



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

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Members present: Crispin Blunt (Chair), Mr John Baron, Ann Clwyd, Stephen Gethins, Mr Mark Hendrick, Mr Adam Holloway, Daniel Kawczynski, Andrew Rosindell, Nadhim Zahawi

Questions 41-77

Witnesses: **Daniel Levy**, Head of Middle East and North Africa Programme, European Council on Foreign Relations, and **Lord Williams of Baglan**, Distinguished Visiting Fellow, Chatham House, gave evidence.

Chair: Welcome to this evidence-taking session of the Foreign Affairs Committee on our inquiry into the fight against ISIL: the United Kingdom's role. I would be very grateful if our two witnesses for the first session could identify themselves for the record.

Lord Williams of Baglan: I am Michael Williams, and I am a former special adviser to three former Foreign Secretaries—Robin Cook, Jack Straw and David Miliband. I served many years in the UN, in Cambodia, the Balkans and the Middle East.

Daniel Levy: I am Daniel Levy, and I head the Middle East and North Africa work at the European Council on Foreign Relations.

Q41 Chair: Thank you very much to both of you for coming. Feel free to pick up the questions, which are not necessarily directed at either of you, but only feel it necessary to reinforce the answer of the other if you have a slightly different perspective or if you think it could do with elucidation for us.

Peace talks between the Syrian regime and the Syrian opposition were due to start on 1 January, and then they were due to start yesterday. Who is not taking this process seriously? Why have these talks not begun, in your judgment?

Lord Williams of Baglan: I think people are taking it seriously, but it is partly a result of the number of parties involved. Of course the Syrian Government, the Assad regime, has one address, one post-box. The opposition is a more loose formation and has needed some coaxing. Vice-President Biden was in Turkey over the weekend, and Secretary Kerry has been in Saudi Arabia over the past few days. My sense from UN colleagues is that, inshallah, as they say in the Arab world, talks will start on Friday. Invitations have gone out, and I am

perhaps guardedly optimistic that they will go ahead. This war is now in its fifth year. The Committee will be all too familiar with the appalling violations of human rights, the deaths and injuries, and even among the parties there is a certain tiredness. I think the nuclear deal with Iran has helped, and the fact that President Rouhani is in Europe this week—in France and Italy, and so on—shows that Iran wants to move forward, which will have a beneficial effect on the Syrian civil war.

Daniel Levy: I think the headline is not the postponement but that the talks are very likely to start on Friday, which was a lot less certain a few days ago. That does not mean that we should now think that this will go swimmingly, that talks begin on Friday and that, in a couple of weeks from now, we can announce a breakthrough. Clearly that is not the case. The odds are still massively stacked against this process delivering where processes in the past failed to deliver, but the extent of the contestation over who should be at these talks is also probably good news. You could just put that down to the egos and petty squabbling of different factions. As Lord Williams said, it is easy to send a Government faction/delegation to the talks. It is not so simple on the opposition side. Again, if one is looking for silver linings and some encouragement for the talks, the fact that there is an interest in participating is good news.

The most important thing for this Committee to consider, given the work you have done in the past on Syria, is that one needs a Syria strategy. One cannot have an ISIL strategy in Syria. One needs a Syria strategy without revisiting the debates you had in this House at the end of last year. In many respects, that famous claim of 70,000 moderate opposition fighters did not matter—either the veracity of the number or the attribution of moderation—whether there were seven, 7,000 or 700,000 or 70, because until one addresses the broader conflict in Syria, those forces are not going to be overwhelmingly focusing on ISIS or being a ground force to our air force, because they will be too busy defending themselves from the regime or trying to launch a counter-offensive.

The fact is that we will now likely be in a process later this week. I don't know if people had a chance to follow the press conference yesterday in Switzerland by the special envoy of the UN, Staffan de Mistura. He was wisely cautious in what he said. He expects at least some of the delegations to be in town on Friday, given that what we are talking about are proximity talks, not a big ceremony of opening a plenary with everyone in the room. Therefore, he will shuttle between rooms.

I think he is also edging to a formula for addressing the question of who will be there in the opposition. As people may be aware, the Saudis have hosted an attempt to form an opposition delegation in Riyadh. They are calling that the higher negotiating committee. It seems the approach that will be taken is that that delegation will be seen as the first among equals of non-regime representation in the talks. It seems you will have other rooms with civil society. Staffan de Mistura has made a point that he wants women representatives there; they are almost overwhelmingly not going to be on the official delegations.

Parts of the opposition, certainly viewed as such in Moscow or Cairo or elsewhere—the Kurdish issue is a big one here—are likely to be not in this formal Riyadh-constituted higher negotiating committee team but in other rooms. I don't know how exactly they will be designated; that is something they are still working on.

Q42 Chair: So it wouldn't be right to say that what appeared to be regime preconditions regarding the composition of the opposition were meant to derail the talks before they started. Is that suggestion now been shown to be false?

Lord Williams of Baglan: My sense is that the regime is not going to be able to block as many as it would have liked. It is not going to have the right to veto. From what I hear, the UN is guardedly optimistic. Staffan de Mistura is a colleague with long experience. He served in Afghanistan and Iraq, so he is used to these struggles and negotiations. This is moving forward, albeit slowly.

