I would like to add that currently we have in Greece 2 million persons who are either refugees or migrants; 2 million persons in a population of 11 million people, and you can imagine what that means. These people are costing Greece more than €2 billion, €2.8 billion. There is a fund from the European Union of €700 million over five years but due to the procedures and the time that these issues take, the amount of this fund has not yet started to flow into Greece. There is also an extraordinary fund of €10 million but also due to procedural issues we have not yet received that amount of money. So you understand very clearly that for a country that has been so severely hit by the eurozone crisis—we lost 28% of our GDP, the same as Germany lost during the First World War—the strain of the situation on our economy and also on the refugees and migrants.

Chair: Of course.

Konstantinos Bikas: Definitely so. What we would need is that the procedures be expedited and that this allocated money be administered as soon as possible.

Chair: Of course. You have our sympathy and our respect for the way in which you are dealing with this very difficult issue.

Q163 James Berry: Your Excellency, focusing on the island of Lesbos, the figures we have are that so far this year 379,000 refugees have arrived there by sea and that is an island that normally has just 88,000 inhabitants. That perhaps puts it into context. Apart from the sheer volume of arrivals, what are the biggest challenges in dealing with the migrants flowing through Lesbos?

Konstantinos Bikas: First of all we should have more personnel from Frontex. We need 740 Frontex people to be activated there and we have 100 at the moment. So we definitely need more people there.

We also need more units of control. We have 30 units of control that we have been given by European countries and we need 100 more units of control, people coming in. So we definitely need equipment quickly so that we can proceed more quickly with examining the people.

That does not mean that because this equipment is lacking we do not proceed with the people coming in but it takes far more time, to the detriment of the involved refugees and the strain of the whole situation. So the sooner we have the Frontex people at the Poseidon operation, the sooner we have this equipment, the sooner we can streamline this flow.

Q164 James Berry: So you are asking for sevenfold increase in Frontex officers? You have 100; you want 700?

Konstantinos Bikas: We should have 740 and we have 100 now. So we need more Frontex officers to be part of the Poseidon operation to assist in this overall humanitarian crisis.

James Berry: So 640 more officers?

Konstantinos Bikas: Yes.

James Berry: Thank you very much.

Konstantinos Bikas: You are most welcome.

Q165 Chair: Would you like to see the return of the rapid forces, the RABITs, that worked so well between Greece and Turkey?

Konstantinos Bikas: Our Prime Minister recently had a visit to Turkey and of course all these issues were discussed. We have an ongoing co-operation between Greece and Turkey. Greece is solely responsible for safeguarding its border and we think we have done a tremendous job. Our coastguard had 83,000 persons saved from the waters and we have had more 2,500 coastguard operations from the start of the year up to now. From our perspective this humanitarian and European refugee crisis has to be coped with in two phases. The first one is the shorter measures and the second is the long-term and strategic measures. With regard to the first, we have discussed that. With regard to the second, unless there is a political and diplomatic solution to the Syrian crisis it will be impossible to stop all these desperate people who are trying to flee the war. We have more than 2 million in Turkey; more than 2 million in Lebanon, Jordan and Egypt. As I understand it, the economics of the United Nations are really in a dire situation so we have in the camps that are in Jordan and Lebanon—

Q166 Chair: Indeed. So you are telling this Committee that you are clear that those who are entering Greece are refugees. They are not economic migrants. They are fleeing the problems in Syria.

Konstantinos Bikas: Most of them now are refugees but we are talking about mixed flows. They can be migrants, they can be refugees but definitely the huge number of people coming is due to the Syrian crisis. Greece has been facing a problem of migration, as you know, Mr Chairman, from your visits, for quite some time; maybe for something like 10 years. Beforehand we had 300 people coming in and out.

Chair: Very helpful. Thank you.

Q167 Mr Jayawardena: I have to say I am somewhat troubled, Ambassador, by the lack of information that we often all have about the difference between refugees and migrants. An important initiative is the hotspot approach to help deal with the processing and the identification of those who are genuinely refugees. It was launched in the port of Athens in October in order to assist with this as people arrived in Greece. Can you explain how a hotspot is intended to work in Greece and if it is working?

