



Oral evidence: [The fight against ISIL: the UK's role](#),

HC 683

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Members present: Crispin Blunt (Chair), Mr Mark Hendrick, Daniel Kawczynski, Yasmin Qureshi; Andrew Rosindell; Nadhim Zahawi

Questions 1-40

Witnesses: **Lina Khatib**, Senior Research Associate, Arab Reform Initiative, **Chris Phillips**, Associate Fellow, Chatham House, **Neil Quilliam**, Acting Head, Middle East and North Africa Programme, Chatham House, and **Michael Stephens**, Research Fellow for Middle East Studies, Royal United Services Institute, gave evidence.

Chair: Order. Welcome to this sitting of the Foreign Affairs Committee's inquiry into the fight against ISIL and the United Kingdom's role in that. I would like to welcome the witnesses for this afternoon. Apologies for House of Commons business having delayed our start. I know that you have to leave early, Mr Stephens, as indeed do I, although I don't imagine it is for the same reason. Thank you all very much for coming. Would you like to introduce yourselves for the record, starting with Mr Stephens?

Michael Stephens: My name is Michael Stephens. I am the Research Fellow for Middle East Studies at the Royal United Services Institute, and I am the head of our office in Qatar.

Lina Khatib: I am Lina Khatib. I am a Senior Research Associate at the Arab Reform Initiative. I am also affiliated with SOAS, University of London.

Neil Quilliam: I am Neil Quilliam. I am the Acting Head of the Middle East and North Africa Programme at Chatham House.

Chris Phillips: I am Chris Phillips. I am a senior lecturer in the international relations of the Middle East at Queen Mary University of London. I am also an Associate Fellow at Chatham House with Neil.

Q1 Chair: Thank you very much indeed. Given that we are now doing this as a panel of four, rather than two panels of two, don't all feel the need to follow up an answer if your analysis is broadly the same. We would be extremely interested in where your analysis is different from each other's, and hopefully there are differing perspectives among members of the panel.

In the Syria vote and the debate around the issue in the run-up to Christmas and the new year, it was key that the current set of peace talks to end the Syrian conflict, which would be vital to enable the fight against ISIL, actually looked to many people as though it had a real prospect of success. Is that right? Do we think these talks are going to succeed where previous ones have failed? Are there still optimists about these talks left around?

Lina Khatib: Before we get to the talks, we should think about whether talks will happen in the first place, at least as originally intended, on 25 January. Looking at the situation on the ground in Syria, especially with the behaviour of Russia, I am not confident that Russia is indeed serious about the negotiations taking place. Also, there are the messages sent by the regime, particularly about the composition of the Syrian opposition delegation, with the regime saying, “We will not negotiate with terrorists”—as we know, the regime is very selective about who it labels as terrorists. Because of all this, we are not sure at the moment whether the negotiations will go ahead on the 25th.

Michael Stephens: I am going to be a bit of an echo chamber for that. One of the things that has disappointed me the most over the Christmas period and leading into the new year has been this spat about what does or does not constitute a terrorist organisation. On that front, I’m afraid to say that the backing parties have clearly not been able to demonstrate any co-ordination about what they do and don’t believe to be groups which constitute terrorist organisations. The responsibility was supposed to be handed to Jordan to construct a list of 160 or so groups, which I think is moving into the land of the farcical.

If you look at, for example, the Iranian reaction to the Riyadh discussions in the middle of December, it was very clear that some of the groups that Saudi Arabia views as legitimate were immediately struck off the list by both Iran and Russia as terrorist organisations and therefore not fit to sit at the table, and of course Saudi Arabia’s reaction to the choice of certain parties aligned to the Assad regime has been similar. So before we have even sat down and had a discussion, we see both sides seeking to delegitimise each other and their various proxy groups, and that, I’m afraid to say, is leading to the sort of quagmire and impasse in negotiations that we are seeing.

Lina Khatib: I will add a small footnote, which is that, as far as I know, the Syrian opposition has not set any conditions about the composition of the regime delegation, whereas, as you know, the regime has made the statement about not negotiating with terrorists, so in fact it is the regime side that is putting the preconditions rather than both camps.

Chris Phillips: The current peace proposal that has been put forward is based on UN Resolution 2254 and was agreed in Parliament in December. The whole premise of it is based on the idea that the external supporters of the different factions within the Syrian civil war will all work towards that peace agreement—they are all members of the International Syria Support Group—but of course we are now in a position where several of those members are not even talking to one another at present. Since recent developments with Saudi Arabia and Iran, we have seen the ending of diplomatic representation of several of those members with Iran, which is another key member of that group. So given that the entire peace process is founded on the idea of those external actors agreeing on this solution, and the fact that they are not even talking to one another, I support the points made by my colleagues and agree that it seems highly unlikely that the timetable as set out will go ahead.

Q2 Daniel Kawczynski: Just to press you on that point, some media reports indicate that the Saudis and the Iranians would still be willing to engage in this process, despite their own bilateral difficulties. Could you comment on that?

Chris Phillips: Perhaps my colleagues, who specialise on the Gulf more, will focus on that.

Michael Stephens: Yes. I have been considering this point in that both sides were very quick to give Secretary Kerry reassurances that they would not be derailing the forthcoming talks and the progress made on Vienna as a result of their bilateral disagreements. However, I think that is putting the cart before the horse.

One of the reasons that Saudi Arabia and Iran are at loggerheads is because of their situation in Syria, Yemen and Iraq, where they have increasingly upped the stakes by backing various different factions to the detriment of the other side, leading to a more polarised, black-and-white narrative, which has then created an environment in which tensions are more likely to flare up and something like the killing of Sheikh Nimr becomes seen as a sectarian-motivated, divisive tool rather than an issue of law. The reassurances that both sides have offered do not make me feel much comfort at all, because actually it was their wrangling over the last four years on the Syria file that has upped tensions considerably in the last four or five years—that alongside some other factors.

Q3 Daniel Kawczynski: Is there anything that you estimate that the United Kingdom can do in conjunction with the UN to encourage them to continue dialogue and this process?

Michael Stephens: One factor about the break in bilateral ties has been that it is in multilateral forums where the Iranians and the Saudis now have to sit and talk, and it is the only arena in which they can put forward their various viewpoints on the region, so actually there is extra stress on this particular dynamic in Syria to get Saudi Arabia and Iran talking. That first has to be understood: this really is the only mechanism left. There is a process in Yemen, which I am afraid is pretty moribund at the moment, so really Syria is the only game in town. It has to be understood that this is a pretty critical dynamic.

The UK has a role that it can play here, particularly on the Saudi Arabian side, to sit there and try to explain that some sort of diplomatic movement forward following the Riyadh conference and the progress made in Vienna would be extremely beneficial not just to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia but to the United Kingdom and its allies as well. If we are looking at a larger framework of de-escalation of conflicts, Syria is the main pathway through which the Saudis can start to see a more constructive pathway towards talking with Iran. That does not necessarily mean that we have to get the Saudis to agree whether Iran is a good thing or a bad thing, or Hezbollah is a good thing or a bad thing. Those things can be left for later, but what I do think is this: it is clear that in Riyadh, they are very married to the idea of Bashar al-Assad having to go and having to step down, and that is something that has been translated into the groups they back. I think there has to be some flexibility here.

A year ago, the Saudis were looking like they were quite flexible on this issue. When they were in discussions with the Russians throughout last year, before the Russian intervention, the Saudis appeared to be looking out for pathways whereby Assad and his

regime could be made to step down and transition slowly out of power. I am not sure that that flexibility is there. The communication from the United Kingdom has to be to get back to the point of flexibility they were at 12 months ago.

Q4 Chair: Is there a deliberate Saudi strategy to drive Iran back out of the framework of the international community discussions in the ISSG by provocation, in the sense of the execution of Sheikh Nimr and everything else they have been doing? Is that part of what Saudi Arabia is up to?