I was reminded by something I was reading last night of the remark made by Churchill during the war in the autumn of '42 when the tide was beginning to turn. Someone asked whether it was the beginning of the end of the war. He said, "No. It is the end of the beginning."

Chair: Alamein.

Lord Williams of Baglan: Exactly. That may be the moment where we are.

Q43 Nadhim Zahawi: I would just like to declare an interest. I was born in Baghdad to Kurdish parents. I came to the UK in '78 and my family still maintains businesses in that country. I draw the Committee's attention to the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

Lord Williams, Daniel, welcome. At our last evidence session we were told that the opposition delegation was much more engaged in the process than the regime delegation. Obviously, as you put it, Lord Williams, the opposition does not have a single post-box address; but would you, on the whole, agree with that in terms of level of engagement?

Lord Williams of Baglan: It may be changing a little now. Just as the regime only has one post-box, it has one view. If that small group at the top around Bashar al-Assad decide we need to do this, and of course the regime feels more confident, I have to say a lot of that confidence is drawn from some successes on the ground—successes enabled in considerable part by Russian military intervention, which has worked very well, with the co-ordination of the Russian air force and the Syrian army. Only today there is a town in the south towards Deraa, called Sheikh Miskeen, which has been recaptured by the regime.

So the regime probably has a bit more confidence. It does not want to be seen—and of course Russia, for all the faults of the Government of President Putin, is a permanent member of the Security Council; they take that seriously and I think they want to see movement, now, on this. They do not want to be the one who are seen as spoilers; and of course it is easier for them to bring their team there. For the opposition it is more diverse and that is a harder act.

As Daniel mentioned, I think it is very good that Staffan de Mistura and the British Government have raised this time and time again: that women and civil society should be represented. I know that he and his UN colleagues have gone to considerable lengths to make sure that that is the case.

Daniel Levy: I think part of the premise of pulling this process together—if one remembers the chronology in terms of when this latest international Syria support group Vienna process was launched, it really came off the back of the Russian military intervention

being massively stepped up, and the acknowledgement that if you are going to have a more effective push against ISIS, you needed to address the broader Syria conflict. What I think that should tell us is that the premise for this political effort is that greater Russian ownership of the Assad regime's fighting capacity, survival capacity—success capacity, perhaps—should translate, or at least we should try in a diplomatic process to translate it, into greater Russian ability to extract political deliverables from the Assad Government at the negotiating table.

I think that is the hypothesis that the Americans are putting to the test and that the other participants in the Vienna process, on the flip side of the Syria struggle, are trying to put to the test. In that respect I don't think you are going to have an Assad Government that says, "Well, here's my first plan for a political transition; if you don't like that one, I've got a wardrobe full of alternative plans." I think this is about saying, "OK, you've got them at the table; now let's see some angle. Now let's see what they're actually willing to do by way of power sharing, by way of a transitional Government, by way of a constitutional process."

One of the challenges that the UK Government and others will face is being able to match any forward lean by the Russians in the name of the Assad Government, or by the Assad Government itself, by bringing the opposition parties to also engage in some kind of a compromise. I think that's one of the challenges, obviously, with the regional supporters of the opposition groups.

Q44 Nadhim Zahawi: So would I be right in saying that both the regional powers, as well as the international powers, would all agree on one lesson, which is a painful lesson from Iraq? The maintenance of the infrastructure of government in Syria is something that we can all agree on.

Lord Williams of Baglan: We are not entirely there; I would hope we would be there.

Q45 Nadhim Zahawi: Who would disagree with that statement?

Lord Williams of Baglan: I am not sure about Saudi Arabia, for example, which still takes a very, very critical stance towards the Assad regime; and even Turkey.

Q46 Nadhim Zahawi: Well, if you remove Assad and keep the regime?

Lord Williams of Baglan: That could be different. I would say, Assad has done many terrible things. In the Balkans we negotiated with Milosevic and Mladic and Karadzic; they were all indicted war criminals later, but we had to sit around a table with them. I referred to my experience in Cambodia in the early '90s. We negotiated with the Khmer Rouge; they certainly killed far more people than Bashar al-Assad ever could. If you can't defeat your enemies militarily—and Mr Baron is a former Army officer, so I don't need to say this—at the end you have to come to a discussion and a negotiated settlement. Will Assad go? I think probably, and there was a very interesting piece in the *Financial Times* on Saturday, which looked reasonably sourced and suggested that Russia had in fact tried to move him, which was a surprise, but there seemed to be some legs to that story.

One important thing is that we learn the lessons of Iraq, and I think that was behind your question. Where to start in terms of mistakes that were made there? But one mistake that

was made was the outlawing of the Ba'ath party. I think at some stage, key Western Governments—I hope our own included—have to take that initiative and make that statement of a difference between Bashar al-Assad and the party. Without that, there will not be anything to inherit. That was one of the many, many mistakes made in Iraq—the destruction of the regime meant that in the end, the West had very little or nothing to deal with, outside the Kurdish areas. That cannot happen in Syria, and I am sure that neither Russia nor Iran would be willing to allow that to happen.

