

Defence Committee

Oral evidence: [UK Military Operations in Syria and Iraq](#), HC 657

Tuesday 19 January 2016

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Members present: Dr Julian Lewis (Chair); Richard Benyon; Douglas Chapman; Mrs Madeleine Moon; Jim Shannon; Ruth Smeeth; Mr John Spellar; Phil Wilson.

Questions 59-88

Witnesses: **Dr Afzal Ashraf**, Consultant Fellow, Royal United Services Institute, and **Major General (Retired) Jonathan Shaw CB CBE** gave evidence.

Q59 Chair: Welcome, everybody, to what is the first session of our inquiry into UK military operations in Syria and Iraq. I invite our two witnesses to introduce themselves for the record and, if they wish, to make a few opening comments. Afzal, would you like to go first?

Dr Ashraf: Good morning. My name is Afzal Ashraf, I am a consultant fellow at the Royal United Services Institute and I am delighted and humbled to be invited here. I have no opening statement to make except that I am at your mercy as far as questions are concerned and I shall do my best.

Chair: And you have a Royal Air Force background?

Dr Ashraf: I'm afraid I do, yes; 32 years as an officer in the Royal Air Force. I served both in Iraq and Afghanistan at the strategic level. I have had a career that has included working in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and in our national security infrastructure dealing with counterterrorism.

Chair: Thank you very much. Jonathan?

Major General Shaw (Retd): Major General (Retired) Jonathan Shaw, 32 years in the military; that followed reading PPE at Oxford. As I think will become apparent from what I say later today, that political start to my life has carried through my military career as well and one of the themes of what I will be mentioning today is that military activity is only as significant as its political outcome. I served 32 years in the military, I have had a lot of time in the Middle East, I was director of special forces—so conducting operations around there—and in 2007 I was the General in charge of the Multinational Division in Basra charged with getting us out of Basra.

I based that analysis on trying to understand what was going on in the mindset of the local Iraqis rather than what we were trying to impose on them. I have continued that view of looking at the region from the bottom up, as opposed to us from the top down in my analysis. I am now chairman of a company called Optima Group, which began life as a counter-improvised explosive device company and has now expanded to be a general threat-management company with relevance to the threats people face in Iraq, so I have a continued interest in the region. I also do some journalism and I suspect it is picking up on some of the articles I have written and appearances on the “Today” programme that may have resulted in my facing you for the next hour and a half.

Chair: Indeed. In fact, both of you, I know, have written extensively on the subject area of this inquiry and I hope we will have opportunities to refer to some of what you have written in the past and to ask you perhaps to expand in a bit more detail in the course of the dialogue. I ask Jim Shannon to begin the questioning.

Q60 Jim Shannon: Gentlemen, you are very welcome here and we look forward to your answers. This is the burning issue of the moment, as we all know. The first question is, what has been the impact of the extension of UK airstrikes into Syria? What is your opinion of it, how successful has it been, and where do you see it going?

Major General Shaw (Retd): If that is for me first, I would say the tactical significance of the UK bombing strikes has been minimal. I am surprised if ISIS have notice the difference. I think the significance of the vote to extend the RAF bombing from just Iraq to Syria was twofold. First, it was to increase the credibility and coherence of the UK’s position. I think the position whereby they were bombing in Iraq and not bombing in Syria was over-legalistic. When you look at the activity that the RAF were already carrying out over Syrian airspace, they were carrying out intelligence missions, targeting missions, they were doing everything apart from actually bombing. To my mind, that means that they were legally, morally and militaristically already involved in the bombing campaign in Syria. Not to actually drop hard bombs on them—when it suited the UK, we were doing drone strikes in the region—struck me as over-legalistic.

My own view is that the whole vote that was taken in the House of Commons was chronic mismanagement by the Government. I think they made a legislative mountain out of a molehill. It should have been a simple change of rules of engagement and it should not have taken a vote of Parliament to agree to that.

I think the significance of it is that it makes Britain’s position in the campaign against ISIS more coherent. It makes it more credible. The real significance of the vote, therefore, is that, when Cameron goes to argue in Vienna for a political solution, it gives him more “wasta”, to use the local Arabic phrase, which has a resonance here. That is the political significance of the change in posture. That is where we should look for any impact that it has and for a measure of success.

Q61 Jim Shannon: Thank you. That was straight shooting from the hip. In relation to Iraq, do you think it has suffered as a result of the extension of operations that we have seen? We are doing more in Syria. You rightly said, it hasn’t been very much, so has Iraq suffered? Are we stretching ourselves too far?

Major General Shaw (Retd): I defer to my RAF colleague. My sense is that there is more asset in the coalition than we know what to do with. So I would be very surprised if the campaign in Iraq has suffered by the extension of our operations. The last I read in the press is that we had launched four air raids into Syria. I can't imagine that has detracted significantly from the air campaign in Iraq, but I defer to my colleague on that.

Dr Ashraf: If I may complement what Major General Shaw said in answer to your first question about impact, assessing impact is hugely problematic in any air campaign for two reasons. One is battle damage assessment. Unless you have people on the ground who are able to look at the assessment of any airstrikes, which clearly we do not have, you can only really say with reasonable certainty that you have hit the target that you intended to hit. That does not necessarily mean that you have had the impact that you wanted to have.

We know from the conflict in Afghanistan that, sadly, huge numbers—an unnecessarily large number—of weddings, for example, have been targeted by airstrikes. We know from the tragic events last year that even when we had assets on the ground in Afghanistan, the MSF hospital was tragically hit, instead of the intended target. So assessing effectiveness, particularly in this scenario, is very difficult.

There is one thing we should think about. The awesome precision of our weapons has been outpaced by the precision of the intelligence that directs them. We have weapons that we confuse with precision, because they are incredibly accurate and reliable. But they are not very precise in effect because the intelligence needed to direct them is not necessarily as precise as the weapons that we have.

The second reason that impact is difficult to assess is that attritional warfare has limited utility in an asymmetric conflict. The point is that, if we take out, let's say according to American figures, 10,000 fighters, almost by definition, it is asymmetric. That has less of a proportionate impact than it would in conventional warfare, where your fighting capability is directly linked to the men and equipment that you have under arms.

For those two reasons, this question has to remain unanswered. It is a question I hope we will explore indirectly in other questions subsequently, in terms of success and trends as well. To say that we have dropped X number of bombs and hit X number of targets does not tell us a great deal in terms of success, failure or impact.

Q62 Chair: Do you mind, Jim, if I come in for a second? In the context of Iraq as well as Syria, how would you frame that answer, when referring to the use of air power in close support of ground forces, which presumably we have been able to do with much greater frequency in one theatre rather than the other?

Dr Ashraf: That is a very good question. It is a very different scenario when you use air power in support of ground forces. In fact, you use a different type of air power generally in close air support scenarios. You tend to use aircraft with forward-firing weapons, such as Apache helicopters, and you usually use low-calibre weapons, so that in urban warfare you have less chance of collateral damage; you have a much more focused area that you are striking.

Those close air-support operations in support of land forces have an immediately measurable impact, because all you are doing is facilitating the advance of your ground

forces. Should they advance and capture territory, you can say that we have been successful in achieving X objectives, however you define them.

It is a very different scenario when you are using air power in the context it is being used in Syria and Iraq, with fast jets dropping precision-guided munitions. Having said that, it can be effective in certain operations. Certainly, if we look back at drone strikes—directed by the CIA rather than the American air force against al-Qaeda—they were very successful in destroying al-Qaeda’s operational capabilities. We can look at that in detail, should you wish. But in the context of a wide insurgency that is territorially based, measuring impact is very problematic.

Q63 Jim Shannon: There has been a measure of progress. We have seen some good results from close air support to the ISF and Peshmerga in the taking of Ramadi and Sinjar. I am keen to get your thoughts on how we can have closer co-operation, if possible, and how that would work, with opposition groups in Syria?