Michael Stephens: That is taking it a bit far. I think the Saudis realised that macro forces in the region are bringing Iran slowly back into the fold, particularly following the agreement on the nuclear file, but also on co-operation between Iranian-backed elements in Iraq and the fight against ISIS; they also assisted the Kurds in 2014. So there are some files on which the Iranians have been sort of coming in from the cold.

The Saudis know that they cannot reverse that—they cannot reverse the fact that Iran is seen by some as an ally in the fight against ISIS. What they can do, however, is try to show the world that Iran is not an actor that can be trusted and that Iranian actors on the ground, such as Hezbollah, Kata'ib Hezbollah, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq—all these players are actors that cannot be trusted in the international arena. Where Saudi Arabia is very clearly upset is by the influence of Iranian proxies—not necessarily Iran itself, but Iranian proxies. Hezbollah, for example, operating freely across the Lebanese-Syria border worries them greatly. The fact that Hezbollah could be there ad infinitum, without end, following a Syrian settlement, greatly disturbs them, and the same in Iraq, where they believe that Shi'a militias are strangling the Government of Baghdad.

Saudi Arabia's tactics here are not necessarily to spark a sectarian war, but they are to show Iran as a player that has little right to be pushing its weight around in the international arena and a player that breaks international law consistently and cannot be trusted. That is more where they are going with it.

Q5 Chair: What should the United Kingdom be doing to try to address that? Do we support Saudi behaviour? Do we think this is a rational act by Saudi Arabia which we support, or should we be acting in some way to ameliorate their behaviour?

Michael Stephens: Are we talking specifically with regard to Syria, or in the larger regional great game that is going on here?

Chair: Do both.

Michael Stephens: Okay. I will take the great game first. It is important to note that in this escalation of tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran, Iran was the actor that broke international law and the 1961 Vienna convention by violating the sovereignty of the embassy, so in that respect and given that we ourselves did the same thing in November 2011, there is a precedent for Saudi Arabia to break off diplomatic relations. That is not new; that is not unheard of. It is obviously not the first time that Iran has conducted its behaviour in such a way, and to that extent I am not particularly convinced that what happened two weeks ago was an accident that the Iranians could not have foreseen. To that extent, of course, the Saudis had a legitimate right to break relations.

What we, as the United Kingdom, should be doing, however, is trying to say to the Saudis, “Listen: you should not be putting pressure on other countries that wish to maintain their relationships with Iran, to the detriment of their own national security calculations.” By that, I am thinking specifically of Oman; Qatar is also in a bit of a conundrum; Dubai as well, and Kuwait. Saudi Arabia obviously wants legitimacy for its position. It wants to know that it is not alone facing Iran, so it has been spending the past couple of months building coalitions against terrorism and trying to get as many countries on board to follow its diplomatic line. The United Kingdom should not be made to choose a side. We should recognise that the Saudi Arabians had a legal right to do what they did under the convention of 1961, but at the same time we should not be pressured into being overly hostile towards Iran as a result of that break in relations.

On the Syria file, it is hard to quantify how the Saudi red lines will shift as a result of the break in relations. I think that will be made more clear on the 25th, when we note whether certain Syrian opposition groups will be more flexible with regard to their basic negotiating positions. Lina can identify those better than I can. What I think is critical is that diplomatic momentum from the United Kingdom, as a Security Council member, can be used to make both Saudi Arabia and the Qataris, actually—I think this is important as well; they are still in the game—understand that there has to be forward momentum on these negotiations. There cannot be simple token statements that “We will co-operate on the Geneva-Vienna process and at the same time harden our line with regard to support for militias inside Syria.”

There is a lot of communication that can be done on that front, in which we understand the concerns of Saudi Arabia, we understand that they are worried about Iranian influence in Syria, but, at the same time, they have to be made to understand that there has got to be some compromise here, and their break in bilateral relations—we understand why that has happened, but we don’t necessarily support every action that the Saudis have done in that regard.

Lina Khatib: On Syria, a key problem for Saudi Arabia is that it needs reassurances from the international community regarding its own position not just vis-à-vis Iran but more generally. It sees that Iran—this is the view from Riyadh—has got more leeway than Saudi Arabia is comfortable with, and Saudi Arabia wants reassurances. So I see the reaction of Saudi Arabia to Iran at the moment as a product of what I call a mixture of paranoia, apprehension and loss of patience with the behaviour of Iran and its allies.

When it comes to Syria in particular, one thing that is missing is the bottom line—the agenda for the talks that will hopefully take place at some point, if not 25 January then at some point in the future. One of the biggest mistakes of the Geneva talks is that the talks started without the agenda having been agreed in advance. This is something that worries Saudi Arabia, because it sees that the opposition might be dragged to talks that don’t have a firm agenda and that end up hurting the opposition’s credibility because of repeating the same mistakes as Geneva.

Now, when it comes to the position of Assad, there is a nuance that we should pay attention to, which is that when the Syrian regime talks about negotiations its ultimate aim is to form what it calls a national unity Government, whereas the Syrian opposition wants a transitional government. These are two different things, because a national unity Government

as defined by the regime would in a way retain the regime and give some token governmental positions to the opposition. The opposition does not want that.

I don't think the key issue is the departure of Assad, because even with a transitional Government, the Syrian opposition and Saudi Arabia are open to a scenario that would have some form of compromise; but ultimately they want Assad to go, and that is something that they keep stressing. But even Iran is not married to the idea of Assad staying President either, and they have communicated this both in public and private on a number of occasions, so I don't think that this is the issue. What I know is that Saudi Arabia and the Syrian opposition are definitely serious about the negotiations going ahead, because they have a stake in them. At the moment we know that the Syrian opposition is indeed forming a negotiating delegation to go and talk to the regime.

Q6 Chair: Can we just turn on that point about the delegation. The Kurds have been excluded. That is surely a serious error, isn't it?

Michael Stephens: Outside the Gulf the Syrian Kurds are my main focus. The Syrian Kurds are not necessarily as angry as was made out about being excluded from the Riyadh process. The conference held in the Syrian city of Derik in parallel with the Riyadh initiative and also conversations in Damascus was in the works for a year. They had planned to form a joint communiqué for some time and had been working hard to do that. Of course, now they have the added diplomatic weight of Haytham Manah who has links, of course, into Damascus and has presented a package in which, as a total representation of the opposition, the Syrian Kurds, or at least the Syrian Democratic Council, would get about 17% of the total seats. Now, there are certain red lines, which the Kurds have expressed in public and to me in private that they will not accept being crossed. One is that they have, very proudly in their eyes, established a self-governing model in the area from Hasakah all the way across to the Euphrates river and in a small enclave in the north-west called Afrin. They are not willing to negotiate the status of that government or to sit at the table with any party that advocates for the removal of that system of government. That is not to say that they are against a unified Syria. They are very happy to be part of a unified Syria, but a Syria that recognises that the system of governance that they have established is to be maintained.

They have also been clear that they are quite disturbed by the level of support that Turkey gives to certain actors. Bear in mind that when you talk about Syrian Kurds, the main bogeyman is always Turkey. They are very concerned about the position of groups such as Ahrar al-Sham, the Jaish al-Fatah and their various guises controlling Idlib, Aleppo and the regions to the north-west. In their view, ISIS and Ahrar al-Sham are simply two sides of the same coin, and they have expressed to me that they will not sit at the table with any delegation that includes Ahrar al-Sham, which unfortunately brings them into some conflict with the Saudis. The Saudis were very clearly trying to engage Ahrar al-Sham, as were other Gulf actors and the Turks. This is something that the Kurds feel that they cannot accept.