Q47 Nadhim Zahawi: You say the Saudis and the Turks—

Lord Williams of Baglan: Saudi and Turkey will be more difficult to bring along on this.

Daniel Levy: Although I am not sure, and I agree with Lord Williams, I think you could probably get everyone to sign up to your opening statement. I think the difficulty is, as you have suggested, Michael, and where the faultline will come is, can the state hold together in the absence of Assad, and even if it could, can you deradicalise, under circumstances of the continued presence of Assad? I am more sceptical about the *FT* story, which has since expired, apparently—apparently, a Russian general died in the three weeks since he went to Damascus; that is what the report said.

Turning to Assad, okay, time to go; because my sense is that the Russian—and I think this is shared with Iran—analysis, and whether there are chinks in the senior echelons of the regime or not, I think the shared question is, can you hold this together without Assad? Now—I have heard this from senior Russian officials—I think there is not necessarily a personal commitment to the person of Assad, but I think they would want to get satisfaction on the answer to that question, and of course, on the opposition side, maybe not the opposition's battles but on the opposition side, it goes much deeper. I think the opposition's battles—it is not just Assad; it is also a cohort around Assad.

Chair: Let's turn to that question. Andrew Rosindell.

Q48 Andrew Rosindell: How can we try to secure the help of the Russians, and possibly the Iranians, to pressure the Assad regime to actually engage with the talks—take the talks more seriously and realise that this is a serious negotiation that they have to be part of if we are to make progress?

Lord Williams of Baglan: I think the short answer is with some difficulty. One can actually separate Russia and Iran—you asked about both—and the curious thing is that Iran seems to me is the easier party to court at the moment, not least because of the success of the nuclear agreement with the P5 plus Germany. Also, I mentioned Rouhani's trip to France and Italy; I hope that at some point the President can visit Great Britain, because we have a long history with Iran going back centuries.

I think the Iranians want to look for a way forward. With Russia, it is more complicated. I do not need to speak to the Committee about the difficult bilateral relations, to say the least, and I think, above all, of the revelations last Friday in the inquiry into the death of Alexander Litvinenko. Relations are difficult, but we still have to forge ahead with them.

Stalin was not a natural partner for Winston Churchill until the German invasion of Russia in 1941. But Russia is conscious of its place on the Security Council, and the United States knows that it needs Russia to put pressure on the Assad regime. So I think that to some extent—and this is very difficult, especially given what has happened in this very city—we have to look towards Russian support on the Syrian issue. There is no other alternative.

Daniel Levy: The common position is there is no military solution; of course, there is no common position on what the political solution looks like, but at what stage does Russia say, “We’ve secured as much as we intend to secure militarily for the regime. We are not going to get sucked in further”? That is not a mistake, and I am attributing things here that may not exist in terms of the Russian thinking, but if one takes that leap for a moment, they are not willing to get sucked in further, so therefore—this is the premise I referred to earlier—what is the regime going to bring to the table on politics on some kind of a transition? We do now have a plan. It does not look particularly implementable, but we have UN Security Council resolution 2254, which we did not have in the past. It has a timetable and it has a plan on the constitution, on governance and on elections. What elements of that—colleagues and I have written in the past on horizontally and vertically devolving power from the presidency to other organs of Government, from Damascus to other parts of Syria—can the Russians get the Government to sign up to?

In my conversations with senior Russians, I have heard them say, “Once the regime feels more secure”—this is probably a self-serving argument, but this is the argument they have put forward—“they might be willing, and we will be encouraging them, to be more forthcoming.”

Let me add one other thought on the UK and Europe in this respect. Lord Williams has raised an interesting point on the respective positions that Russia and Iran have taken. In many ways, it is quite convenient for the Iranians right now to have Russia in the lead. It is Russia that is owning the dispute over the opposition delegation and who should and should not be in it and so on. But when it comes to working with the Iranians, Washington still remains very constrained in terms of how much engagement there is, and that is true for Tehran as well. On both sides there is a toxicity in their respective systems to US-Iranian engagement politically that does not apply in Europe.

The UK is probably least well positioned. It is not a coincidence that the Iranian President is not coming here first in his European tour, but none the less it seems the Foreign Minister, Zarif, will be here for the Syria refugee conference. So we may be able to play a role there that the Americans cannot.

Part of the answer to getting the other side focused, to testing this hypothesis and to putting pressure on Russia, or Russia and Iran, to get the Assad Government to bring something to the table is that we can do likewise with our allies—the opposition side. You see an American effort to try to push some kind of a retreat from maximalism by the regional backers of the opposition in the Gulf, Turkey and elsewhere. They are trying to soften them up for compromise and I fear that we may sometimes stiffen their spine against compromise, rather than being encouraging about it.