Major General Shaw (Retd): The question is how to have greater co-operation with the local ground forces. The premise to that is that ground forces are what you need to take territory, and I would agree with that premise. The big political question is where those ground forces are going to come from.

It seems to me that the bulk of the ground that has been retaken off ISIS has been taken by Kurds fighting for their own land. That raises again the political question of the final end status of Kurdistan and how much support we are prepared to give them, or whether we only work through the Iraqi Government. It seems that we are playing both sides on that one. If our focus is on defeating ISIS, I actually think that is correct.

If we want to increase the efficacy of the Peshmerga ground forces, we need to supply them with ground observers and equipment to deliver precisely the increased precision that we have just heard about, which you get when you have liaison between the ground forces and the air assets. I suspect that, given the technology involved and the training required, that will have to come from western troops.

Q64 Jim Shannon: Okay. The second question is, how do you better understand the Daesh military tactics? Both of you have referred to intelligence, for instance, as being important. We feel as well that that is important. How can the coalition better fight Daesh by better understanding Daesh military tactics? Some people say that they do not have a middle management and that their communications are not as good, but they seem to be quite efficient. I would like your thoughts on how the coalition could do it better.

Major General Shaw (Retd): How the coalition could do it better? Well, I think if we start off by looking at Daesh and their tactics, they have been remarkably resourceful in adapting the weapons and technology they have to achieve the same ends as conventional armies with a vastly larger armoury of weapons and techniques. The most obvious lack they have is of artillery and general engineer support.

Their use of improvised explosive devices to fill the gaps in what you might term conventional methodology has been remarkable and the novelty in the way they use them has been striking. It has allowed them to use improvised explosive devices not just as a defensive device to protect places they have already captured or indeed to make it hard for

people to retake places they have subsequently lost. They have also started to use them in ways that are offensive and that, in many ways, mimic the use of artillery in standard offensive operations.

That is one example of how adaptive they are. In a sense, it reveals the military roots of a lot of their thinkers. The story goes that when the Sunni leadership—the Ba’ath leadership of Saddam’s Government and Saddam’s military—was de-Ba’athified, apparently they went into ISIS. You can see that military training, whether it was from Russia or ourselves, being applied to the weaponry that ISIS have.

We also see that, when they realise that they are being bombed, they start using tunnels. That use of tunnels to nullify the effect of air power is a well worn path—the Vietnamese did the same. We should not be surprised—this is standard behaviour when you face this kind of threat.

Dr Ashraf: Complementing what the Major General said, in essence what they did was shape the battlefield and, in so doing, the one component in their capability that perhaps has not been emphasised enough is what we in the west call the moral component of those three components of force: physical, conceptual and moral. The moral component of force is essentially how you motivate your people to fight, kill and die for a cause, but it is also the way the force is seen.

If we go back to 2013, the year before Daesh burst on to the scene in the form of ISIS, it was the year in Iraq when we had the greatest number of terrorist attacks for many years. Prime Minister Maliki promised to deal with this. The point is that those terrorist attacks set up a reputation for this organisation such that whenever armies, including the somewhat corrupt and poorly led Iraqi Army—corrupt at the senior leadership level, not necessarily at the foot soldier level—were faced with the onslaught of Daesh, they crumbled and ran away. That reputation still holds. They are ruthless, and deliberately so, so people realise that you either fight and die or run away—there is no other option. That is a very successful component of their tactics, which continues to this day.

As the Major General said, they have adapted to the new regime. In the past, they used shock and awe tactics through rapid manoeuvre through open territory, but as soon as the coalition started using air power against them, they have dispersed. They have used deception and they have used hardening in the form of tunnelling and so on. As has been said, that was used in Vietnam and indeed the Bosnian Serbs, in a much more recent scenario, used very similar tactics to the coalition’s air power. So what we have got is an adaptation of tactics.

I am not confident to advise the Committee on their use of tactics right now, because I do not know exactly how they are fighting and, to be perfectly honest, I am not sure whether many of our people do unless we have some very good intelligence assets on the ground. Their real tactics on the ground right now are not very clear to me, except that they are avoiding the use of large-scale movement, for obvious reasons, and they are using small covert groups to fight, but beyond that, I cannot really advise.

Q65 Jim Shannon: Two very quick points, because I’m conscious of the time—on the intelligence I referred to earlier, it is important that the British Government and their allies

continue to recruit the agents and that they protect them. I would like to get your thoughts on how that happens and the importance of it.

My second point is that Daesh use tactics that are very similar to Hezbollah's, and who better to give you information on Hezbollah than the Israelis? I sometimes wonder whether we have asked them, or maybe we have and we've got the answers. How important is it to have contact with the Israeli Government, for instance, to find out how they have dealt with the tunnels, the communications, the middle management personnel and the use of schools and hospitals? That is my thinking, but I would like to get your ideas about it.

Dr Ashraf: That is a very important question. I think intelligence is crucial. When I was in Iraq, in our headquarters our intelligence assessment of the number of insurgents—this is going back 10 years or more—fluctuated by a factor of 500% in a matter of just a few weeks. That was at a time when we had military intelligence from all coalition forces. We had the national intelligence services of most coalition forces. We had some of the most advanced surveillance systems in place. Gathering intelligence is a hugely problematic issue, particularly when we are dealing with insurgencies, so we should do everything we possibly can to increase our intelligence coverage.

In this particular scenario, you are absolutely right; Israelis do have some very valuable intelligence capabilities that could be used, but we must not close our eyes to the fact that the nature of Daesh is international. Most countries, one would expect, would have intelligence sources in place. In that respect, we have two valuable sources. One is Russia. The Russians are very concerned about Daesh, and they have obviously a very large number of Russians. Knowing the KGB—of course, the KGB has been replaced now, but knowing the Russian tradition in intelligence, which is very respectable in terms of professionalism, there will be some very valuable sources there.

The other source we must not forget is the Assad regime's very sophisticated intelligence legacy. We are certain that they have intelligence sources in place, and using their intelligence is another option that we should consider. Intelligence is key in this conflict, and there are many things we can do to improve our intelligence picture that we should seriously explore.

Major General Shaw (Retd): I am sure that people are talking to the Israelis already. It would be part of standard business to talk to the Israelis about these sorts of thing. If we are talking agents on the ground, we imagine HUMINT and we imagine our own people going over there. That may be quite tricky. Life has moved on, and what we will actually be looking at is what you might call "e-HUMINT", via cyberspace.

We mentioned earlier how important reputation is to Daesh. Given that the sense of inevitable growth that seemed to be coming out of 2013 into 2014 has now been halted—the containment mission we were engaged in has come in for some criticism, but from the point of view of Daesh and their reputation, it has actually been successful in damaging the sense of inevitable triumph that I suspect was, at one time, one of their major recruiting tools.

I am hearing noise that there may be a degree of disillusion among a lot of Daesh members. To that extent, the way we will get to find them is in cyberspace, and you

should be asking someone like GCHQ or the NSA what they are finding out, because I suspect there is quite a lot of interesting intelligence to be gathered from them.

Q66 Mrs Moon: Major General Shaw, you commented on the Ba'athist links with the Sunnis. Do we underestimate the Ba'athist links with the Sunnis in IS and with the Assad regime?

Major General Shaw (Retd): I am not sufficiently into the intelligence to be able to give you an answer to that one. It is not my strong topic, but I would say that the fact that they were both called Ba'ath parties once upon a time actually exaggerates how close they might have been. I am not sure they were quite the same thing, as their same name would imply. My feeling is that there may be links, but I would not say they were that strong; but, as I say, I am quite tenuous about that.

Q67 Mrs Moon: Dr Ashraf?

Dr Ashraf: That is a very interesting question and one that I have not even thought about. It would be counterproductive, because ISIS, by definition, is fighting against the Assad regime. The links, for what they are worth, are ones that were established, or encouraged, deliberately on 13 February 2003 by bin Laden when he sent out a message to the Iraqi people just days before the invasion and used the phrase, "It is no sin to work with the godless Ba'athists against the west". That scenario has developed over time and the forerunner to Daesh, AQI—al-Qaeda in Iraq—had already absorbed many Ba'athist fighters.