So they are actually sitting in a strange position where they have the legitimacy of the international community because their YPG forces—Syrian democratic forces as they call them—are receiving quite extensive support from the American air force and now from us. On the political level, they also seem to be looking towards Russia for some support and they have indicated that the Russians have looked favourably on including them in a final negotiation process. So they are sitting in between the two major axes but, at the same time,

on the regional level they are not really friends with anybody. It puts them in a very strange position where they are not willing to compromise because they believe they have the support of the great powers, but at the same time they are willing to consider being part of a unified Syria. Unpick that conundrum, if you will.

Chair: Right, before we go on to that, I will invite Andrew Rosindell to ask the next question. I am now going to surrender the Chair to Mr Hendrick as I need to go next door to ask a not dissimilar set of questions to the Prime Minister as a member of the Liaison Committee. Thank you very much for the pre-brief.

[MARK HENDRICK *in the Chair*]

Chair: The next question will be asked by Andrew.

Q7 Andrew Rosindell: Is there a risk of the Syrian Government actually boycotting the talks altogether?

Lina Khatib: The Syrian opposition say that they have faith that the Syrian Government are going to participate. They say that it is most likely that Faisal Muqdad and Bashar Jaafari will be the leaders of the Syrian regime delegation. At the moment, I know that the Syrian opposition are indeed giving the regime a chance. They are going ahead on the assumption that the regime is going to participate. Personally, however, I do not see the regime as taking this seriously. As I said, the regime's pre-conditions are meant to derail the negotiation process.

The regime still thinks that it can rely on Russian support to get away with holding at least a small territory of Syria—the regime currently only controls 18% of Syrian territory—and consolidating its presence there. It seems to me, if you look at the trajectory of activities on the ground, that the regime, with Russian support, is trying to eliminate the key leaders of the Syrian opposition on the ground. We have seen the assassination of Zahran Alloush on Christmas day and the assassination of one of the leaders of Ahrar al-Sham last week. This seems to me like an escalation that has come about after the Riyadh conference.

It seems to me that this is an attempt at perhaps acknowledging that for once maybe Saudi Arabia is serious about the negotiations going ahead. As I said, Saudi Arabia has a stake in this because it wants to be the highest authority in Syria. So it wants this to succeed because this is in its own foreign relations interest. The regime, on the other hand, and Russia are behaving in ways that would lead to a scenario whereby they can say there is no one left to negotiate with in the first place.

Q8 Andrew Rosindell: Did you say that the Syrian regime would participate in the talks but would have the intention of holding on to control of 20% of the land mass of what was Syria? Is that what you are saying? Are they trying to split that off and create their own area?

Lina Khatib: From my conversations with the Syrian opposition in Riyadh, they say that they believe that the regime will send a delegation, most likely led by Muqdad and Jaafari.

Q9 Andrew Rosindell: Do you think that is their intention, to create their own region that they control permanently?

Lina Khatib: Personally, I see the regime strategy as not having changed much, frankly, from the very beginning. That is to show the international community that Syria has two options: the regime, or ISIS and chaos. By weakening the Syrian opposition, by trying to break down the groups that have signed the Riyadh communiqué and also tactical withdrawals that are allowing ISIS to take over certain areas, with the reversal taking place of ISIS also handing over to the regime key areas in Damascus and the route to the Zahle area: all that makes me believe that the regime ultimately wants to hold territory while leaving the rest of Syria to be run over by ISIS, while weakening the opposition to the extent that it becomes irrelevant.

Then the regime can appeal to the international community for help in fighting terrorism. That is one of the reasons why the regime has always insisted that any agenda for talks should be about security and terrorism, whereas the Syrian opposition initially said, no, the talks should be about a transitional Government and eventually said, actually terrorism is also a concern, so why not run the two tracks in parallel. As you can see, the opposition is being a lot more pragmatic and engaging, at least giving its intention to give the regime a chance, but I am not seeing the same kind of behaviour from the regime side.

Chris Phillips: Just to add a little to that, when we talk about 20% of the territory, that is still a heavily populated part of the country. A lot of the territory lost is desert area and uninhabitable and so on. They are quite keen on, not detaching a heartland area, but having a viable statelet as such in place, as Lina suggested, until such a time when it hopes the international community will recognise that it is the only option, and maybe help it secure the rest of Syria. I think that is the idea.

With regard to the Government's role within the peace talks, at the moment you need to look at the model they set in the Geneva talks at the beginning of 2014. That was to give the appearance of engaging in the talks, sending a delegation, but when there actively spoiling it. What happened in those talks was, yes, they met with the opposition but they just hurled insults at them all the time and were not willing to budge at all.

The people who were sent by the regime were not actually power brokers; they weren't members of the security forces or Assad's inner circles. The people being talked about are effectively figureheads without a great deal of negotiating power to offer anything serious. That is the kind of engagement we are likely to see from them.

The big question mark about these talks that was not present at the Geneva II talks in January and February 2014, is Iran and Russia's position. Iran was not invited to the Geneva II talks in 2014; they have been invited to these. Russia has now committed far more to the fight in Syria, having put forward its own military resources and sent its air force, as we all know about. The question is whether they are going to put any serious pressure on the regime to engage in a way that they clearly did not place on them in Geneva II.

Lina would clearly suggest that they are not going to, but that is the unknown at the moment. It is whether or not that kind of pressure is going to be present on the regime to take them seriously, as clearly did not happen in Geneva II. Clearly, the regime does not want to engage. I think Lina is absolutely right. That is their view. They want to keep going, wait it out and hope that eventually there will only be the regime and ISIS, and the international community will have to choose. The question is whether Iran and Russia will put pressure on them to change that calculus.

Neil Quilliam: I wish I could contradict my colleagues, but I can't. I am going to have to reinforce this point and make it a little harder as well. One thing that this regime is very good at—like the predecessor, Bashar's father—is waiting things out. There is a really good book on Syria called "The Wisdom of Syria's Waiting Game". They are experts at waiting things out—waiting for the context to change. If we go back to post 1991, when the Syrians agreed to the Madrid peace conference, it took another 20 years before the talks advanced anywhere significantly. Why I am saying that is that while Bashar can agree to these talks and put a few functionaries in these negotiations, he is waiting for the context in the region to change, exactly as Lina said. He knows that the international community have the difficult task of untangling ISIS from Nusra and from Ahrar al-Sham. Those are very complex issues that are going to really challenge the international community, so while we get to grips with that, he can just sit there, hang out and wait another two or three years, with the Russian and Iranian support. It cannot be overestimated how much that Russian support has put a marker or a block behind Assad. So I see the regime as absolutely going to engage, but with no end sign.

Q10 Andrew Rosindell: Going back to the peace talks themselves, to what extent will the Syrian Government's participation depend on the make-up of the opposition that take part? Will they seek to influence exactly who sits, as part of the peace talks, opposing the regime, or will they have to accept whoever is chosen?

Lina Khatib: They are trying to influence the composition of the delegation—indeed, they have said that in public—but the delegation or the Syrian opposition higher authority formed in Riyadh are refusing any intervention, not just from the regime but even from the UN. They are saying, "We do not want anybody to choose who represents the Syrians." Therefore, when it comes to the regime accepting or not accepting, I think the regime will most likely use this as an excuse, if they are not going to participate in any negotiations, by saying, "We regard some of these participants as illegitimate."

There is one thing I want to add here, because I know that Ahrar al-Sham has been invoked a number of times and there seems to be a bit of misunderstanding in the way the dynamics in Riyadh were reported, which raises an important point about the future of this group. As we know, Ahrar al-Sham is an Islamist militant group, very influential in Syria. It had an alliance with Jabhat al-Nusra under the umbrella of Jaish al-Fatah. When it came to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia in particular put a lot of pressure on Ahrar al-Sham to come to the Riyadh meeting and to sign the Riyadh communiqué, and Ahrar al-Sham did indeed send somebody who represented it and signed, but what happened inside Syria is that a certain wing, if you like, within Ahrar al-Sham made a statement saying, "We do not recognise the Riyadh communiqué and we are against it." Some people interpreted this as Ahrar al-Sham having changed its mind, but actually what is happening is that the group is splintering, so what we are seeing with this Riyadh process, if anything, is that it's like a sieve: it is telling

us who is potentially pragmatic, who can be rehabilitated, who has the potential to renounce extremism and join the political process and who does not.