Q49 Mr Baron: I think most of us would accept that soldiers can only buy time. You need the diplomats and politicians to provide the longer-term solution. With that in mind, do you

accept that the West has made a fundamental shift in its position regarding the approach to these peace talks by not arguing for or making it a precondition for the talks that Assad must go? What do you think has brought that about? Is it the realism on the ground—the need to ensure that we have apparatus on the ground after some sort of settlement—or the realisation that ISIL now presents the greater danger? What implications does this have for any possible solution to the crisis?

Lord Williams of Baglan: To be frank, I have always had some misgivings with our position that Assad must go. It personalised it and made little historical sense. Once you decide that you are not going to wage a war against the other party, how will the leader depart, especially when he has entrenched support in the country? You can argue over how much entrenched support he has within the country but he certainly has entrenched support externally with the Russians, Iranians and Hezbollah in Lebanon. It seemed the wrong focus.

The focus should have been that the Assad regime must change and that we must have a more responsible and representative Syrian Government—not to personalise it around Assad. I would have preferred something like what happened in the Balkans. We negotiated with the likes of Milosevic, Karadzic and so on. I was later a witness against them in the tribunal on war crimes in The Hague. One issue that I do not see very much to the fore throughout the four or five years of this war is that of international justice and of the International Criminal Court. If war crimes have been committed on such a scale, surely that court should look at that. In a way, moving those issues to that court takes it away from the politics. I have never felt that simply saying that Assad must go made much sense. It put the UN in a difficult position because who are they going to talk to? They need to talk to Assad.

Daniel Levy: Can I add one point?

Chair: We have another session to go, so may I move on to Adam Holloway?

Q50 Mr Holloway: On that point, I totally agree with what you are saying about separating the Assad brothers from the wider regime but is it really possible to separate war crimes from the politics given that appalling things have been done by both sides? Right the way down the regime in the armed forces and security services—you only have to look on the internet and type, “Syria torture videos”, and you will see thousands of videos of Assad troops and, likewise, the opposition, beating people to death. Is it really so straightforward to say that we have to get rid of a few key people in the regime? This is much worse than the aftermath of the invasion of Iraq when scores were settled. This goes right the way down the military and security structures in Syria.

Lord Williams of Baglan: It does but I know that Ann Clwyd MP would argue that this was the same in Iraq. The Ba’athist regimes, like so many Middle Eastern regimes, were entrenched not for years, but for decades. They were ruled by brute force and, if necessary, murder and torture. Those were political mechanisms.

Q51 Mr Holloway: To be fair, I was there in the immediate hours of those Iraqi cities being liberated, and this is a completely different thing, with the abuse of the population by both sides, but particularly by the regime beating people to death. I go back to my question: is it really so straightforward to separate politics and war crimes? The crimes go all the way down.

Lord Williams of Baglan: They do, but if we are in the game of a negotiated peace, we somehow have to separate the politics and international justice in that regard. That is why, after all, this country among others supported the formation of the International Criminal Court. It is for the court to look at these crimes and, if necessary, to bring cases against defendants and perhaps against institutions.

Q52 Mr Holloway: I get that, but in real practical terms of having some sort of political accommodation, how is one going to get opposition fighters or the civilian population to interact with former regime elements when the abuses go so far up and down the regime? The International Criminal Court will only do a tiny number of people.

Lord Williams of Baglan: It was only a small number of those who may have committed very substantial crimes in Bosnia and in Kosovo who were tried. I think that that is the nature of this sort of post-war justice.

Q53 Mr Baron: Can I just follow on briefly on the implications of the west's change with Assad looking forward? If we have changed our position—it certainly looks like that—to what extent does that have implications for a solution going forward? For example, talk was made about the 70,000 moderates. That was an important part of the debate, because when the Government hangs its case on having a comprehensive strategy and on having 70,000 moderates about to turn face and face ISIS, and that is falling away as the Government is speaking, it is right that Parliament scrutinises that. A more credible opposition to ISIL when it comes to troops on the ground would be Assad's own forces.

Lord Williams of Baglan: I agree.

Q54 Mr Baron: Given that we dropped that opposition to Assad—it is quite clear that we have over a period of time—what implications does that have for possible solutions going forward?

Lord Williams of Baglan: ISIL, of course, is a transnational movement. It regards states as evil imperialist formations and all the rest of it. It must be fought on a transnational basis, and that fight has to be co-ordinated between countries. It is difficult to see how elements of the present Syrian army would not be involved in that fight.

Q55 Mr Baron: But it is going to be very difficult for anyone other than the Syrian regime to put troops actually on the ground. A lot of the other things around that military package can be put into place by the west and others, but troops on the ground is a very sensitive issue. I therefore come back to that original question: to what extent will our change with regard to Assad influence the solution going forward when it comes to taking on ISIL on the ground?

Daniel Levy: It drives a logic that says, “Have a messy political compromise in Syria”. Through that, the Assad forces, the Kurdish forces, which we are working with already, the YPG and whatever remains of an opposition fighting force that is willing to be part of that messy accommodation and part of that struggle against ISIL—then, one will have to divide up who takes on ISIL where. Those groups would then be the basis.