Friends of mine have interviewed Daesh people. In one case, a journalist after a few days was shocked when he spoke to one of them privately who said, "Look, I have to be honest with you, I do not believe in Daesh's religious stuff, I am not a Muslim, I don't even believe in God; I am an atheist". So there is a political alliance there, but I cannot imagine that there are any Ba'athists who are working both with Daesh and in support of the Assad regime. I think, as Major General Shaw has said, that the Ba'athist ideology is very nationalistic. There was a trend in the early 1960s towards pan-Arabism, through the Ba'athist ideology, but that fell apart in the 1960s and early 1970s and I think from then on it is every man for himself—Realpolitik has taken over any Ba'athist allegiances.

Major General Shaw (Retd): To follow that up, there is one school of thought that sees ISIS as a product of the Assad regime and its evidence is that it keeps attacking less the Assad regime and more other parties. This is becoming standard behaviour for ISIS, that instead of forming a coalition with opposition groups against what you might term the far enemy, how they tend to operate is to consume the local enemy, the other voices of opposition, so that they become the opposition. I do not know if we are going to go on to talk about Libya, but that is exactly what is happening in Libya right now, where the cancer in the opposition is slowly expanding, with their target being not what you might call the western-backed Government or the more moderates—they are actually taking out the Salafist preachers and putting their preachers in place. They are attacking the near radicals rather than the far, moderate enemy. They are trying to get a monopoly on the opposition and I would say that is exactly what they are doing in ISIS: they are trying to take out al-Nusra, they are trying to take out al-Qaeda, to become the big opposition against Assad; that is their way of operating.

Q68 Chair: Madeleine, before you continue, may I interject? Richard, I know you have a point you want to make very briefly before Madeleine resumes. May I just ask, is the reverse also true? We hear allegations from time to time that Assad is facilitating, if not actually co-operating with, the operations of Daesh. What assessment do you both make of that?

Major General Shaw (Retd): I would say it is entirely normal. We have talked about the Balkans: Governments under stress seek what allies they can and make all kinds of back-door deals. There are so many back-handed deals going on in the region: we have not even mentioned Turkey yet, but I am sure we will get to it. I am afraid I do not have a clear enough picture of it all. Suffice it to say that if there were some back-door local deals going on, I would not be surprised, but I think, fundamentally, they are opposed and we should draw a distinction between local, tactical, intelligence deals and large-scale alliances and seeing ISIS as a product of Assad. That would be a mistake.

Dr Ashraf: Before I comment, Major General Shaw described earlier Daesh's behaviour in terms of fighting fellow rebel groups, and certainly in the early days it did so and became stronger as a result. I give this trend, which is almost unique, the title of mugging operations. It is the only group in recent history that I know of—and I do not claim to be an expert—to have done this. Daesh has fought fellow rebel groups and captured their weapons and their people, and that is one of the sources of its surprising strength in a short space of time.

Coming back to the question of Assad doing a deal, I am afraid that when I look at this conflict in the wider picture there is no player—whether the Assad regime, the western-led coalition, the regional coalition, Iran or Russia—which is not working to a national interest. Sadly, one of the features of this conflict is that we are perpetuating something that has been happening for almost the last three quarters of a century or more. We allow, or sometimes encourage, these non-state actors, many of which use terrorist tactics, for short-term political gain, and they are beginning to destabilise the international system in the longer term. This is one lesson which I hope that in the longer term we will learn. It does not surprise me that Assad does this, but so do other people.

It is a mystery to me why Turkey did not use an excellent opportunity to send out a message over Kobani, which was a telegenic amphitheatre of conflict. The Turkish army was on one bank, and the Daesh people were on the other. They could within a matter of hours have stopped the attack on Kobani and demonstrated to the world their awesome and very effective military capability, but they chose not to. There are many other mysteries in this conflict that can only be explained through this idea of short-term self-interest, and a permission or sometimes an encouragement—and indeed in other cases a support—of terrorist groups.

Q69 Richard Benyon: Without prejudicing Madeleine's next line of questioning, I want to ask whether you think that we in the west have a naïve view of the forces ranged. We talk about orders of battle in the way that we might apply it to a conventional force. Perhaps we look at the forces ranged against ISIS in the same way that we look through the prism of our own political systems. We see that there are these different groupings but actually it is so much more fluid, and there can be local factors that decide whether somebody fights on one side or the other. These could be religious factors or other factors, and at times people drift from one side to the other, when they feel that the opportunity is ripe to enhance their quality of life or the safety of their family. Do you find the rhetoric of western analysis lacking?

Major General Shaw (Retd): Yes.

Q70 Richard Benyon: Good. Of course. Then I am right. Why?

Major General Shaw (Retd): First, because of ignorance. As Rory Stewart famously said last year, we have lost the ability to understand the world. That is an institutional failure of the UK through its Foreign Office, its cutback in missions and its lack of foreign representatives. It is a failure of our intelligence agents, who are set a list of Masters questions which means that they tend to answer in terms of known unknowns, and therefore constantly get caught by surprise by unknown unknowns. It is because politicians answer to a domestic agenda. They see the world through their domestic political prism. I don't need to tell you that. You may choose to deny it, and I would be interested to hear that.

It seems to me that there is an over-emphasis on seeing the world through a western prism, which is the only prism that people really understand. There is a lack of humility when we apply that prism to other countries, and one of the premises of liberal interventionism was precisely that. I think that we are seeing the consequences of that. Morality is a dangerous tool through which to see the world if that is the only tool through which you see the world. The purity of one's intent is not the same as the purity of one's outcome, and I think the outcomes can sometimes outweigh the purity of one's intent.

As I have said before the Committee previously, I think politicians need to think very hard before they intervene. They should take a sort of Hippocratic oath to do no harm. If we do not understand global situations, we should be much more cautious about intervening in them rather than assuming that we do understand and imposing a model. In regard to Iraq and Afghanistan, I said I thought both of those were attempts at achieving cultural change on management consultant timelines. I think they were delusional—we fooled ourselves about the art of the possible and we are seeing the consequences today. So yes, I agree with you.

Dr Ashraf: I agree with the point that our rhetoric is incorrect, but I would suggest that the reasons are very much more complex and, perhaps in some ways, the reverse of what Major General Shaw says. The reasons for that are that we are still working with a mindset politically of our national interest. All Governments have a national interest identification, but, increasingly in democratic societies, they articulate that interest to the public on a moral case. It may be a security-based moral case, but it is often articulated in the moral case. This rhetorical articulation involves a degree of propaganda and one of the first victims of propaganda are the people who articulate it. So I am not sure that we should take morality out from international politics—quite the reverse. I think the problem is that there is an inconsistency between the morality of our case and sometimes the effectiveness and actuality of our actions.

There is a very deep philosophical issue here which I think we could spend a lot of time going into, but another area that we should think about—perhaps we do not have time here—is to do with organisational culture. In my opinion, some very strange things have been happening. One is that while the armed forces teach a very good doctrine about taking the political mission and deriving a military mission from that, very often we have allowed the politicians to give us the political end-state as well as the means by which to achieve that end-state. Using air power to fight Daesh is a classic example. If you were to

have a mission to degrade and destroy Daesh, air power would be no more than a component, not the sole means of doing so. We have got this culture of over-compliance by the military.

Within the military itself, our doctrine is manoeuvrist; our way of fighting and cultural thinking is expeditionary. That is counterproductive. In expeditionary warfare, about 80% of our forces are supporting and defending the 20% who are actually delivering the security effect. It is politically counterproductive because it is being seen and articulated as occupational forces, which strengthens the opposition. It is militarily inefficient.