This is actually a very good way to try to weaken these Islamist militant groups on the ground. Instead of targeting them through air strikes, for example, which is more of a top-down approach, this is a bottom-up approach that is actually pushing them to either choose the pragmatic line or show their hardline colours. If this process can be supported, it is the best way to allow moderate Syrians to lead the political process, as opposed to keeping the radicals powerful on the ground.

Q11 Chair: Can we move on to another question? The International Syria Support Group recently asked Jordan to complete a list of terrorist groups to be excluded from any potential ceasefire. I think Mr Stephens made reference to it earlier; it was a very long list. The list has been criticised by a number of ISSG member countries. Given the different views about which groups are terrorists, do you feel that this task is doomed to failure? I will ask Mr Stephens first, because I am conscious of the fact that he has to leave shortly, and because he did raise the issue of the list of terrorist groups earlier.

Michael Stephens: I have been able to push my meeting back 10 minutes, Mr Chairman, so I have got a little bit more time if that is necessary. I have to say that this wrangling over what does and does not constitute a terrorist organisation is taking up a lot of diplomatic oxygen, when it could be used for finding methods of compromise in other areas. It is unfortunately becoming the mirror by which we judge much larger conflicts within the region, which are being played out in Syria and to some extent in Iraq.

I think that it is to the United Kingdom's detriment to be caught up in defining, outside the parameters of associations with al-Qaeda, associations with extremist organisations like ISIS or even Hezbollah, which is still considered a terrorist organisation—it is important for us not to be moved on that front. I think our current categorisations are adequate in defining those organisations which are against our national interest. I do not think it is in our interest to be swayed by discussions over who is and who is not a terrorist organisation. As far as I can see, it simply happens to be falling along ideological lines as to who you do and do not define as a terrorist.

Not only that, but it does play very strongly into President Putin's and Bashar al-Assad's hands to keep talking about democracy versus terrorism, because, frankly, that is a bit of a misnomer. If we are going to look at war crimes and who has been charged with committing atrocities, I am afraid to say there is a long list on both sides of things that I have worked on, going right back to 2011, where I can give you the name of a group and give you a list of things that they have done in what town, and we could be there ad infinitum. We need to try not to be distracted by this, otherwise we will be here trying to define who is a terrorist for the next two years, and we will never get anywhere.

Q12 Chair: Isn't the definition you have just given—some organisation or group that acts against our national interest—

Michael Stephens: From our perspective, yes.

Chair: From a UK perspective.

Michael Stephens: From a UK perspective, there is already quite a defined, adequate list of organisations.

Q13 Chair: Okay, but we are discussing this in an international context, with the discussions that will be taking place, hopefully, in Vienna in the future. How other nation states see terrorism might be something else.

Michael Stephens: The problem is, Mr Chairman, that you are immediately then straying into the realm of the political. If you agree to say that someone like Ahrar al-Sham is a terrorist organisation—they may be Salafi, they may have an ideology which we dislike deeply, and they may have actually had individuals who have committed terrorist acts. Well, we could literally discount almost every single opposition group and every single pro-regime militia that exists on the ground at that point. It becomes reductivist ad absurdum.

Q14 Chair: I accept the point; I was only questioning your definition.

Michael Stephens: The definition, from our perspective, should be to maintain the categories which already exist and to understand that there are players which have their differences, but the position of what constitutes a terrorist organisation for many regional players is ideologically based and, I am afraid to say, sectarian-based

Q15 Chair: All right. I think, by implication, you are saying that groups should be included that some of the participants in the discussions may themselves regard as terrorist groups.

Michael Stephens: Absolutely. The problem is that you will not get full consensus on that.

Lina Khatib: That is why Jordan has given up on the task. As you know, Jordan had been given the task of coming up with a list of terrorist organisations, and it has now publicly announced that the task is too big and that Jordan does not want to do it. That is because Jordan is recognising that actually, this opens a can of worms that is not in Jordan's own national interests. The example I gave about Ahrar al-Sham gives you an example of how complicated the situation is.

Instead of looking at the situation in terms of terrorist or non-terrorist, what we have to look at is pragmatism and evolution. Groups are not fixed in time; they change and evolve. This is what we should push for: processes that act at the level of membership of organisations to push them in a particular direction, not fix them in time, because actually that is hurting us. Ultimately, when you list a group as a terrorist organisation, you are in a way giving it no choice but to be that, whereas the process of engagement that Saudi Arabia and the opposition are engaging in at the moment is, I think, the right way forward. We have to remember that it was Russia and the regime which pushed the UN to come

up with the idea of listing opposition organisations basically as terrorists because they want to lessen the burden on themselves. So ultimately, the whole issue is very politically motivated.

Q16 Chair: I take it from what you and Mr Stephens have just said that you do not accept Mr Lavrov's definition of a terrorist. Would Mr Phillips or Mr Quilliam like to come in on that before I bring in Yasmin?

Neil Quilliam: I would just add two words that we probably all deal with: complex and binary. The situation, as we would describe it, is extremely complex and very fluid, but it is portrayed by some of the regional players as binary—it is terrorist or not terrorist, and that is not a helpful typology.

Chris Phillips: I would just add that the west, or the UK, already stray from these lines anyway. We are effectively allied with the PYD, who are an affiliate of the PKK, which the EU itself designates as a terrorist organisation, so we are not really even sticking to our own definitions in the broader sense for reasons of pragmatism. I think that answers itself.

Q17 Yasmin Qureshi: Hearing what you are all saying, it strikes me that it is fair to say that, with what has been happening in that part of the Middle East for a number of years, not only are there “terrorist organisations”—I entirely agree with you, who is a terrorist and who isn't?—but a lot of the regional players themselves have not come into this conflict with clean hands. In fact, virtually every single person, country or organisation in dispute comes not with clean hands. Everyone's hands are dirty along the way; the question is to what extent their hands are dirty. Therefore, in any conflict such as this, saying who can and cannot participate is counterproductive. This seems to be what you are saying. Some people like myself and others feel that in any event, so what is the way forward? How do we then convince the main regional players to stop playing these silly games in the end? Whether it is Russia, Iran—all these countries—they have all been playing games and siding one group of people against others, and these groups have been flourishing. What is a constructive way forward?

Michael Stephens: It depends how much the United Kingdom wants to cash its diplomatic cheques, and this goes back to Daniel's earlier question. We have been very close to the Gulf states for many years. It is time that we opened a discussion which says that there are elements of the regime that you may consider illegitimate, which, I am afraid to say, will be represented at the negotiating table. In response, there will be certain militias that you have hosted in Riyadh that will have political representation, perhaps under Riad Hijab or some other formulation. I am not going to say that it would be successful. We may be on a hiding to nothing because, I am afraid to say—as Neil said—the region is becoming more binary, not less. I am afraid that two weeks ago really did not help with that categorisation, but that is the reality we are in.

I believe that the international community, and particularly the permanent powers of the Security Council, have begun at least to find a mechanism—unlike 2012 and 2013—where we can all sit down and agree on basic principles. I am afraid that it then requires us to give instructions to our diplomats to start dragging our guys along with them. On our side of the table lies Saudi Arabia—whether we would like that or not, it is the case. On the Russian side of the table lies Iran—whether they are good allies is another question, but in the binary world that we live in, that is the formulation.