Going back to the “Assad must go” point, it stems from this recognition of the mismatch between means and ends when we made that “Assad must go” declaration. One can

deliver on that, and that probably means taking full ownership of the conflict in Syria, its resolution and the removal of Assad and his regime. Wisely, we are not willing to put the means into that. Alternatively, one changes the end—the outcome to which we aspire—and that is a difficult transition to make. It is not made any easier by the points that were just raised by Mr Holloway on coming to terms, to a significant degree, with what that regime looks like. It is not made any easier by the relationships we have in the region with those backing the opposition and by the relationships with the opposition, but that is now the logic of where we are going. That is kind of what the effort in Iraq looks like, where there is now progress on squeezing ISIS.

When it comes to confronting ISIS, the question might have been set a decade ago, “How do we defeat al-Qaeda? Well, we can defeat al-Qaeda. By the way, there is this nasty by-product that might come about, an even more virulent stream of al-Qaeda—al-Qaeda 2.0—called Daesh.” If we said now, “Well, that’s fine. As long as we can defeat Daesh, we don’t really care what al-Qaeda 3.0 looks like”—

Chair: You said earlier that we needed to do Syria before we did ISIL. Can we just return to the immediate prospects around Syria?

Q56 Daniel Kawczynski: Saudi Arabia instigated roundtable discussions with the opposition groups in December. One of those that was included was the radical Ahrar al-Sham group. Do you believe that they are becoming more moderate and joining the mainstream?

Daniel Levy: I don’t think we gain clarity by even using terms like “moderate” here. No, Ahrar al-Sham are not moderates in a way that any of us would conjure a list of things that constitute moderation. If Ahrar al-Sham are willing to be around a table and be part of a political process, we should not exclude them from that process. It doesn’t look like they will actually be represented in the delegation—another group with whom they fight will be. The Russians have tried to have that group, Jaysh al-Islam, excluded from the delegation, but it seems that they will swallow that and accept them on the delegation.

In situations like this, whatever part of hard-line, radicalised fighting forces are willing to join a political process and slowly go through a transition, the end point of which is not necessarily the moderation of their ideology or philosophy but hopefully that they are no longer killing people and are part of a solution rather than part of a problem, that is not a stupid guiding principle for how to work such processes—if Ahrar al-Sham or other groups are on board. Look, we have a real problem. Ahrar al-Sham is in a military fighting coalition with the al-Qaeda Syria affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra, in different parts of Syria. You have this—it seems crazy—situation in Syria where Russia and America are quite close, given the proximity in which they are fighting, to a conflict over America defending al-Qaeda almost. We should avoid that. We have a real problem with this group because of the affiliation with al-Qaeda. I think it is right to keep the al-Qaeda affiliate listed—there are only two groups fighting there that the UN has listed, the al-Qaeda affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra, and ISIS. I don’t think listing should go further. I think it was an encouraging sign that Ahrar was willing to be in the process and that the Saudis managed to bring them there.

Q57 Daniel Kawczynski: Subsequently to their signing the declaration with the other opposition groups, we had been led to believe that they had split and that there had been

splinters within the group. Some of their members have dissociated themselves from the declaration that was signed in Riyadh. Might that undermine the talks?

Daniel Levy: The Syrian fighting opposition groups are not groups that have been around for decades, where there is a strong identification, affiliation and sense of loyalty to a particular group. Most of these groups are of relatively recent vintage, and very recent in many cases. Affiliations are very fluid, and the point to take away from this is that a real struggle with the opposition in general is the ease with which you are branded a sell-out because you have attached yourself to a political process that broaches compromise, rather than maximalism. Much as Lord Williams and I may have staked out a certain position of what needs to happen in a political process, we should not lose sight of the fact how difficult it is for the fighting opposition, as they are looking over their shoulders at their own fighters and constituencies and, what is often the case, at the money. Who is willing to provide money for what? It may well be the case that you no longer get paid your stipend as a fighter if you become part of a political process, because that is not what your financial backers were paying you to do.

In any process, if you bring the extremists in and they lose their fighters and backers, it was not much point having them at the table. That is why these things tend to be very difficult, replete with setbacks and lengthy.

Q58 Daniel Kawczynski: In a sentence, how would you gauge Saudi Arabia's attempts at bringing these groups together?

Daniel Levy: The attempts to bring the groups together could be helpful. It depends on what position they are encouraging the groups to take at the negotiating table. I don't think the Saudi position is necessarily neutral in that respect. That is why I am saying that what one needs is a willingness to inch towards compromise rather than to support the groups in maximalist positions.

Q59 Stephen Gethins: Following Daniel's line of questioning, you mentioned, Mr Levy, getting Government negotiators to the talks as a reasonably straightforward process. Given that and your response to Daniel, how representative of the situation on the ground do you think the opposition delegation will be when they actually get to Geneva?

Daniel Levy: If my assumption of different delegations sitting in different rooms turns out to be the way it looks, that begins to look quite representative. We also have to bear in mind that the fighting opposition is not necessarily representative of the Syrian population. It is not necessarily more representative of the Syrian population than the Government. The very real possibility exists that were there to be free and fair elections in Syria, Assad would be re-elected.