All of that actually is walking into a strategy that al-Qaeda articulated 20 years ago when it said, “we will fight our far enemy and we will destroy it by exhausting”—it used the word “spreading” in Arabic, but it means exhausting—“its political, its military and its economic capital.” The effects are there and this is what is encouraging Daesh. So in answer to your question, I think our rhetoric is shaped by some very complex factors involving military culture, political culture and an inconsistency in the way we are doing foreign policy between a moral articulation and perhaps a realist delivery of some of our actions.

Chair: Major General Shaw has written that any western response must be in support of a Muslim plan. Madeleine, I believe you are going to talk about possible regional and local ground forces.

Q71 Mrs Moon: I have a number of things to ask. One is about the consistency of the strategy when it feels like two campaigns are taking place: the western campaign and the Assad-Russian-Iranian campaign. Is that an underestimation? Are there two campaigns and not one strategy here?

Dr Ashraf: I see two campaigns, but not quite—I can identify two parties, if you like, within two campaigns. It appears to me, judging by actions and priorities, that for the west and its regional friends, the Gulf powers, the primary campaign had as its priority ousting Assad. There was a secondary effort to contain Daesh. What has happened, certainly in the public discourse in the last year or less, is that there is now a priority in fighting Daesh and dealing with Assad is a secondary priority. The discourse has moved on, but I am not sure whether our strategies and plans have flipped to the same extent.

Within that realm, there are two blocs, so to speak: the international coalition, led by the US and supported by the regional Gulf states; and the Assad coalition, supported by Iran, Syria and, indeed, Hezbollah locally. So there is this unfortunate bloc. There has been an effort by all parties, on both sides, to bring those two parties together in at least a politically articulated priority against Daesh. The other interesting feature, speaking to Russian officials and listening to some of the rhetoric from Iran, is that both Iran and Russia seem to have strategic interests that are facilitated by the preservation of Assad but not tied to the preservation of Assad. Both sides have articulated that they can conceive of a world without Assad, provided their interests are met.

Major General Shaw (Retd): You have used my favourite bogey word, “strategy”. I have written a book about how Whitehall does not understand strategy—in fact, it was the Public Administration Committee that nailed the fact in 2010-11 that Whitehall does not do strategy. I even wrote a book about it.

Q72 Mrs Moon: Did you read our report on that?

Major General Shaw (Retd): A House of Commons Defence Committee report?

Mrs Moon: Yes.

Major General Shaw (Retd): I'm afraid I did not.

Mrs Moon: Shame on you! We also said that they did not understand strategy.

Major General Shaw (Retd): I am sure; it is a common observation.

Do I think that we have a resolution of what Clausewitz calls “ends, ways and means” or what I would term the reality of resource and aspiration? No, I do not think that we do. I do not think that there is even agreement universally about what the goal or priority is.

As I think has been said, we all set out on this campaign thinking that Assad was the issue, and I was around in the MoD when Syria first became one. We had not really dealt with Syria and were pretty institutionally ignorant about it, and I can tell you that the Whitehall machine's instinctive response and view was, “Well, it's a friend of Iran. Iran is the enemy. Therefore, what's bad for Syria must be bad for Iran and therefore good for us. Therefore, let's support the insurgents.” I said at the time, in a meeting I attended, that this was regrettable, because we should not equate Syria with Libya, and Assad's relations with his people were rather different from Gaddafi's relationship with his people. That has proved the case.

We are struggling with that initial moral judgment—just to come back on a point, I do not think that we should not consider morality; I am just considering that it should not be taken as the only guide to action. Politically, that is the hook that we are trying to unpick ourselves from, because having started off by saying that Assad was all evil incarnate, we are now struggling and working out that ISIS actually might be a more direct threat to the United Kingdom than Assad. How do we get off that hook and say he is a secondary threat, not a primary threat? We have heard that articulated, and it seems to me that everyone is gently shifting their ground, because realism is coming to ground.

The problem with Assad being judged a bad ruler is that that is not a sufficient judgment on its own. You have to say, “Yes, okay, we may not like him, but what are the alternatives?” One thing we have surely learnt since 9/11 is that it is very easy to topple a regime but very difficult to put a better regime in its place, because the regime you put in place tends to be drawn from the same cultural and political soil as the one it has replaced, so it tends to replicate it. Maliki is the shining example of precisely that sort of model.

There seems to be a softening of language about Assad and more talk about transitional moments for the regime. I am hoping that the discussions at Vienna can lead us to some form of long-term agreement on objectives. I agree with our other witness that all nations involved at the moment are guided by national self-interest, but equally they all are realising that the biggest national self-interest is that we stop this thing—we stop the civil war and crush ISIS, because it threatens us all.

The civil war threatens the integrity of the European Union, and ISIS as an idea threatens the whole state structure on which every country depends. Surely it is only a matter of

time before every country realises that its vested interest—its primary national interest—is to kill the idea behind Daesh. The first way of killing that idea is to get rid of the territory run by Daesh, but then there is the ideological battle, which is much harder to fight. I am hoping that this will provide a cohering notion.

The third coalition, which you did not mention, is Saudi Arabia's counter-terrorist coalition, which does not really belong in either the western coalition—although it theoretically says it does—or the Assad-Russia-Iran one. Getting the Sunni powers involved in the battle against ISIS is, to me, the ideological crux of the whole battle. Loth as I am to correct the Chairman on something, in terms of, "It's not Muslim leadership we need; it's Sunni leadership," I was wrong about that. It is actually leadership from within the Wahhabi-Salafist religious sect.

I know that trying to get theological about Sunnism is about as difficult as being definitive about Protestantism, but I am going to risk it. Until we get the Wahhabi-Salafists to disown ISIS as an ideological interpretation of Islam, we will not kill the idea behind ISIS. Until we kill the idea behind ISIS, I am afraid we will see it just pop up in another manifestation somewhere else.

Q73 Mrs Moon: When the Committee was last in Jordan, the King of Jordan was hoping to set up a conference to start looking at that. Unfortunately, I don't think he has been able to pull that together, which is a great sadness. Daesh are now said to have lost 40% of their territory in Iraq and 10% in Syria. Can that be sustained? Have airstrikes been the most effective way of doing it? Will it take longer from the air?

Dr Ashraf: May I quickly go back to your last question about strategy, which was a very important one? Strategy is a process by which we can come to decisions and solutions to problems. What is important is not only the very important point made about using strategy but also what you include.

Quite understandably, culturally, we are looking at this problem as a geopolitical problem and trying to solve it as such. One thing we have not talked about is the people affected by this conflict. There are two significant issues about this conflict that distinguish it from previous conflicts. One is the issue of refugees, which is part of a wider trend. That means the assumption underlying our political culture that regional conflicts can be contained is no longer true. These wars are literally coming to our shores in one way or another, whether it is through terrorist attacks or refugees.

The other thing that nobody has really talked about is the rich mosaic of society that is Syria. I was hoping that the member of your Committee would publish the excellent piece that he has written. Syria is probably the most culturally and religiously diverse and integrated society anywhere in the world, and it has been for thousands of years. We are at the cusp of seeing that destroyed irreversibly, just as the rich mosaic of society and the religious tolerance that existed has been destroyed in Iraq. In that context, the thing that we should think about is that strategy is layered. You have ground strategy, operations and tactics. The ground strategy should be about what sort of world we want. If we want a world of nation states dealing with nation states, we need to get out of the business of empowering non-state actors. That is one of the great threats to security in the modern world. Forgive me, but I wanted to make those points.

On your question about whether a loss of 40% and 10% of territory is a success, again I go back to my point about asymmetric warfare. Success cannot easily be measured in quantitative terms. In insurgencies, particularly in ideological insurgencies, success is defined very often as survival. So if you survive against the rhetoric with which the whole world has fought you, unsuccessfully, and with the latest technology, then you are obviously divinely supported and succeeding, because the whole world, with all it's got, is failing to eradicate you.