Konstantinos Bikas: We want to have five hotspots on five islands. The first hotspot, which should be working very shortly, is that of Lesbos. The hotspots will facilitate

acceptance and operationally be the place where people are examined as to what they are. There are some people who are sensitive about the term hotspot, but anyhow.

The hotspot does what is being done now but at a quicker interval, so these hotspots will facilitate a flow of examining persons much more quickly. That does not mean that because we do not have these operational centres now—we will have them shortly—that the work that should be done is not done. It is done but it takes far more time, far more strain. Also facilities that deal with where the people are allocated at this port, where they sleep, could be a strain to them. From the security perspective it takes longer, but the essential, what should be done, is being done.

Q168 Mr Jayawardena: Clearly, as you say, there are multiple places where refugees can arrive in Greece and this creates obvious difficulties in deciding where to allocate resources. Who is responsible for co-ordinating the processing of refugees when they arrive and indeed how are the impacts of having such a large number of refugees being dealt with?

Konstantinos Bikas: The impact, as you will understand, is severe. It is severe on the Greek budget, which is also under strain because of the eurozone crisis, and of course on the local communities, who I must say have shown tremendous hospitality and acceptance of this humanitarian crisis. As for the authorities who are responsible, there is the coastguard when they come from the sea and then police officers, hospitals all knee-deep in first aid situations depending on the need, the local authorities of course who also have to deal with the issue, and the general population, definitely.

Q169 Mr Jayawardena: Would you welcome more EU intervention?

Konstantinos Bikas: As I said before, we believe that this is a European crisis, is a humanitarian tragedy. It is a crisis where the West has responsibility because we had the destabilisation of countries from interference in wars without having seen the consequences of these actions that are now in our laps.

Definitely we would like to see the decisions that have been taken by the European Union with regard to relocation, resettlement being implemented. We very much also would like to see this resettlement taking place outside of the European Union; to take place in Turkey, for example, so that Turkey could be aided, be helped, because also Turkey, like the other countries, Lebanon and Jordan, is under tremendous strain and this resettlement takes place from there.

Q170 Mr Jayawardena: Ambassador, you anticipate my next question, which is would you see that offshore processing would be much more effective, efficient and indeed resilient in dealing with the large number of people coming through? Do you believe—and I think the answer is yes—that could be run directly by the EU in terms of protecting the Schengen area?

Konstantinos Bikas: Definitely I believe that this should be done outside of the EU area, as I told you before. I believe Great Britain is working in that direction, having resettlement directly from places in Turkey. We definitely believe that we need an overall, comprehensive European approach. One European country says, “I will not accept these refugees”. Another says, “I wouldn’t give so much money”. It would help to see this as a

European crisis and have a European response. Of course I do not refer to the statutory issues like the opt-out question where everybody has the right to exercise its authority.

Q171 Mr Jayawardena: One very quick supplementary, ambassador. Would you accept that there is a difference between those countries that are part of the Schengen area and those who are not and the need for responsibility to be weighted accordingly?

Konstantinos Bikas: This deals also with statutory issues. I am afraid at the moment I am not so certain about the legality of the issue. I would say that each country should abide by the regulations that are agreed within the framework of the European Union.

Q172 Stuart C. McDonald: Ambassador, I am going to read you a description of hotspots, how they are operating, which comes from an organisation called the International Rescue Committee. Their report is, “The way hotspots are currently being ruled out is causing chaos, increasing tensions and violence, and leaving more people without basic shelter. They have been placed on overwhelmed islands like Lesbos, which lack the physical facilities to handle huge numbers and they have been introduced without co-ordination at all”. Do you recognise that description, that hotspots are failing?

Konstantinos Bikas: Hotspots are not actually working, not yet. Lesbos is going to work in a short time. What obviously this report is referring to is the situation, how it is being dealt with. But if you have arriving from a very short distance, from the other side of the ports, from Turkey, 3,000, 5,000, 10,000 people a day, what do you expect? Don’t you expect that there will be some commotion or difficulty in dealing with the situation in a very orderly way?