The non-fighting opposition needs to be there as well, because that also represents a real constituency in Syria. If you take what has been called the higher negotiating committee based in Riyadh, that is quite representative of the fighting opposition, not necessarily of the Syrian people.

Q60 Stephen Gethins: Can I ask you both whether you think the opposition will be reasonably well represented this weekend if talks get underway?

Lord Williams of Baglan: I think it will. Staffan de Mistura and his colleagues have gone to extraordinary lengths to try to ensure that. I know that they have appealed to relevant Governments, including that of Saudi Arabia, to be helpful in that regard. The sense I have is one of being guardedly optimistic.

Q61 Stephen Gethins: Thank you for your brief answers. If I may Chair, I have just one more question, as time is marching on. Mr Levy, you made a point about decentralisation as part of any deal. I know you will not be able to answer over-briefly, but could you expand on that? What might that look like and is it something that they are seriously talking about?

Daniel Levy: I think de facto the writ of the Syrian Government does not expand to all of Syria today, so it may well be in some respects a recognition of a reality that already exists on the ground. But that would mean allowing certain regions, towns, governorates perhaps, to have a degree of devolved power, including the provision of security to the people living in a certain area.

There is the other level. There is talk in the UN resolution of having a transitional Government. What kind of powers does that have? Where is this going to bump up against hard realities? Mostly in the security sector, I would say. That is the kind of thing one would be looking at, if that is a short enough answer.

Q62 Stephen Gethins: I understand. We could have talked for hours about that.

Lord Williams of Baglan: I agree with that.

Q63 Ann Clwyd: I think you have partly answered my questions, but I would like you to say what you think a positive outcome of the Geneva talks would look like. Should they focus on setting up a transitional government, or on dealing with the terrorists? What should the focus be?

Lord Williams of Baglan: That is a tough question. I am sure that Staffan de Mistura will have ideas about that, and to see what is achievable. He will want to get out of this something that he can put in the bank next Monday, or a month from now, and to be able to build on that in future rounds of talks. We can't afford to see these talks fail, because the only consequence would be even greater violence. I think that, fragile though it is, there is enough of a momentum now to gain traction.

Daniel Levy: I will add one sentence, if I may. I think that he—Staffan de Mistura—and we should all appreciate that, in terms of that kind of political outcome, this is going to be a long slog at best. I think the deliverables that Lord Williams rightly says will have to be quite front-loaded will revolve around such questions as, “Can you get ceasefires in certain areas? Can you get a de-escalation in certain areas?” We have seen this occasionally. Unfortunately, sometimes it has looked more like a siege, producing a local deal. Can it look a lot less like that? Can you get humanitarian access? This is where one should have a full press by the global actors and the regional actors on the respective parties to make that happen, and where you might begin to see early positive results.

Q64 Ann Clwyd: What role do you think the FCO should play in supporting the peace process?

Lord Williams of Baglan: It should play a very important role. I just want to add to that. Something that happened recently, which is a prelude to these talks, is the convoy that eventually got through to this village of Madaya, the Sunni village, and also to two Shi'a villages in the north, Kefraya and al-Foua. That had been negotiated about a year ago. I think the timing of that—before these talks—is no accident and the UN will want to go forward on this. This is the sort of thing that we did in Bosnia: going to Serb villages and Croat villages over there, on a quid pro quo basis. And gradually that can help build a basis.

You ask, Ann, about the role of the FCO. Obviously, it needs to be working hard. I hope that our embassy in Tehran is very engaged with the Iranians on the Syrian question; it should be. I would hope that it is taking forward this question of justice; the sort of questions that Mr Holloway raised and which in some ways I answered inadequately. In the second world war, we declared the SS a criminal organisation, so everybody who served in it was judged a criminal. We did not say that about the Wehrmacht. Now, we could say that about the Syrian army, but only an occupying power can do that, and as we all know there is not going to be an occupying power in Syria. We tried that in Iraq. It didn't work.

Daniel Levy: I want to be a bit more blunt, if I may, in a very short response. In responding to your report, the Prime Minister said, among other things, that alongside military action the UK would put its full diplomatic weight into this. I really hope that what we've seen does not constitute the full diplomatic weight of this country.

We are one of 20 around the table in the International Syria Support Group; together with European colleagues, we are five of 20. Sometimes I think that dogged relentlessness in shuttling back and forth to the relevant capitals—I would argue in shuttling as a European five: the French, the Germans, the Italians and the EU High Representative are all part of this Syria process. I don't think we're seeing a degree of prioritisation of being a nuisance. Go back and forward to the regional actors, to the Americans and the Russians; be nudging on this continuously. Have a set of goals on where those ceasefires and humanitarian access should be. I am sure that the UN Special Envoy would welcome consistent high-level political support, and I think our default position is still to do the easy thing of laying more blame on the other side, not wanting to distance ourselves too much—not have too much clear blue sky between ourselves and our regional allies—and letting others do the heavy diplomatic lifting. I do not want to pretend that we can have a decisive putting our thumb down on one side of this, but I do think that we are punching below our weight.