Territory, ironically, in the case of Daesh as opposed to the case of al-Qaeda, is a critical success factor. By that I mean that if they have territory, that is how they define themselves. Daesh did not exist until it had territory. It did not declare a caliphate until it had territory. It is very different from al-Qaeda, which defined itself—its mission—as striking the far enemy. It was an operational construct. Its centre of gravity was operations, and when its ability to conduct operations against the west was effectively destroyed through the war on terror, it ceased to be a credible force. This is one of the reasons why Daesh eclipsed it. So, as long as Daesh has territory, it survives. Without territory, it cannot be Daesh as it has defined itself. Of course, the grievances will continue, and its supporters will continue, but it will cease to be an effective force.

I make that judgment based on the history of modern ideologies. If you look at communism as an ideology, it defined itself with a superior socio-economic system, and 75 years later it failed to provide that superior socio-economic system. It does not exist as a force in the modern world. There are still communists—millions of them. The Nazis defined themselves to be racially and militarily superior. Just a decade after they came on the scene, they failed to achieve their mission. There are millions of Nazis across the world. They fail to threaten the world because both of those ideologies have learnt failure. They have learnt the one lesson that they cannot change the world through force.

Exactly the same principle must be applied to Daesh, because Daesh have handed us a very convenient target. If we are to hit them, their centre of gravity is territory. Without territory, they are not a state. Without territory, they cannot claim the caliphate. Without territory, they cannot claim to be Daesh as they currently are.

Chair: So the question is who is going to retake this territory.

Q74 Mrs Moon: The 40% of the territory that has been lost in Iraq seems to be because we have credible forces on the ground, and of course a great deal of help from the Peshmerga. Is that possible in Syria when theoretically we have this so-called 70,000, but they are dispersed, if they exist, across the country? Is it possible to retake as much territory in Syria as we have in Iraq?

Dr Ashraf: It is possible, but how you do it is the question. One must question the 70,000 figure—I don't have any evidence for it. In my experience, what often happens is that if I write something in the press and say, "It is possible that" or, "It is estimated that," it becomes a fact and is repeated as a fact. Where does this 70,000 figure come from? There is evidence to suggest that not even the US knows where these people are and who they are. If they had known where these people—these friendly forces—were, the men that they trained at a cost of half a billion dollars, the two batches that they sent, would not have been captured and their weapons would not have been captured. So there is a question mark.

Every single group I have come across, with one possible exception, has a name that alludes to an Islamist ideology. There are some people, particularly some friends in the Middle East, who tell me that they are a cuddly form of Islamist and that they are people who we can do business with. Without spending too much time on it, I would say that it is very problematic. You might do some business in the short term, but in the long term you will suffer. Look at what happened to Jamaat-e-Islami's offspring, which are creating increasing havoc in Pakistan and Bangladesh. Look at the Muslim Brotherhood's offspring, which have led to the formation of al-Qaeda and Daesh. This is a problematic area, and it is one of the areas where the west should remain true to its principles.

The basic principle that we are a secular society where there is a separation of Church and state is one that we should not only perpetuate; we certainly should not empower people who do not agree with that principle. Ironically, there is nobody more secular than the Patriarch in Damascus. There is nobody more secular than the Mufti of Damascus. They have both articulated the case for the separation of Church and state more clearly than anybody else I have come across.

Major General Shaw (Retd): Can I come in briefly? I agree absolutely with the point about the spurious accuracy of the 40% or 10% figures—what do they mean? I think it is more symbolic than real; it is an order of magnitude. The difference between the two is ground forces. As you say, we have the Kurds fighting here. You would need to look at the demographic make-up of Syria to see whether there was a similar Kurdish-Syrian population that one could mobilise. To my mind, if we are going to do this, there needs to be some form of Sunni army—some army that has credibility with the local populace. That really cannot be the Christian west in anything but the very shortest term or in minor numbers. It needs to be a Sunni force, if there is one that we see as capable of it.

You brought up the point about IDPs. We need to be very clear about what we mean by success and not simply define success by military achievement, because what follows on behind the military achievement is just as important. As I said earlier, Daesh's tactic is to make the land that they relinquish uninhabitable by the displaced persons. They lace the place with IEDs and make them absolute death traps. I mention this not because I have a commercial interest in it, although I do, but just because it is a fact: in the past few days, the governor of Anbar has come to an Iraqi company—a partner of mine—to ask whether they can help the Anbar province with the clearance of IEDs. We are in the process, as a company, of applying to the United Kingdom for money to do that. If not, we will get it from the European Union or the United Nations.

The point of mentioning that is simply to say that there is now a real and present desire by these governorates to re-occupy the land that Daesh has been thrown off and to rehouse the refugee camp population into these sites. In all our focus on what you might call phase 1 to 3 operations—taking out ISIS territory—we need to ensure that we have in place the preparations to make the place habitable thereafter. That is not only because that will look after IDPs, get people restored and stop the refugee floods to the western countries, but because that promise of a better life—that promise of a life after Daesh—is precisely the kind of motivating factor that will turn Sunni people and Salafist people against Daesh and create precisely the kind of local, indigenous support against Daesh that we need if we are to take the land back from them. For both those reasons, looking at making the land

rehabitable once we have taken it off Daesh is absolutely vital. We need to be clear that we have got that planning and those financial structures in place.

Q75 Chair: Before I turn to Douglas Chapman, I want to say that our main focus as a Defence Committee has to be on the military, rather than the political aspect, although the two certainly overlap. Can I ask you both for an assessment of the fighting power of the Free Syrian Army, even though the Prime Minister has decided that he will not publish any sort of breakdown or the basis of what the Government say the JIC has told them on the 70,000 moderates? Mr Charles Lister of the Brookings Institution—he will be giving us evidence in a later session—has come up with a table of groups, a large part of which is made up by the Free Syrian Army, but also several other major groups. Are you familiar with the list? If not, can you confine yourself to an assessment of the Free Syrian Army in military terms as a fighting force that could take over and win the conflict? What sort of society do you think we would then get? Would we get an inclusive society or an Islamist society?

Dr Ashraf: I am not very familiar with the list, although I am familiar with an excellent book by one of his erstwhile colleagues. The caveat that I would put on this is that many of these groups have come into contact with very talented researchers with the assistance of regional Arab powers that have an agenda. That agenda involves empowering those groups. Billions of dollars-worth of high-tech weaponry has been pumped into these regions, nominally to go to these groups. We know, however, that some of the weaponry has fallen into the hands of Jabhat al-Nusra, which is an al-Qaeda front, and Daesh, so there is a question mark over that capability. I would caution any assessment of capability in asymmetric warfare purely on the basis of conventional armies, where you are measuring the numbers of men under arms and the equipment they have and so on, because in asymmetric warfare those things by definition do not equate directly to a capability.

The second point I would make is that the ideological mapping has not been done very well. It is very difficult to ideologically map people. As Major General Shaw began to allude when he was talking about Salafis, the problem about the theological version of Islam is that there is no clergy and no configuration control, so anyone can define themselves as a Salafi. There are no criteria for a Salafi. There are no criteria for almost anything. It is a problematic area, and that is one of the reasons why I think that the simplest and most effective way for western Governments to make a decision is based on their own criteria.

Our own criteria should simply be that religion is an important human right. We will encourage it, but we do not encourage the mixing of religion and politics, and there is a reason for that. I have spent years trying to think about why it is problematic whenever you mix religion with politics, whether it is the Hindutva ideology in India, the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa, Jewish extremists or Islamist extremists. Why is it problematic? The reason is that the two factors, religion and politics, contradict each other in one very important way. Religion aspires towards excellence. A compromise on your religious beliefs is a weakness of faith. Politics requires you to be pragmatic. Machiavelli's "The Prince" is about pragmatism. It is about looking at maximising your power given the reality on the ground. There is this contradiction that you see played out ideologically in these groups. So what we have in these so-called cuddly Islamist groups are people who have one set of beliefs, but they are politically compromising them. When

they gain power, the ideologues will say, “Well, we don’t need to compromise. Compromising is a weakness of faith, rather than of politics.” It is a very dangerous thing.