Q173 Stuart C. McDonald: I absolutely accept that. In fact the numbers that Greece has been asked to deal with are impossible for Greece. It would be impossible for any single country to deal with. But my colleague spoke about the EU being involved. Isn’t the obvious organisation to get involved here and to be responsible for co-ordinating the response the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees?

Konstantinos Bikas: When people come to Greece they are dealt with by the Greek authorities with the co-operation of the European Union. I am not certain how this legally goes with the High Commissioner for Refugees. I am afraid I cannot say. Definitely, I believe, they are responsible for the refugees who are in Syria and in Lebanon but the responsibility for them coming within the European Union space is with the Greek and European authorities.

Q174 Stuart C. McDonald: They obviously have some sort of role already but a number of NGOs and other charitable organisations have been suggesting that the role of the UNHCR should be vastly increased; it should be responsible for co-ordinating the response altogether. Is that something you would think about?

Konstantinos Bikas: As I told you before, I think the way we work now is the one that I have described. If there are other ways to deal with it, I am sure the competent Greek authorities will look at them. They will not have any reason to disregard any help or assistance that would be useful on the spot.

Q175 Stuart C. McDonald: Finally, how many people do you think arrive in Greece and are not checked at all before being able to travel onwards?

Konstantinos Bikas: I do not know of people who arrive and are not checked. I know that from the start of the year we had more than 600,000 arriving in Greece through these mixed flows and they are being checked. So I cannot answer this question because I believe they are checked.

Q176 Chair: You have no evidence of people going through Greece to go to Syria, going the other way?

Konstantinos Bikas: No, not really. You know the possible routes and Greece is not a possible route to go from Greece to Syria because you would need to fly to Syria, which is impossible now.

Q177 Mr Winnick: Leading on from the previous question, and recognising the plight of the Greek people, which has received a great deal of attention in Parliament and a great deal of sympathy and solidarity, what has been the effect among Greek people in the main as a result of the refugee crisis, bearing in mind what I have said?

Konstantinos Bikas: It is a strain on society and a strain on finances. There is a belief that this is a European crisis that has to be dealt with by Europe working together, which means allocating the means, resources, and people. We cannot expect one or two countries—Greece or Italy let's say—to cope by themselves with this European crisis, which was not in the end the result of any Greek action.

Q178 Mr Winnick: Has this led to a situation in your country where extremists—we know in particular of one party that prides itself on being adherents of Hitler—have been given further ammunition?

Konstantinos Bikas: This is an estimation, an evaluation, where my analysis is as good as yours but I believe that of course when you have situations of strain and of pressure on a society then all societies react with extreme forces or extreme ideas crop up and gain support.

Q179 Nusrat Ghani: Good afternoon, Ambassador. What support, financial or otherwise, have the Greek Government received from the European Union to help manage the crisis in Greece?

Konstantinos Bikas: I have discussed the support in the discussions that we have had. What we believe should be done is that decisions that have been taken at European Union level should be implemented. For example, there are quotas for allocation. Quotas have to do with the GDP or the economic development of the country and various other indicators. The EU Council decided about the relocation of 140,000 people but up to now the numbers that have been taken within this framework are very meagre. So we would expect these decisions to be implemented.

Q180 Nusrat Ghani: That decision was made on 27 May 2015 when the European Commission presented proposals for measures, including an emergency relocation scheme, and the scheme aimed to relocate 40,000 to other member states over the next two years. So

what update can you give on what work has been done by the Greek Government to relocate those people, working with the Commission?

Konstantinos Bikas: The last decision was that of 23 September, I think.

Nusrat Ghani: Forgive me, I have only 27 May. But can we have an update? What has happened?

Konstantinos Bikas: Yes. This decision has not been implemented up to now. Greece will locate 50,000 refugees, a very big number of people. Out of them, 30,000 will be paid for by Greece and 20,000 will have their rent supported by the European Union. But I am not aware of any new developments on that.