Chair: That is very clear and a very good note on which to finish, if you will forgive me, because we are now behind schedule. Lord Williams and Daniel Levy, thank you very much indeed for your evidence.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: **Gareth Stansfield**, Senior Associate Fellow, Royal United Services Institute, **Zeynep Kaya**, Fellow, London School of Economics, and **Güney Yıldız**, Turkish and Kurdish Affairs Analyst, gave evidence.

Chair: Thank you for coming. My apologies for our slightly over-running and keeping you waiting. Please identify yourselves for the record. I know you want to be clear about the guise

in which you are speaking. So let us know who you are and the organisations you are associated with.

Güney Yıldız: My name is Güney Yıldız. I am an analyst focusing on Turkey, Kurds and Syria. I am a visiting fellow in an institute in Vienna and I am speaking in a personal capacity here.

Zeynep Kaya: I am Zeynep Kaya. I am a research fellow at the LSE Middle East Centre and I work on the Kurdish politics of the Middle East. I am here in an academic capacity, so what I am saying here does not represent the Middle East Centre's position.

Gareth Stansfield: My name is Gareth Stansfield. I am a professor of Middle East politics at the University of Exeter and a senior associate fellow at RUSI. I specialise particularly in the politics of Iraq, Kurdistan and increasingly ISIS.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. During the question session, if you think you have more to say when a colleague has answered, please chip in. If you are in agreement, there is no need to reinforce what has already been said.

Q65 Stephen Gethins: Thank you for coming along today. I have a straightforward question. Do you think that Turkey's current stance in regard to the Kurds is undermining the fight against Daesh?

Zeynep Kaya: ISIS?

Stephen Gethins: Yes.

Zeynep Kaya: To answer the question, we need to look at it from Turkey's perspective. For Turkey, what is at stake is the PKK and PYD. Turkey is part of the coalition and part of the fight against ISIS. It also experiences attacks from ISIS. ISIS did not claim they were their attacks, but that is the case. For Turkey, the fight with the PKK is the priority. It is more important because Turkey sees the PKK and the PKK's connection with the PYD, and the increasing strength of the PYD in Syria, as a threat to its territorial unity. If the connection between the PYD and the PKK strengthens, and the border between Syria and Turkey becomes a border where Kurds on both sides are becoming more connected, this might in the long term have implications for territorial unity, so Turkey is thinking about this issue in those terms, whereas ISIS never threatened Turkey's territorial unity.

Q66 Stephen Gethins: Sure, but what impact do you think that that has on Turkey and the broader coalition's fight against ISIL/Daesh?

Zeynep Kaya: I think it is weakening the coalition and the fight.

Gareth Stansfield: I share those views and would perhaps go even further. It is absolutely undermining the ability of the PKK/HPG/YPG—however you want to call these different PKK fighting formations on that side—to prosecute the fight against ISIS. It is both in military terms—the PKK is having to redeploy, either back to Qandil or into south-east Anatolia—but also in straightforward diplomatic terms. The Syrian Kurds and especially the

YPG are increasingly more concerned about the threat that Turkey poses to them, rather than the threat that Raqqa and other places may pose to them going forward. It affects them diplomatically in terms of inclusion in the different talks, such as Geneva III.

There is also another dimension here, which is how it undermines the Kurdish ability to fight. That is not just the PKK, but the integrity of the Kurds of Iraq. Turkey's involvement in terms of fighting the PKK is introducing a split in the integrity of the Kurdish political scene in Iraq—that could be very dangerous going forward—to the extent that all these groups, which are the most effective war fighters against ISIS on the ground, are increasingly more limited in their ability to prosecute that fight and support it.

Q67 Stephen Gethins: So this is undermining the fight that is being carried out by the Kurds against ISIL, in your view?

Gareth Stansfield: It is an unqualified yes to that.

Q68 Stephen Gethins: If I may ask one final question, which reflects on a question that I asked Mr Levy, do you think that that makes a long-term political settlement a lot more unlikely, especially if you look, for example, at some kind of decentralisation as part of a solution to the situation in Syria, with more power therefore for Syrian Kurds?

Zeynep Kaya: To realise it, we need to think about what is happening in Syria and the other Syrian groups' position towards Kurdish autonomy. If the de facto autonomy turns into de jure autonomy, who will be part of that? We know that Kurds on the ground in Syria are divided. The KNC is sidelined right now and the PYD is dominating the area and is running the administrative parts. The YPG is the main military operation taking place there. The KNC does not have those capacities. If there is a coalition and an understanding among Kurdish groups in Syria on such a formation, that is possible, but you also have to think about other opposition groups within Syria and the regime and Turkey, and what they are going to say. It might be part of a solution, but reaching the solution might become part of the problem.

Güney Yıldız: I want to put this into a different context. I believe that Turkey has followed Western policies vis-à-vis Syria.

Q69 Chair: Güney, you are speaking slightly more clearly than your colleagues, so thank you, but I ask all of you to speak up a bit. I was struggling.