In that respect, it does not just require the nuanced work that we have been doing for years. Gareth Bayley and his predecessor did a lot of work with the Syrian opposition over

many years and that is not to be criticised, but what I think needs to happen is more higher level weight put to it. In that respect, we are talking tier 1 here. The Prime Minister needs to lend more weight to the initiative. If you look at the amount of work Secretary Kerry is putting in, and Vladimir Putin and Lavrov as well, we need to be matching that and starting to try and push forward a less binary way.

Q18 Chair: That point has been well made. Mr Phillips, do you want to come in briefly?

Chris Phillips: We need to be realistic about how much leverage the UK and the west in general has over the situation. If you are looking specifically at the Syrian civil war, effectively you have four actors: the regime, ISIS, the Kurds and the various rebel groups. Within that, the west's leverage extends to some of the rebel groups and, to an extent now, to the leading Kurdish groups, but is only limited.

Of all the players involved and all the external actors you are talking about, really the west's leverage is pretty limited, so in terms of influencing that conflict directly the way in which any influence will be placed will be on the external actors, which is a bit like what Michael was saying. In many of these debates about whether we should recognise which group should be allowed in, it is not really for the UK to be involved and I am a little confused as to why, as Lina suggested, Secretary Kerry made such a big point about this when in many ways it is not his place, and certainly not the UK's place, to do that.

As Michael was saying, the role of the western actors and the UK needs to be much more nuanced in leveraging the pressure it has over its key allies, and not just Saudi Arabia, by the way, but Turkey. Turkey is probably the most important actor in Syria today, certainly on the rebel side, and more important than Saudi Arabia. A lot of what it is doing, especially in the fight with ISIS and so on, and a lot of what is happening does not seem to have much attention on it. A lot of UK diplomatic pressure should be on its allies in Turkey to get more involved in the fight against ISIS and, of course, to play a more constructive role in the Syrian peace talks.

Q19 Chair: I think that's true at the diplomatic level, but at the political level in terms of us in Parliament making a decision on whether to support air strikes on Syria, what is going on on the ground, and which groups are involved and would act in a way we would them to, is very pertinent.

On 14 November, the ISSG called for a ceasefire to be implemented as soon as peace talks begin. Do you believe that this is sufficiently ambitious, or would it be better to aim for an immediate ceasefire, and what do you think are the possibilities of a ceasefire in the immediate coming weeks and months?

Lina Khatib: Very slim. Before a military ceasefire can happen, certain things should take place, such as stopping air bombing targeting civilians, lifting sieges and allowing humanitarian aid to reach the people who need it.

The militant groups in Syria at the moment are not asking for military activities against them to stop. They are asking—I am talking about the military groups on the ground—for attacks against civilians to stop. They are becoming very politically mature, as far as I can see, in terms of recognising that as militant groups in a war they are, so to speak,

a legitimate target, whereas civilians are never a legitimate target in a conflict. Therefore, having these measures in place would allow for a ceasefire whereby all the military groups would stop fighting one another. But unless we see these measures happening, I don't see a ceasefire being realistic.

Michael Stephens: Just quickly before I go, I think the most realistic scenario is partial ceasefires geographically located in areas of dire humanitarian need or in areas where, for example, there have been long-standing contacts between opposition actors and regime forces, such as happened in Zabadani where the Iranians played a hugely important role, but now Madaya, which is right next door, is starving to death. There is hyperlocality here to do with areas that are suffering grievously and where there has been a ceasefire which has held. In that particular incident, I'm afraid it comes back to my point—I hate to sound like a broken record—about getting some of the major players backing these groups fighting on the ground to negotiate between them. There it has been partially successful.

Here we have to be a bit humble. If you're going to insist on a complete ceasefire across Syria, not even the Kurds will adhere to that. It's just not going to happen. What we can do is accept that there will be outbreaks of violence and a number of incidents across the country, but that does not necessarily derail good will, which is building up.

Chris Phillips: I repeat the point that the various signatories to resolution 2254 expressed their support for “a nationwide ceasefire in Syria, which the ISSG has committed to support and assist in implementing”. Many members of the ISSG are not doing that at the moment. As was mentioned, Russia is actively bombing parts of Syria and so on. It is very difficult to see how a nationwide ceasefire can possibly take place when the signatories to that UN resolution are actively involved in violent acts in Syria.

Chair: The view seems to be that everybody is quite pessimistic about the possibility of a ceasefire.

Q20 Daniel Kawczynski: Just before I ask my questions, Mr Stephens, who has gone now, seemed to imply that some of these countries are being forced by Saudi Arabia to sever links with Iran—I think he noted the United Arab Emirates among others. Would you like to comment on that? I generally tend to think that these countries are doing it off their own bat, rather than with any specific pressure from Saudi Arabia.

Neil Quilliam: I am not sure that he meant that it was direct pressure. But Saudi Arabia, as the largest group among the GCC states, would have an understanding with its GCC members. We saw earlier last year that the UAE and Bahrain withdrew their ambassadors to Qatar because of that spat in the relationship. It would be common that they would see their interests aligned primarily with Saudi Arabia. It is interesting that you pick out the UAE because, of course, it has only downgraded its relationship primarily because of the make-up of the Emirates. Dubai would be much more forward leaning in maintaining its relationship with Iran as opposed to somewhere such as Bahrain, which is more intimately connected to Saudi Arabia. Bear in mind that Saudi Arabia did put its troops across the causeway back in 2012.

Q21 Daniel Kawczynski: These are very much sovereign nations that guard their independence from their larger neighbour of Saudi Arabia. I hope you can concur that these

are independent decisions off their own bats, rather than with any undue influence from Riyadh.

Neil Quilliam: They are independent sovereign nations and they will be acting in their own national interests but also in the collective interests of the GCC, of which Saudi Arabia is the largest, and probably most, important member.

Q22 Daniel Kawczynski: Mr Stephens also indicated—this was my impression of what he said—that we needed to have an even-handed approach between Iran and Saudi Arabia, particularly at these difficult negotiations. How can we have a genuinely impartial, equal relationship between ourselves, Saudi Arabia and Iran when our relationship with both countries has been so completely different over the past few decades? The sort of sense of friendship that we have built up with one country rather than the other is quite profound.

Lina Khatib: When it comes to Saudi Arabia, at the moment a key issue for Riyadh is the Syrian file. Some of the measures that I just talked about—on the ground measures that can precede ceasefires—can be measures that Saudi Arabia would regard as indications of confidence building if the international community were to support them. Ultimately, they aid Saudi Arabia's vision to try to find a solution to this conflict, which, in turn, translates into an affirmation of Saudi Arabia's regional leadership, which leads me back to the issue mentioned by Neil, and your question about Saudi Arabia's position in the Gulf.

Yes, the Gulf has independent countries. However, Saudi Arabia remains the most influential actor in the Gulf and it has taken a number of decisions lately in order to assert its position as the leading Arab state, not just in the Gulf. The issue of Gulf security is a red line that very often comes before national security for individual Gulf countries, especially the smaller countries that see that national security can only be guaranteed if the regional security in the Gulf is maintained, rather than the other way around. Sometimes there are small exceptions but, in general, this has been the line that Saudi Arabia has been pursuing.

Therefore, in order for the UK, for example, to have any leeway with Saudi Arabia, these measures of confidence that show Saudi Arabia that, regardless of what happens with Iran, Saudi Arabia's leadership in the Arab world is maintained—I think that is what Saudi Arabia is ultimately looking for.

Q23 Daniel Kawczynski: I understand that you are telling us that we ought to be using up some of the good will and capital that we have with the Saudis to try to ensure that they act responsibly at this critical time. Can we be seen as an independent interlocutor between Iran and Saudi Arabia, bearing in mind that we have for decades been a very close partner with Saudi Arabia, providing them with military capability, training their pilots and having a very substantial trading relationship? That is a very different scenario from the relationship with Iran over the past 30 or 40 years.