One could argue theologically—many people do—that Islam encourages a secular form of politics. The first constitution ever devised by the Prophet was secular. If you read it, it was between Jewish and Muslim peoples. There was no mention of religion. Each group will live their life according to their own laws, and they will work together according to agreed laws, which did not mention or involve religion in any way. Mapping those out in conventional terms is problematic and inadvisable. Don’t even try to understand, because the more you know about the Islamist ideology, the more confusing it is, because it is like jelly. You cannot get hold of it. The simplest thing is whether you are going to allow a secular society.

In fact, ironically, the society that exists in Damascus even to this day allows people to live and worship. The Mufti in Damascus has prayed in every single church, some of which are 1,000 years old. The mosques are decorated over Christmas. The irony of the situation is that it is probably one of the best examples of multi-culturalism, of religious tolerance, of secularism that we are allowing and witnessing the destruction of—just as we did, sadly, in Baghdad over the years.

The simplest, most accurate way is to do what the late Professor Paul Wilkinson said about dealing with terrorism: the western liberal democracies must remain true to themselves. If we use that as a guide, we won’t go too far wrong.

Q76 Chair: That was massively interesting. When we had the Prime Minister before the Liaison Committee last week, it was put to him that there may be just a binary choice between a dictatorship of some sort that is secular and an opposition victory that is Islamist, and he said that that was a counsel of despair and that there must be a third option. If the Free Syrian Army and the other groups that are commonly listed as moderate opposition forces are successful, what sort of society do you think it will be?

Major General Shaw (Retd): I think it will be authoritarian, because that is the political soil of the region.

Q77 Chair: Will it be Islamist?

Major General Shaw (Retd): It will be authoritarian one way or the other, because that is the way they work. Liberal democracy is a very fragile and specific flower that has grown over a long time in very specific cultural soil in very specific conditions. The idea that it will spring up naturally is—surely we have played this one so many times that it hardly needs arguing any more. I think the choice that you put to him was exactly the right one.

To come back the question, are the FSA a good fighting force? I do not have a hard and fast judgment on them for the many of the reasons that have already been explained. I would also say that they face the hardest struggle of the three. If there are broadly three groups—Assad, Daesh and the FSA—the FSA have it the hardest, because they are stuck in the middle between the two and are trying to fight both ways, which is incredibly difficult. In terms of the military leadership and training, they are the worst trained. Assad’s army are pretty well trained. Daesh have got Saddam’s army. I think the FSA lack the leadership to do it. Unfortunately, they are the people we seem to be historically

backing with our weapons. If that is still the case, I think we are backing the weakest horse of the three. I think they have the hardest struggle, and I don't think they are up to the challenge—my own view

On the Islamist one, the distinction I would draw is between tolerance and intolerance: it is all to do with an attitude of truth. Whereas we in the west, and in most of the world, believe in what Chomsky would call “contingent truths”—you can always improve on things and that is the very basis of western civilisation, of democracy, of progress, of the scientific approach—the opposition view to that is one of intolerance, of truth being perfect, all having been given in a book, and of progress being written out. That would seem to me to be the defining feature between the people we are looking at—in fact, the world population—those who accept the perfectibility or the imperfectibility of knowledge. That divide is key and that ties in very much with what you were just saying. So, yes, I think that is the choice we will face in Syria: it is going to be an authoritarian regime which will either be Islamist or secular, but it will be authoritarian.

Q78 Douglas Chapman: We talked this morning about this being a very fluid situation, that today's allies may be tomorrow's enemies and vice versa, but this is a very changing and fluid situation for Daesh as well. What would you consider to be their principal weakness on the ground? As their so-called caliphate covers a very wide area, what are the burdens that they carry in defending that area?

Dr Ashraf: They have a very significant burden because, as I say, they are defining themselves as territory. Territory is very hard to defend. Most of that territory is actually along huge routes, splintered along main supply routes between towns, and if you can break up those chunks of territory so that the population centres are isolated as far as Daesh is concerned, you immediately weaken this sense of a coherent entity of a state. So in classic military terms—here, Major General Shaw has the advantage of me, being a military officer—you have huge opportunities for breaking this up into chunks, dislocating them and eventually removing their influence over time.

Certainly, when it comes to urban warfare, that is where you need strategic patience, but you do not need strategic patience in overall warfare, because the advantage that conventional forces have is their ability to react rapidly. The advantage that insurgencies have is their ability to adapt over time. There is a very subtle and significant difference and we should play to our strengths—the ability to launch mass attacks very quickly, with surprise, and break up their territory. We should deny them the luxury of time and the talk that our Prime Minister has used, in terms of a generational war, and that President Obama has used, in terms of containment and then degrade and destroy, plays into their hands. So I think that territory is a key way of reversing their advantages and increasing our advantages.

Q79 Mr Spellar: On the position of Saudi Arabia in this, you will have seen the Saudi announcement of a counter-terrorism coalition initiative. What is your evaluation of that and does it lead to the possibility of seeing ground troops from the region entering Syria as part of a stabilisation operation?

Major General Shaw (Retd): Briefly, it is a good thing and a bad thing. It is a good thing because it does, indeed, give hope of some leadership from within the Sunni community to deal with this. I was very optimistic, on the demise of the previous king, that Prince bin

Nayef became number two. I thought that if he could only use his strong hand externally, as he had been using it internally, we might see some real progress. I am less clear on bin Salman, who seems to have seized the reins of power in that country and I am slightly dubious about to what end this counterterrorist coalition will be put, not least because the bad side of this coalition is that it is not simply a counterterrorist coalition, it is a Sunni coalition. The countries that it excludes are about as important and significant as the ones it includes. It does not include Iraq. It does not include Syria. It does not include Iran, so it is very much a Sunni power base. I would see it as another attempt by the Saudis to seize leadership of the entire Sunni world. We have seen them try it before, and this is the latest manifestation of it. That power could be used for good or evil.

None the less, let us take the positive out of this. It is to be hoped that, just as they have seen fit to launch Sunni assaults down into Yemen, so they might choose, despite their experiences there, to create some Sunni force, to create precisely the ground force that will be needed to take Sunni lands up in Syria. We are some way from that, but I can see that that could be the sort of political coherence you need to achieve it.

Dr Ashraf: The time, unfortunately, has passed for that solution. At the beginning of this conflict, it would probably have been very wise to have had a coalition of conventional forces from the region—defined not in Sunni-Shi’a terms but regional terms—to deal with this issue. Sadly, it is now already tainted.

The other thing that is problematic is, as Major General Shaw said, that Prince Nayef is one of the few people who really was committed to counter-terrorism because he was nearly killed by al-Qaeda. He came very close to being destroyed by them. They played a very clever ruse on him, by getting a man wearing a bomb into his office, who blew himself up while streaming the event live to his followers. Prince Nayef understood and took more seriously than most the threat ranged against him.

The other thing we should remember is that Saudis have a tradition, sadly, of not fighting, but paying others to do so on their behalf. A Saudi-led coalition is more appropriately defined as a Saudi-funded coalition. In Yemen, for example, there will be mercenaries and other forces that are being paid, for example, sadly, because of political poor handling. Pakistan, which was going to provide many of those forces, has not officially done so, but somehow we find a lot of Pakistanis there fighting, presumably funded through some mechanism. It is problematic on a practical ground, but even if it could have been done, that window of opportunity has now gone.

Q80 Mr Spellar: You talk about a Saudi-funded coalition or grouping. Do you think that that could still have any impact?

Dr Ashraf: A Saudi-funded grouping would have an impact if there were an international consensus. This conflict, certainly in the last year, has been internationalised. It has always been international, but with the involvement of the Russians, it has become internationalised. Through the Vienna conference, there should be an agreement. If there is an international agreement on the nature of that force, the composition of that force can be agreed internationally and the Saudis are in a very good position to fund it. They can bring a lot of good to bear, should they fund it, as long as it has international agreement.