Q181 Nusrat Ghani: You must be very disappointed with that.

Konstantinos Bikas: Of course. As I said before, we think that these decisions should be implemented.

Q182 Nusrat Ghani: Do you feel that the European Commission is setting unrealistic aims and expectations of the Greek Government without even consulting you?

Konstantinos Bikas: I wouldn't say that. I think there is co-operation between Greece and the European Commission. There have been decisions that have been floated by the European Commission but these decisions ultimately have to be implemented by the member states.

Q183 Nusrat Ghani: Mr Jayawardena talked about the Schengen agreement. Do you think that Greece would have joined the EU or perhaps joined with an opt-out from the Schengen agreement if you had foreseen this situation?

Konstantinos Bikas: This is a counterfactual. We believe that the Schengen agreement should be implemented. We believe that we have to have controls, strict controls, outside the Schengen area, at the external borders of the European Union.

Q184 Victoria Atkins: Will Schengen survive this crisis?

Konstantinos Bikas: This is a problem. This is about the future and the future is not certain, as we know. I believe that Schengen will survive this crisis. We are working through a very severe humanitarian crisis and even though eventually some extraordinary measures have been taken but within the framework of Schengen, I believe in the end that the Schengen agreement will survive. However, we must consider the strategic situation and the political issues, and a political and diplomatic solution in Syria is of paramount importance. Vienna 1 and Vienna 2 gave us some hope. We believe that the parties, the Government, the Opposition, will start discussions by next year. We want to see a constitutional charter in Syria and then go beyond that eventually at elections. The important thing is to see the diplomatic connection, the political connection, between the crisis and the refugee flows. If the Syrian crisis is controlled, the refugee flows will stop; diminish and stop.

Q185 Victoria Atkins: We do know that there are migrants or refugees coming from not just Syria but from other areas.

Konstantinos Bikas: Of course, and that is why we need a long-term strategy because, as I said before, there were interventions that did not have the desired effects. We have to deal now with what went wrong. We have to face it. We have to cope with it. We have a dire situation. We have Iraq, Afghanistan. I don't think there are any easy answers to all these questions. I don't think anybody has any easy answers.

Q186 Victoria Atkins: There is a certain amount of scepticism, I think it is fair to say, in this country about Schengen. What do you see are the advantages of Schengen that outweigh its problems?

Konstantinos Bikas: Schengen was not created for a situation of crisis. Schengen was created to have a space that would complement the free flow of trade, capital and people. That all goes together. These are the principles, the pillars, of the common market more or less. So this was the idea and that is how it worked and I think it worked well until we reached this huge humanitarian and international crisis where now Schengen is under strain.

Q187 Victoria Atkins: So its flexibility or lack of flexibility would be a fair criticism of the system?

Konstantinos Bikas: If you take all the regulations within Schengen, there are ways and means to face extraordinary situations. So while we are working within the framework of Schengen I believe that this crisis will be faced and that in the end Schengen will continue to exist. But as I told you, this is a question about the future.

Q188 Victoria Atkins: What is the situation on the border between Greece and Macedonia?

Konstantinos Bikas: Between Greece and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, as is its constitutional name, I believe—but this is information I have from the press so please do take it as that—that there are a number of Iranians who want to enter and the FYROM authorities will not accept them. They will only accept Syrian, Iraqi and Afghan nationalities. This situation has been developing.

Q189 Chair: Last Friday, the JHA, under the chairmanship of your countryman Dimitris Avramopoulos, stated that the EU has agreed to have systematic, co-ordinated and strengthening checks on EU citizens on the external border. Why was this not happening before? Why does it take a meeting of the JHA to systematically co-ordinate checks of EU citizens crossing the border?

Konstantinos Bikas: I believe they wanted to reiterate and reaffirm the principle of Schengen but the principles were there. Due to the situation both in the field and the political situation they thought it appropriate to stress that again. This is, of course, my interpretation of the decision.

Q190 Chair: You are an expert on these matters so we accept your interpretation. Basically they just wanted to reaffirm what was happening anyway? Is that what you are saying?