Lina Khatib: Absolutely. I guess what you are saying is that the Iranians might view any UK brokering as being biased, which may well be the case. But that is why at the moment Iraq, for example, has offered to mediate in the diplomatic crisis between Saudi Arabia and Iran. I think that is a positive step forward. I don't think the UK can play a leading role but it can play a backing role. It can definitely facilitate and enable but there are other actors who are better suited to be at the forefront of this process.

Q24 Daniel Kawczynski: It is interesting that you say Iraq has offered to be an independent broker between Saudi and Iran. I see the tension between Saudi and Iran as one of the biggest threats to stability in the Middle East. Would you acquiesce to Iraq being that key state that could do that, or is there any other country that you have in mind that could genuinely play a role as an independent broker between both countries?

Lina Khatib: The word “independent” opens up a can of worms. Even Iraq is obviously not by any means independent in doing this. Turkey is another country that has offered to mediate. A coalition of interested parties, let’s put it that way, would be more appropriate. The issue for me with Iraq—and I defer to MP Zahawi here—is that recently what we have seen in Ramadi indicates a positive change in the country. As you know, ISIS is a major problem in Iraq. ISIS had taken hold of Ramadi and Anbar largely because of the grievances of the Sunni population in those areas. Then when Iran sponsored the Shi’a militias Hashd al-Shaabi in order to try to fight ISIS that only made sectarian tensions worse. The only way that Anbar could be regained was by reaching out to the Sunni community there and engaging them in the fight against ISIS.

This kind of behaviour is exactly what should happen. This kind of behaviour by a Government that has the blessing of both Riyadh and Iran, gives Iraq the potential to act as a mediator, not an independent one, but as a mediator that has a stake on both sides, for its own national interests, of course.

Chair: I think we need to move on to the next question, Daniel.

Daniel Kawczynski: I have just one very quick one.

Chair: Is it on the UK’s role?

Daniel Kawczynski: On the 26 January deadline.

Chair: Okay.

Q25 Daniel Kawczynski: The Special Envoy for Syria has set a target of 26 January for the start of the peace talks. Several similar targets have been missed in the past. Are you confident that this one will be met?

Chris Phillips: I am not confident that it will be. It is certainly feasible, as we have mentioned before, that some kind of talks will take place, but rather like the Iranian nuclear deadlines and so on, they did get pushed back when they felt there was something close being formulated. It is perfectly possible that this deadline will be missed and yet some kind of talks do take place. The big question mark is over whether those talks are going to have any value. I think we mentioned before that a lot of that is going to be about who goes along and who is putting pressure on the actors involved in those talks, as to whether they are any more valuable than the failed Geneva II talks of 2014.

Neil Quilliam: I don’t think we should obsess over the date anyway. There is slippage; we saw that with the nuclear talks. We have seen periodically throughout the electoral cycle in Iraq that there are always delays; things always get pushed back. If you try to rush things you are not necessarily going to go in the right direction. So we should look at

that date and anticipate that it is going to happen, but if it does not happen for another two or three weeks or a month even, we should not give up hope.

Q26 Chair: The dates are obviously important in terms of setting a target. With UN Security Council Resolution 2254, they want a timetable for agreeing a new constitution within six months. Do you want to comment on that and then I'll ask Yasmin to follow up? Six months, from what has just been said, seems very ambitious as well.

Lina Khatib: Yes, absolutely. I see the timetable set as more of a time-buying mechanism than a conflict-solving mechanism that would actually push the country towards democratisation. Saying, "Negotiations for six months, then a constitution in six months and then the formation of a transitional Government," seems to me very rushed, frankly. I don't think that any country has managed to write a constitution that is viable in just six months, but what we have here is a start, and this is why the Syrian opposition has agreed to be part of this process.

Everybody knows that what we are dealing with is not perfect—what is being proposed is not perfect—but the Syrian opposition wants to start somewhere, after the failures of Geneva I and II. Therefore, I don't think that we can hope for a constitution to be written in six months. All we can hope for realistically is that this can be the start of a process that will probably take a lot longer than we hope and that will eventually lead to the conflict ending. This is the best we can hope for. Anything more concrete than that in terms of the constitution is too premature.

Chris Phillips: It is far more important for the external actors to agree loosely on a framework and actually commit to wanting to implement it. Until they do that, it doesn't matter whether something is written and whether an agreement comes together in six months, a year or whatever; it will not hold together unless the majority if not all of the key external players are on board. Once that occurs, your timetable is almost less important, because the cogs will be in place to begin to move, however long it takes. But until those actors come on board and seem committed to actually trying to make it work, none of these deadlines will really make much of a difference. We need to look at Saudi, Iran and Turkey in particular—their positions. Sorry, I should have mentioned Russia as well. Are they actually committed to pushing their proxies on the ground towards some kind of viable solution? I don't think they are at the moment. You need to really make sure that they are before any of this can begin to have any meaningful impact.

Lina Khatib: Which leads me to the point that, for me, the first step in trying to resolve this conflict is not thinking about the constitution; it is security. You cannot have any viable political process in any country if the security situation is in disarray.

Chair: That is why we dealt with the ceasefire earlier. Obviously, the ceasefire is probably a precondition for successful negotiations and discussions along those lines. Yasmin, do you want to come in at this point?

Q27 Yasmin Qureshi: We are discussing Resolution 2254. One of the other things the Resolution talks about, apart from getting the constitution within six months, is the ability to have elections within 18 months, and then there is the issue that Syrian refugees should be entitled to vote in those elections. It is clear from what all of you have said that, in some

respects, it is good that these timelines are there, but it's not going to happen because of the prevailing situation. We are obviously discussing the issue of how you get all the regional players together. Taking that one step further, is it possible to look at some other large Muslim countries that are not in the Middle East—for example, Indonesia, Malaysia and maybe Pakistan—and ask whether they or the Organisation of Islamic Co-operation could come in and act as brokers to the big regional players, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey? Pakistan has a good relationship with Turkey and, I think, with Iran and Saudi Arabia as well. Malaysia and Indonesia are normally out of the Middle East situation, but they have a pretty good relationship with everybody in the region. Is it possible for the international community to ask those countries to come in and urge the regional players to work together, or do you think that they are just not interested?

Lina Khatib: My short answer is no. Despite the fact that these are large Muslim countries, the fact is that their stakes in the Middle East are very low. The biggest cause of paranoia for Saudi Arabia has been the rise of Iran and its embrace by the international community, so its eyes are set on the west, not the east. Therefore, who should be engaged is really the United States. We have barely mentioned the US in this room today, but it is the elephant in the room. Ultimately, we are where we are largely as a result of the retreat of the United States from this conflict at large. More involvement by the United States would make a huge difference in this conflict, and it is something that we are not seeing. Perhaps the UK can try to talk to the US about it, because this conflict is hurting all of us. The more it continues, the more it will become not just militarised but Islamicised in an extreme way. This is an issue for international security.

Going back to the issue of security, it is not about elections and it is not about the constitution. A security plan for Syria is something in which you can involve the international community, because everybody is affected by this. To get there, you need to work on the actors on the ground in Syria. I know that Turkey now has a plan, which is to try to reach out to certain officers within the existing Syrian army, because the army is currently crumbling, and to try to have a vision for unifying the Syrian army—meaning the Free Syrian Army—with elements of the existing army under officers who would be willing to play that role so that this entity can be the entity that will be able to lead the process of securing Syria once the political settlement has been agreed. For all of us in the west, this is something that we should definitely focus on.

Just to sum up, two things are missing: first, the US's role in terms of leadership; and secondly, serious thinking about how to actually implement a security plan. As we know, even the ceasefires will not include ISIS or al-Qaeda. These groups will continue to fight, so what do you do then?

Chair: We will come on to that shortly.