Sadly, as time goes on, the options are limited. One of the options that the west may now have to consider is the reconstitution of the Syrian state. It may have to be done with a slight change of leadership, or maybe a slight rebadging of leadership. The reconstitution of the Syrian state should be the end state in this strategy, and it may be that a force based on the existing Syrian army, suitably revamped and supported by regional and international players, is the only practical option we are left with now.

Q81 Mr Spellar: Does the impact of the increasing tensions we are seeing between Saudi Arabia and Iran complicate that?

Dr Ashraf: Hugely. The Saudi-Iran thing has been going on for many years and it is complicating the issue not only in the ways that we are all beginning to understand in Syria and to some degree in Iraq, but in Libya in a very complex way and in places like Pakistan, where there is almost all-out conflict between terrorist proxies supported by both sides. I am pretty certain that this trend, if not arrested, will begin to accelerate in places such as Bangladesh and the Far East as well.

Q82 Jim Shannon: We talk about Saudi Arabia and—I think it is referred to as—its counter-terrorism coalition. Is that really a good example of a coalition, with its blanket bombing of Yemen and the destruction of the people? Is that something to look up to? Would you ever want it to be a leader of anything? I just ask the question.

Major General Shaw (Retd): Good question. I agree with the tenor of your question, but where I would find some hope is in the sense that there is some attempt to create political cohesion. But, as you said, whether the time has passed for that, I do not know.

I agree, the attacks in Yemen are not an example that we would like to see followed elsewhere. Unfortunately, it exposes the west to the accusation of double standards, in that we criticise cluster bomb use by the Russians in Syria, but our weapons, our cluster bombs, are being used by Saudi Arabia in Yemen. That is an embarrassment to the west and to our Government—and we should be embarrassed about it. Yes, I think there is a real difficulty there.

Dr Ashraf: Embarrassment is a very good word. Saudi Arabia has a natural place in the Muslim world, for both Sunni and Shi'a, and this is a great tragedy, because had the Saudi Arabians taken true leadership of the region, the world would have been a far better place. Two or three days ago, on 17 January—if it was 17 January—it was 25 years since the start of the first Gulf war, which we have forgotten, because we think it was a just war. Certainly there was a legal case for it, but the way in which it was fought was perhaps not the wisest. It was that experience—Saudi Arabia inviting, facilitating and allowing the west to fight a war that many people in the region felt that they should have fought—that resulted in the radicalisation of bin Laden. So I think that it is a great tragedy that Saudi Arabia has not taken its natural place of leadership in this Muslim world. One of the things that will come to haunt us in years to come—God forbid—is the legacy of what is now taking place in Yemen.

You make the point very well. One of the poorest countries in the world is being bombed; the vast majority of victims are civilians; and 80% of the population, according to the UN, are in need of humanitarian assistance. For that to go on month after month, year after

year, is a travesty. It is a travesty that impinges on all human beings, but in particular it is a travesty of the fundamentals of the Islamic faith—this should not and cannot be justified.

That is one of the reasons why we have this horrible choice between what we might call authoritarian regimes, some of which have been or continue to be sponsored by international support, and totalitarian regimes, such as Islamist ones, which want to offer a solution to the perceived corruption in those countries. It is about the absence of good governance and the fact that, despite having the most unimaginable wealth in the history of mankind and despite having opportunities for employment, these countries are witnessing an exodus of their fellow Muslims, who are risking their lives and those of their children to come to Europe, because here they have dignity. These are the sort of factors that Islam is supposed to provide. Neither of those organisations—the authoritarian dictatorships and the totalitarian ideologies—have answered this question.

So there is an opportunity for a third way. The current Jordanian King's uncle has been trying to answer this question for decades, but this voice of what most people might describe as true moderate Islam has been muffled by the political power of these two extreme groups. We need to see this conflict in the wider context of governance and political systems. I recognise that that is straying way beyond the Chairman's remit, but, certainly to understand our military strategy, that is the wider context that we must be thinking in terms of.

Chair: I know Mr Benyon has to leave us, but, Richard, have you time to get a question in now?

Q83 Richard Benyon: We are focusing on Iraq and Syria and our military response, but we touched on the contagion across the region. In either of your experience, have you registered real concern about the possible drift of Daesh into Jordan and, of course, Libya, where an increasingly alarming situation appears to be manifesting itself, with extremists being taken out by even more extreme extremists in a Daesh context? I would welcome your thoughts on that, because ultimately this place might have to make different decisions beyond the borders of just Iraq and Syria.

Major General Shaw (Retd): I have already mentioned that in Libya this is exactly what Daesh are doing. So it is not a worry; it is a reality. It is happening now and we can see it. Because Daesh is fundamentally an idea as well as a land mass, I suspect the idea is global—it is already there.

How much they have infiltrated to other places, we do not know. It is the nature of hybrid warfare, which I think they are doing: the precursor operations happen under one's nose without one knowing they are happening. People are corrupted and paid off, which explains how Daesh managed to take Mosul with apparently so little military effort—they had bought off and corrupted and sewn the psychological seeds well in advance. I suspect that is going on in all sorts of places and we are ill-prepared and ill-configured to detect that at the moment.

So whatever we are saying about the land mass of Daesh, I think the idea of Daesh is still out there. It has still got good publicity and we need to fight that information campaign much harder, from our point of view, for all the reasons we said. But, as you say, with

Libya it is already a reality rather than a risk. It is happening and I think pretty soon we will have to face a question of whether we do something about it.

Dr Ashraf: The big picture question really is: how did Libya come about? Libya came about because again we had the rhetoric of a nasty dictator that had to be removed because he was doing horrible things to his people, but whatever he did—I am not suggesting in any way that he was less than horrible—was less horrible than what is going on now. That is one big lesson that we must understand.

One other thing about your question, in particular on Jordan: Jordan is a real concern, because it is what I would describe as a very brittle state. It is very strong and in many ways it is an ideal partner in the region—it is very well meaning. The problem is that there are elements within Jordan: it has suffered for 60, 70 years with a massive influx of refugees from Palestine. And there are many other elements: they have a pseudo-Islamist structure that mirrors the Government in terms of the Muslim Brotherhood, with its own pseudo-Ministries and so on. It is ripe for overtaking. It is a credit to the regime in Jordan that it has managed to keep it together. We should give them every help and support to do so. We should never take Jordan for granted.

There are the sort of things that we talked about regarding Yemen and that are happening throughout the region, and there are the assumptions that we make that Major General Shaw mentioned about an hour ago in terms of looking at the role through our own prism. One of the assumptions that we make, at our peril, has been highlighted in a book called “Thieves of State” by a wonderful lady whose name has just escaped me—Sarah Chayes. She wrote in the context of Afghanistan. We assume at our peril that corruption is the norm here. What she has shown very clearly and effectively is that if there is an allergy anywhere in the world to corruption, it is, for reasons that she articulates very clearly, in the Muslim world. So what we have here is a ripe field, because of these obscenities that are taking place in Yemen and elsewhere, with human suffering on an unimaginable scale. In Lebanon even today, refugees are stealing food from animals. In any society, that is unforgivable, but it is particularly hugely offensive to Muslim sensibilities and that is what makes ordinary Muslims susceptible to extremist, simplistic messages.

Chair: We are now on the final set of questions, so we will be finishing in just a few minutes. I haven’t wanted to curtail your answers, because they have been so informative.

Q84 Ruth Smeeth: These questions are really straightforward and easy, and it’s not like they will take long at all. Given the military co-operation between Iran and Russia, how significant do you think it is beyond the prism of Syria? If you view it as significant, what impact will that have on the region in the future? That is really straightforward and will take you a minute.

Major General Shaw (Retd): In terms of the long-term global power play, it’s very important, and we shall see. Russia has long felt affronted and shunted off to the sidelines as if it was a historical power rather than a present one. In the Middle East, America’s withdrawal and residual difficulties have presented Russia with an opportunity. It has taken it, and it has made itself an inevitable part of whatever solution comes up or whatever management we do. It has made itself a world player again. Like any state, as we discussed, it will choose its allies according to its own short-term national interest, but I am interested in it seeing Iran as a suitable ally.