Konstantinos Bikas: No. I am saying that I find it normal that under the strain of the situation they wanted to reiterate that Schengen rules be applied as they should be.

Q191 Chair: Do you agree with the Hungarian Foreign Minister that the Dublin system is dead?

Konstantinos Bikas: Our position there is that the Dublin system was not meant for a situation like that. According to the Dublin system, if in the European Union space we had since the start of the year 750,000-plus and 600,000 enter from Greece, we would have to examine the asylum applications of 600,000 people. I think that fact says for itself that something would not work.

Chair: We are coming to end of the session. Mr Loughton has the final question.

Q192 Tim Loughton: Following on from Victoria Atkins' question, you are of course right that Schengen and the free movement of labour was never designed to cope with these circumstances. Do you think they could survive if there were a facility whereby Schengen, the free movement of labour, and perhaps the Dublin Convention, could be suspended in extreme circumstances, of which this is clearly one?

Konstantinos Bikas: I do not think that this is within the framework of the Schengen regulations.

Q193 Tim Loughton: It is not. But should it be?

Konstantinos Bikas: I don't think we should we should go outside the regulations. I think we have the tools within the Schengen framework to work with the situation. That is what we believe.

Q194 Tim Loughton: Can I go on to a different subject? The clear winners out of the migrant crisis at the moment are the people traffickers. These are the people who are making money at the expense of lives and large amounts of misery. What are the Greek authorities doing to track down and prosecute some of these people traffickers and where are most of them coming from?

Konstantinos Bikas: There we need to co-operation of Turkey because these people come from Turkey. We would like to see this co-operation go ahead as quickly and diligently as possible. That is what we think.

Q195 Tim Loughton: What does that mean? Relationships with Turkey are difficult, as we know. Is that preventing greater co-operation between Greece and Turkey in apprehending these people traffickers? If they were taken out of circulation it may mean that fewer people try to make those perilous journeys across the Aegean and Mediterranean.

Konstantinos Bikas: You heard about our Prime Minister visiting the Foreign Minister of Turkey a few days ago. There was progress on a lot of issues that were discussed. Of course there are issues that are open and one of them is to have more comprehensive co-

operation with regard to tracking down on the other side of the border people who are involved in that kind of trafficking.

Q196 Tim Loughton: Presumably there are Greek citizens involved in this trafficking as well.

Konstantinos Bikas: In that case of course why should the law not apply to the Greeks who are there?

Q197 Tim Loughton: Have any of these traffickers been apprehended?

Konstantinos Bikas: Mostly the situation is in the field. There is a trafficker in Turkey who puts the people on to the boat, the boat comes to Greek waters and then they are rescued by the Greek coastguard. So they do not need anyone to wait for them there, to take them in. The system, the trafficking system, doesn't work like that. The trafficking system works in the sense that these are sea borders, there are people at sea who are in danger and practically the Greek coastguard has to take them. They don't really need a contact person, on the Greek coast, to help them.

Q198 Tim Loughton: So you don't think there are any Greek citizens involved in profiting from people trafficking?

Konstantinos Bikas: No, I did not say that exactly. I said how the system works and in that sense you do not really need contacts on the other side of the border. But if there are some people who are responsible for co-operation, I am sure that the Greek authorities are going to deal with them. But to be honest with you, I do not have any more information to give you on that.

Q199 Chair: Mr Loughton is right, isn't he? In March of this year Europol and the Greek security services acting together smashed an international people-trafficking ring in Greece. They staged 20 raids across Greece, arresting 16 suspects, seizing 280 passports and dozens of mobile phones, and found €64,000 in cash. So clearly there are some suspects in Greece as well as there being some in other countries. We are not saying Greece is responsible for them. The point that Mr Loughton was making was that this is an international problem.

Konstantinos Bikas: Absolutely. As I said from the start, if there are suspects or criminals in Greece, of course the Greek police every day apprehend criminals of Greek origin in Greece.

Q200 Tim Loughton: To come back to my point, there is a worry because there should be greater co-operation between the Greek authorities and the Turkish authorities to try to smash this thing at source. We are seeing few examples of people traffickers taken out of circulation and that does require the acquiescence of both sides of the Aegean surely.