Chris Phillips: May I make a brief point? Brokers are not needed. That is not where the absence is. At the moment, the absence is the will of those key regional players. Again, I would add that it is not the US. I agree that the US has a greater role to play, although it is a very important point that we need to start living in a world where we recognise that the US does not want to put boots on the ground in the Middle East anymore. That needs to get into everyone's head, both in the UK and in the Middle East. The perception that the US is going

to come in has been one of the major problems from the Saudi, Qatari and Turkish perspectives throughout this conflict.

Chair: We saw that in Libya.

Chris Phillips: Exactly. The issue that is happening at the moment with the regional powers that are acting in Syria—the reason why they do not need brokering but the will to change their position—is that none of those actors is incentivised enough to change their position. None of them is hurting enough to change their position, and none of them see the benefit enough to change their position. In my opinion, the calculus of all those actors needs to be changed somehow. How we do that with a more reluctant United States, which has its own reasons for being more reluctant to be involved in the region, and with Saudi Arabia, Iran, Russia and Turkey not really feeling the negative effects of their position, is very difficult to see. I maintain my earlier point: I think that the key player in this is going to be Turkey, which probably is going to hurt the most. As we have already seen today, very sadly, with the explosion in Istanbul, the impact of its policies in Syria are being felt in Turkey. Actually, if the UK is to play any role, it might be to look at its influence and role in Turkey.

Chair: The EU may well have an important role there. You mentioned the elephant in the room being the US. We saw how involved the US wanted to be when it came to Libya. Since then, we have seen discussion, and John Kerry has been quite active, but the reference has been to the west—the US, the European Union, et cetera.

Let's assume that we can get to a transitional Government, or a Government of unity, which Assad might want. Obviously, this inquiry is looking at how we can, in the medium to long term, deal with ISIL. I want to bring in Nadhim to ask a little bit about how we might tackle ISIL once we have got some sort of unity—if we ever get to that—within Syria.

Q28 Nadhim Zahawi: Before I start my question, may I just remind the Committee of my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests? I am obviously of Kurdish origin. I was born in Baghdad; my family has a number of interests in Iraq. And I have a number of advisory roles that are all in the register.

This inquiry is about how we defeat ISIL. There is clearly a better formed or more fully formed strategy to do that in Iraq, but in Syria it is slightly more fluid. As the Chairman said, let's just take a hypothetical situation. Once a transitional Government are formed and we are there, do you believe that to defeat ISIL in Syria will still need the engagement of western forces on the ground?

Lina Khatib: Not boots on the ground; I maintain that that is not necessary. I think there are enough fighters in Syria to be able to rally themselves against ISIS if they had the resources and the co-ordination. That is what has been missing. Certain key groups, such as the Southern Front for example, were doing very well until the Assad regime allowed ISIS access to the south specifically to try to defeat them, and the US unfortunately cut their funding. So we are seeing joint responsibility here frankly by the west at large and of course the regime and its allies regarding the weakness of certain groups on the ground, but those groups are still there.

Q29 Chair: You say those groups are still there. Obviously, in the run-up to the vote here on the UK's involvement in air strikes on Syria, the Free Syrian Army, which you mentioned earlier today, was mentioned. How strong or how effective do you believe them to be?

Lina Khatib: They are still effective, but they are not alone.

Q30 Chair: In numbers I mean, as well.

Lina Khatib: Oh, yes. They still form the majority of fighters, if you count all the numbers in the north and the south, but the problem is they have not had the adequate resources to allow them to play the leading role, and this is what has allowed other groups like Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham to exist and prosper. In a way now, a lot of people look at the moderate Syrian groups on the ground that are fighting and blame them for their own failure and say, "But al-Nusra is stronger," and I say, "Well, of course. If they had been given adequate resources and co-ordination, this would not have happened."

Now, of course the situation is complex, because in addition to—

Q31 Chair: How big do you think that the Free Syrian Army is? What would you say on the numbers?

Lina Khatib: All I can tell you is that it is growing. What we are seeing now, with the potential split in Ahrar al-Sham, is a great opportunity to attract thousands more to the ranks of the Free Syrian Army. And I will say that even Jabhat al-Nusra, which as a group will remain hard-line and will follow al-Qaeda and it has been very firm, at the level of membership the situation is much more complex. A lot of people are only with that group because they see the comparative weakness of the moderates. But if the moderates were supported, things would change.

To go back to your question at the start, it is not about western boots on the ground. It is about co-ordination, resources and training. Political co-ordination, not just military co-ordination, is very much needed, because these groups also need to reach out to the populations in areas where they exist and gain their confidence, and this can only be done by backing up the local administrations in these areas.

I will give one example—the courts. I give this example a lot. In the absence of rule of law, because of the situation, Jabhat al-Nusra has exploited the chaos and set up Islamic courts, and this has been comparatively attractive to certain people on the ground because they are so tired of chaos. Offer them civilian courts and they will prefer that to what they have at the moment. This is what I'm talking about.

Q32 Chair: Okay, but just to deal with them as a force. Mr Phillips?

Chris Phillips: I disagree with Lina a little bit on some of those points, in that there are a lot of unknowns with regard to the affiliation of the different fighters and so on. The Free Syrian Army, whether or not it actually exists—

Q33 Chair: Are they moderate?

Chris Phillips: It depends on what you consider moderate, as always. Not ISIS? Yes. The kind of people that the UK Government wants to be funding? Quite possibly not. The important point that I would like to get across—this is very important in terms of their ability to fight ISIS—is that most of them are local. Most of them are rooted in their local communities. The idea that you can say, “Okay, fine. You are now secure. Now turn around and march all the way over to east Syria and take them out in Raqqa”, is highly unlikely, quite frankly.

Q34 Chair: I think Lina mentioned being able to co-ordinate and organise. How would you tie up airstrikes with people on the ground?

Chris Phillips: That is the difficulty. That is one of the reasons why a lot will depend on the hypothetical transitional Government that you are talking about. That matters. It is not something where you can just say, “That’s a given, now let’s move on”, because those people in those groups—those former fighters—need to feel that their home areas are secure enough that they can leave to take on ISIS without either the regime or more radical groups moving in on their space. At the moment, that just is not going to happen. You need to have a huge degree of stability and, as Lina said, security in those areas to persuade those people under arms to march over to the other side of the country. Even then, how many of those people are actually there primarily just to defend their local area? Do they actually want to be career soldiers and march over and attack ISIS?

Q35 Nadhim Zahawi: Let us take that logic a step further. Say the situation is not as stable as we would like and the transitional Government is not as strong as we would like it to be. There are the lessons of Iraq. We would need something more like the Petraeus-type surge—a Sahwa or Awakening-type thing—because these people are local and you can get them to drive the bad people out, whether they are ISIL or whoever else. With Petraeus, it needed a lot of people on the ground and a lot of troops on the ground. Chris, are you telling me that Lina’s position is not the right one and that we do need boots on the ground?

Chris Phillips: First, I am not a counter-terrorism expert. I am a political scientist and an international relations specialist. My understanding is that in the grand scheme of things the Sahwa offensive failed, because it is no longer stable in that area.

Q36 Nadhim Zahawi: But the only reason it failed was the third pillar of it, which Petraeus was not able to implement. That was winning the peace post getting rid of the bad people. You need to invest in those areas to win the peace, and al-Maliki did not allow that to happen. As a strategy, it worked. The third pillar of it, which was never implemented, was what led to its failure.

Chris Phillips: In many ways, we are talking about the same situation, because we are saying that if we cannot get that stability in the areas in Syria that these people are meant to be coming from, you will not have the ability to remove ISIS from Raqqa and so on.

Q37 Nadhim Zahawi: Are you saying to me that we need western troops on the ground?

Chris Phillips: It sounds to me that the conclusion from that is western troops on the ground, but permanently there until you can guarantee that whatever you are putting in place will succeed.

Nadhim Zahawi: That is my point. It is a different position.