Iran and Russia have an interesting history. It is not a natural friendship, so it works both ways. Certainly for the moment, I think we will see them as very convenient allies for each other in opposition to what they still see as the American-run world order, and they would see this arrangement as an alternate world order created around being other than the American system. I think it will be very significant.

Regionally, I think Russia's interest is to protect its listening base and its Mediterranean port. Those are quite local things. In geopolitical terms, I think it is more significant in terms of the overall balance of power, with which we are all familiar from the past.

Dr Ashraf: I could not put it in any better terms. Realist, temporary and changeable.

Q85 Ruth Smeeth: So it was short and sweet.

You touched on it earlier on and we've talked a great deal about the effectiveness of our air campaign. However, given all that it implies for the training mission, intelligence collection, and covert operations on the ground, how sustained can we be over a prolonged period?

Major General Shaw (Retd): I think we can continue our current rate of operations for a long time. I do not see it as a problem. I would be very surprised if sustaining the current campaign was a problem.

Dr Ashraf: I am not so sure—over a longer period. I think that what we forget is that there is finite political capital in this, there is finite economic capital in this, and there is finite military capital in this. The UK forces have been massively reduced in size. Even a force, such as a small force of Tornados or Typhoons, will exhaust itself. We use the term consumed fatigue life in aircraft. We consume our airmen's good will, because only a small number of the air force are capable of conducting these operations, using this equipment and so on.

Much more importantly, if that is all we do and it continues for a long time, by definition Daesh has succeeded. Survival is success. The strategy that Bin Laden articulated very clearly 20 years ago holds sway. It is very clear: we will exhaust the west politically, militarily and economically. I have no evidence for this, but I would be extremely surprised if Daesh is not continually putting out decoy targets, because Bin Laden, again, said that they cannot produce weapons at the rate that they expend them. He was speaking in the context of the Tora Bora, where huge numbers of weapons were being spent, but those weapons are hundreds of thousands of pounds. The operations are millions. I know that for years, in the US, many friends of mind in the State Department said, "We cannot afford another trillion-dollar war." I have a doubt about our sustainability. I think it would be entirely wrong to sustain it, even if you could afford it, because we are denying ourselves success and giving success to the opposition on a plate.

Q86 Ruth Smeeth: On that basis, surely our military operation has to be part of achieving a long-term political solution. Is that what is actually happening?

Major General Shaw (Retd): I go back to my answer to the very first question: the whole significance of the air campaign is what it does to the political campaign. You are absolutely right. Military action has to be judged by its effects on the politics. If this is just

a gesture to cover up our absence of political progress, I think, as Dr Ashraf said, this is failure.

Dr Ashraf: Any military action must have a long-term political aim. The long-term political aim is presumably to restore Syria to a peaceful state, at peace with its neighbours. Whatever that requires, it requires medium and short-term political facilitation and, as I have said, the military campaign must be as short-term as possible, simply because that is where conventional forces have their advantage. If you make it long term, you strengthen the advantage of insurgencies, because they can adapt to military campaigns over a longer period.

We must reverse our thinking, culturally, on military campaigns. We must reverse what I feel—this is a very private opinion—is the reinvention of the concept of victory in western militaries. That is the most dangerous thing that has happened to us. The components of force are physical, conceptual and moral. If you are not willing to fight and win—if you do not have a winning spirit in your forces—you might as well forget the billions you have invested in your physical and conceptual components. The willingness to fight and die for a cause—the willingness to win—is our most powerful military capability. I will stress that point to the Defence Committee: it is the willingness to win that we must invest in. If we are to do that, we must think very aggressively about a strategy that will deliver military success so that political solutions can be enacted for a long-term solution.

Ruth Smeeth: That is fascinating. Thank you very much.

Q87 Mrs Moon: Briefly, I read a fantastic book on intervention in which the author said that intervention is “unpredictable, chaotic and uncertain” and “often prevents local leaders from taking responsibility” as it does not put pressure on a settlement between enemies. Interventions are often “crippled” by the frequently changing aims of the intervening Governments. Is that precisely the problem we are facing at the moment?

Major General Shaw (Retd): It is a neat encapsulation of the problem. I would agree with a lot of that. Interventions all too often, as I have said before, are the result of wishful thinking and ignorance, and a domestic focus and an over-focus of the morality of the intent, rather than the actual morality of the output, because the future is unforeseeable. So my own sense is that we have intervened in places we would have been better off not intervening, and if we have intervened, to have lower, more realistic, more prudent and more pragmatic aims. The problem comes back to selling this message to a sceptical public, and that tends to ramp up the moral rhetoric, which lands us in all kinds of problems.

Dr Ashraf: That encapsulates some of the reasons for failure intervention. But what it does not do is tell us how an intervention should be done. The greatest irony is this: the man who is responsible for the most flawed intervention, Prime Minister Blair, was also responsible for some of the most successful interventions. It is something that I wish he would speak more of. He intervened in Sierra Leone. We do not talk about Sierra Leone in terms of conflict, because that intervention was characterised by early intervention, limited aims and very swift operations, and it solved a problem that could have been accelerating out of control. He intervened in Kosovo: again, relative success and characterised by early intervention, limited aims and a very quick extraction, and a political process that has been a success.

Major General Shaw (Retd): That is the critical point. The successes of Blair's wars were when the political situation was either clear or was sorted. Sierra Leone was not about creating a new political entity; it was about protecting an existing one. So a military intervention to do with a military threat with a political end: perfect. Ditto the Falklands campaign. It was a military solution to a military response that put it back to being a political problem. It did not resolve the political issue, but it got it back to being a political issue rather than a military issue. So the military tool was suited to the military task. It is when you apply the military tool to achieve a political task that you get in trouble.

One of the indictments that I would have of our campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan as a coalition was that the military had far too strong a handle on controlling it, and the American public and the President seemed to expect American generals—I remember McChrystal and his great plan—to come up with a plan for Afghanistan. The military are designed for two things: to kill people and break things. They were fantastically successful at those in Iraq and Afghanistan, but that was not what was required. What was required was a political process and political reconstruction. That is what the military are not good at. Until you have sorted out that political end state and what you are going to do, military action will be flawed; it will be futile. My fear is that in the absence of a clear political solution, the military are deployed to cover up that absence of a political plan. That is a misuse of the military and leads to failure and flawed interventions.

Q88 Mrs Moon: I would suggest that the military are sometimes used to respond to the public's cry of, "Something must be done." If you listened to last week's statement about Madaya, some of the statements coming from the Floor of the House were frightening in terms of the supposed simplicity of what can sometimes be done by military force.

Major General Shaw (Retd): Agreed.

Dr Ashraf: The point that Major General Shaw made needs to be reinforced. Militaries are very good at destroying targets and things. The solution has to be political, and there is a real need for education both of the military by the politicians and of the politicians by the military. That relationship must be improved, so that there is an understanding of the limits of political influence and of military power.

There also has to be an understanding of the changing nature of warfare in the modern world. The utility of warfare in the modern world has changed significantly and progressively over the past century, and we are lagging behind changes. Just as the political and military power in the first world war was out of touch with the reality, which led to enormous problems, I feel there is exactly the same situation now. Both the political leadership and military leadership are out of touch with the reality of modern warfare and its capabilities, as well as its limitations.

Chair: Sadly, I have to bring matters to a close now. I do not know if our two witnesses have ever shared a panel before, but if not, their message has been superbly in synchronisation. I will risk pushing the Committee's luck a little bit by asking if the two of you might be willing, on reflecting on your evidence, to give us a joint paper as follow-up written evidence on your ideas, which you started to touch on towards the end, on what the strategy should now be. We have not heard, for example, your concept of boots with wings or, as I have sometimes called it, special forces that swoop in and swoop out, and how that might be fitted into a future strategy. I wonder, gentlemen, if you would be

willing to consider doing that in the light of the interest that you can see the Committee has in your views. Thank you very much for a most comprehensive session.