Konstantinos Bikas: Absolutely. I very much agree with that. As I said, since the people are coming from Turkey this whole traffic system must be starting in Turkey because in order to have them transported by a boat, they get on in Turkey and are pushed over to Greece. But I agree with what you are saying.

Chair: Thank you. We have a final quick supplementary from David Burrowes then we will let you go.

Q201 Mr Burrowes: There is concern about the misuse of passports, the use of fake passports and the growing market based in Turkey for that. In particular, on, say, the island of Lesbos, there are reports of this three-track process where you have to be a Syrian family to get the 24-hour expedited process and for everyone else it takes longer. Is that not perpetuating this market, which is then going to have profound impacts on us all if more people are using fake passports to get through systems?

Konstantinos Bikas: I am sorry, I did not quite understand.

Mr Burrowes: The report at the weekend, in *The Guardian*, was about this three-track process. Syrian families are expedited within 24 hours to leave Lesbos for mainland Europe. Then below that, Syrian males, Yemenis and Somalis are separately processed and it takes a little bit longer. Then for the third category, Afghans, Iraqis, Pakistanis and others, it takes a lot longer. The suggestion is that is encouraging a market for fake passports to be obtained by that third category to try to make their way across Europe more quickly.

Konstantinos Bikas: In terms of the refugee crisis from Syria, I understand that our thought is to try first to help those who are fleeing from a situation of war whereas in the other situations of course they can be in some danger or in some state but their situation is not deemed as urgent as the Syrian one. What would be the way to get out of this trap? Would we have them all in one queue? What would that change?

Q202 Mr Burrowes: It is a question to you, whether in particular the defined three-track process is encouraging this market of false passports.

Konstantinos Bikas: In situations like that I believe that you always have some people trying to find false passports to enter.

Q203 Chair: But we can't distinguish, can we, between someone posing as a terrorist and someone who is a refugee? It is very difficult to do that, especially, as Mr Burrowes says, if they go and pay for a fake Syrian passport.

Konstantinos Bikas: When we talk to people—and also there are briefers coming from many countries, also from the United Kingdom to help—we can distinguish whether the person is a Syrian or a Somali or an Afghani or something; that we can distinguish. But also in the past before the refugee crisis, if there was someone trying to enter the European Union and that person was not recognised as a terrorist and wanted to enter as an immigrant, there were many ways to do that.

Q204 Chair: Two very final questions, one with your previous hat on as a very distinguished head of the security services in Greece. Are we going to be able to find out more about Daesh and defeat them? Do you think they are defeatable?

Konstantinos Bikas: Now you are talking to me not in my capacity as ambassador so I—

Chair: No. Your previous experience.

Konstantinos Bikas: My overall experience, and this is everybody's, to be honest with you, I do not know the exact facts of that organisation, military strength and all these things. From what I understand from responsible politicians, they are talking about a long-term struggle, a generational struggle. But for a niche that I do not myself have knowledge of, I would not like to go into that.

Q205 Chair: All right. In respect of the current climate, the potential bombing of Syria by the United Kingdom, the bombing of Syria at the moment by France and Russia and what happened today with the Russian aircraft being brought down in Turkish airspace, will that increase the problem or decrease the problem for Greece, if more countries take part in the bombing of Syria?

Konstantinos Bikas: I would think it better for me not to comment on those remarks, if you will allow me to do that.

Q206 Chair: Spoken like a true diplomat. Well done. Ambassador, thank you very much for coming. At some stage in the future the Committee will come and visit Greece. We will not do so at the moment but we are very grateful for all the co-operation that you have shown to this Committee on all our previous visits. Please keep us updated on matters of fact.

Konstantinos Bikas: I want also to thank you, Mr Chairman, and the other honourable members of the Committee for that co-operation and for having me here to express some of the issues that my country is facing. Of course you are most welcome to contact me again with any other information or to facilitate any trip of yours to my country.

Chair: Thank you very much.