Chris Phillips: I would add that that I do not think you will be able to create peace on the ground in Raqqa that will be long-lasting, for the same reason that they failed to do so in Iraq. There are far greater issues than it simply being a question of “al-Maliki is a bad ruler”. If you look at the role that Iranians and other actors, such as al-Qaeda international, played, there are multiple reasons why it failed. The problem with all these analyses is that we end up trying to localise and say, “It is one bad ruler: al-Maliki. Get rid of him and everything will be fine.” We got rid of him and everything is not fine. I think the same would go for Assad in Syria. I do not think it is simply about one bad ruler and so on. To bet the house, as you are suggesting, by putting a huge amount of western troops on the ground on the assumption that this time you will get the governance part of it correct is a massive gamble that probably will not come off.

Neil Quilliam: It is also a massive gamble for those Syrians who would subscribe to it. Whether Assad is there or not—he is only one person, as you say, Chris—that will have a large bearing on how people want to subscribe to whatever comes in his place. Whether we like it or not, Syrians on the ground do not have a lot of faith in the international community, and they look to Iraq, and also to August 2013 and red lines and all the things that came from there. It would be very difficult to persuade Syrians that signing up to this transitional Government is going to represent their interests and that it is worth fighting and throwing off the yoke of ISIS, because what is coming in its place is really valuable. They are never going to buy into that. Why on earth would they believe that?

They would look at Iraq, too. I have had conversations with some of the Sahwa leaders. It all comes down to the fact that even if the international community were to do this, they would not be able to commit themselves to that 10, 20, or 30-year horizon, and we all know that is not going to happen. They have no reason to sign up to it. It is very difficult to think of it—I am finding it hard to suspend reality and imagine this transitional thing coming into place.

We often talked a couple of years ago about how you might be able to keep the remnants of the regime and peel away parts of the opposition and build that together. That sounds great if it is a Lego set, but in reality that just cannot happen. After five years of this conflict, how to see institutions or militaries reconstituted is great in theory, but making it happen in practice is near impossible.

Lina Khatib: Near impossible, but not impossible. Otherwise, we would all not be here. We would just say, “Okay, we give up. There is no more Syria. Let’s just live with ISIS as a reality for the rest of our lives.” I see it as a set of variables that keep changing, and when they change you need to change your framework of looking at them and adapt accordingly.

One key thing that has come up in this conversation is the importance of local dynamics. One thing that we need to think about now—it is not too early—is the process of demilitarisation, demobilisation and disarmament in Syria. The only way to think about this is by looking at what the conditions are that would make people in different places give up their arms. What are the things they want? What made them take up arms in the first place?

Q38 Chair: With respect, we are dealing with ISIL, and ISIL have no intention of giving up their arms. We are trying to get to a point, presuming there is a transitional Government, where we can deal with ISIL. That is the scenario, and I think Nadhim wants to come in.

Lina Khatib: Yes, absolutely. May I just clarify my point? I am not talking about ISIS giving up.

Chair: But we are. That is what the inquiry is about.

Lina Khatib: I am talking about everybody else giving up their arms as militias but being part of the drive against ISIS. I think the only way to eradicate ISIS is, first, to offer people an alternative. At the moment there is no such alternative. I have done research on ISIS in the field, and many people who are currently with ISIS are only there because they have no choice. So you offer these people an alternative and you will weaken ISIS from within. The second thing you do is find out why these other people took up arms and offer them locally based measures to gain their confidence. That is how you rally them in a Sahwa-like approach to fight ISIS.

Chris Phillips: May I add one point?

Chair: I am conscious of time. We are due vote at 10 minutes to 5. In seven minutes we are going to have to wrap up, and we are already over time. I suggest we close the meeting then.

Q39 Nadhim Zahawi: I will be very brief. Neil, you mentioned Assad. Is it time that the UK abandoned its insistence on the removal of Assad as part of a negotiated deal? If not, how can he be replaced? How would a transitional authority work?

Lina, you mentioned the Free Syrian Army. Is there now a clear command and control structure so that, if you do back them, they can deliver on the ground? You said that the support was taken away, but it was taken away for a reason. Actually, initially they were a rag-tag bunch of people, with corruption, and all sorts of things happened. They didn't deliver on the ground. Is that now different on the ground?

Lina Khatib: Yes. A number of things are different. One reason for the divisions in the Free Syrian Army is that in the south they were largely supported by the Saudis and in the north they were largely supported by the Qataris and the Turks. Those two camps used Syria as a playground in which they competed, which led not just to lack of co-ordination but lack of trust among different parts of the Free Syrian Army. Now that Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey are all in harmony, that has translated into measures of confidence on the ground among different members of the Free Syrian Army.

The second thing I will say is that at the moment, as a result of this potential for harmonising efforts, the Turks have proposed a plan to have a new military command centre that would unify the different Free Syrian Army brigades on the ground as well as trying to reach out to elements from the regular regime army. That is a smart move because it is the only way forward. Yes, there has been progress, and we should recognise that.

Neil Quilliam: On the question of Assad, the realist in me would say that it is time that we recognise that he is part of the solution. However, I would say that we are hamstrung over whether he is part of it or not. I do not see that he can be part of the solution. I really do

not see that for two reasons. His regime and barrel bombs have killed far more civilians than ISIS has, and I cannot imagine any Syrian opposition being willing to engage or to anticipate expecting him to be present. If he were to continue as part of that transition, no Syrian would ever believe that he is going to step aside.

Q40 Chair: When you say he cannot be part of the solution, do you mean that he should not be part of the solution? As long as the Russians are there, they are not going to see him toppled that easily.

Neil Quilliam: That's true, although Putin today suggested or hinted very gently that he may provide him with a home at some later stage. I am not sure.

Nadhim Zahawi: Sochi or something.

Neil Quilliam: That's right. One of the concerns is over whether the regime suddenly collapses if you take Assad off. I do not buy that argument. I am not sure what part of the regime really exists beyond what the Russians are providing and beyond the Iranian support. It is a little bit like "The Wizard of Oz". As soon as you pull that curtain back, he could just collapse and fall away. He has managed to create a narrative that he is absolutely central and that he is core to the continuity of the regime. I do not buy that, so I think we should stick to our guns and keep an eye out.

Chris Phillips: May I add a slightly dissenting opinion to that of my boss? First, I agree that the desire would be to remove Assad. He has perpetrated some terrible war crimes and so on. That is the starting point. However, as I maintain throughout my testimony here, the key will be what the Russians and Iranians choose to do. The UK is in no position to call for Assad to go. We have no leverage whatever to actually make him go. We can have this desire to take a moral stand, as we have since 2011, saying, "You're a bad man who should not be in charge", but we are actually in no position to call for him to go or stay. The question in this dynamic is whether the Russians and Iranians are willing to try to push him off.

Speaking to Iranians and Russians on the matter, it is clear that their perception of the regime at the moment is a little bit how Neil described that it is not. They do begin to see Assad as a central figure—not as a kind of all-powerful dictator, but more as a chairman managing various competing factions that, if you removed him, would end up eating one another. It is interesting speaking to people who work with the Iranians on this. At the beginning of the conflict in 2011, they were not that embedded in the regime. They dealt very much at a top level and were not aware of how it worked. The more they burrowed into it, built their own militias and helped to undermine the regime, the more they understood that this is really complex and are not 100% convinced that it can survive without him holding it together.

Not to completely contradict what Neil was saying, the key is that it might be the case that that is a myth and that if you removed Assad from the situation, the regime or aspects of the regime or the state could survive. What is important is trying to persuade the Russians and Iranians to do that themselves. It is not really a question of whether we should stick to our guns on the moral point. It is about whether we can persuade the Russians and the Iranians that that is the case. I am not convinced that they will believe that.

Chair: I thank the panel members for coming along today. We have gone on longer than we planned to because of the number of votes we have had. Thank you for co-operating with the change to the organisation of the panels. We would be happy to have any further evidence you wish to submit.