Güney Yıldız: I was just making the point that Turkey has been following Western policies towards Syria from early on, but Turkey diverted from Western policies when the West was becoming increasingly less active in the region. They followed the policies that were set out by their Western partners and tried to pursue them, but on undermining the fight against ISIS, we have to look at other actors. We can argue that Russia is undermining the fight against ISIS by also attacking other rebel groups. Assad is undermining the fight against ISIS by focusing on other groups.

Turkish diversion from the rest of the Western coalition in the Syrian civil war happened when ISIS and al-Nusra started attacking the Kurdish groups in northern Syria. As Zeynep mentioned, Turkey sees more of an existential threat from that than from ISIS. To bring Turkey more on board, it is necessary to help Turkey and the Kurds solve their

problems. The West, including the EU and the US, did not play its role when there was a peace process in Turkey with the Kurds and the Turks. The two sides need to be brought together, because Turkey used to have better relations with Syrian Kurds. In preparation for this meeting, I spoke to a top Syrian Kurdish leader and also to senior Turkish officials. I came to the conclusion again that, for Turkey and the Kurds, the problems are so difficult to solve among themselves that they clearly need external help.

Q70 Chair: Who needs external help?

Güney Yıldız: Both the Kurds and Turkey need external help to bring them to the table. The role that the UK can play is to push both sides to come to the negotiating table again.

Q71 Chair: How would you construct that help? Turkey appears to have behaved in a way in the past six months that has been largely reckless to the interests of the wider international community, by seeking any opportunity to find a casus belli to reopen the Kurdish insurgency through the PKK.

Güney Yıldız: Both sides are in a position now. Turkey has been struggling to constrain the uprising in the south-east. The PKK is a military—

Q72 Chair: There was no uprising before July, was there? There was a ceasefire, wasn't there?

Güney Yıldız: There was a ceasefire.

Zeynep Kaya: There were ongoing small attacks. It was not a full peace.

Q73 Chair: I am trying to understand Turkish policy. There was an opportunity to treat those crimes being committed against Kurdish and Turkish and other people in that region as crimes and to prosecute them and police them in that way. Or there was an opportunity again to declare war on the PKK, tear up the ceasefire and go for it, in the way that they have done.

Zeynep Kaya: We have to look at what happened in the domestic context. It appears that the AKP wanted to gain majority rule again. One way to do that was to feed into the Turkish nationalist feeling.

Q74 Chair: So your interpretation of Turkish policy towards the internal Kurdish question in the late summer was, therefore, all about winning the election in November?

Zeynep Kaya: No, it was not all about that. I wouldn't say that. But I think that played a huge role in restarting the war with the PKK. It led to a positive outcome for the Government. In November, they won the majority and became the majority Government again. There is no proof for that. That is the interpretation that is out there.

Q75 Chair: But that is a reasonable interpretation to place on it.

Zeynep Kaya: It is, because, in a sense, when the AKP started to engage with Turkish nationalist feelings, especially against the PKK, we know that during the elections a big share of the vote passed from the MHP, the Turkish nationalist party, to the AKP. So it worked for

the AKP. The outcome shows that it worked for them, and they might have followed it as a strategy.

Güney Yıldız: Turkey's problem was to try to separate its own Kurdish problem from the Kurds in Syria. They wanted to have a settlement or at least try to buy time with a ceasefire with the Kurds inside Turkey and try to sort out Syria in a way that would weaken the Syrian Kurds, so that they can push the Turkish Kurds to the negotiating table when they are in a better position. But the opposite to that happened. When the Kurds stood their ground against ISIS and al-Nusra and got US support, the opposite of that happened. Kurds captured more areas from ISIS than any other group in Iraq and Syria, including the Assad Government.

The problem for Turkey was in separating Kurds. I think that is also a problem for the West. We are all trying to understand whether we can help and negotiate with the PYD. The US position is that; the UK position is more or less that, but when it comes to the PKK, it is a different matter. That was the mistake that Turkey made in this issue as well.

In my opinion, another mistake the Western Governments are making is to apply an either/or policy when it comes to Turks and Kurds. For example, the UK thinks that it can have good relations with either Turkey or the Kurds and that it has to choose between the two. What happened with the Obama Administration's decision to help Kobane Kurds last year was that the Obama Administration decided to have good relations with both. Despite being advised otherwise, President Obama saw that they could have good relations with the Kurds without pissing off the Turks too much. I think that is the policy to follow.

Gareth Stansfield: I think President Erdogan of Turkey is quite simple to understand in this regard. He had an open policy of wanting to reform the constitution to promote a presidential system—some would say to centralise more power around him—and the threat to that was not the PKK at all. There was a peace process; they had to some degree stood down. The threat was the HDP of Selahattin Demirtas, which had become far too powerful as a legal political party.

What we then saw was a heightening of anti-Kurdish rhetoric in Turkey and a response from the PKK that saw Syria as an opportunity to resurrect itself and re-expand. Now what we see is an increasingly aggressive anti-Kurdish policy from the Turkish state, led by Erdogan, and an increasingly reactive and very militant response from the PKK, in the cities as well. The victim in this, as it were, is the HDP. The legal political party is being squeezed out as the AKP and the PKK fight for the support of the Kurds going forward. The plan is working: opinion is polarised in Turkey now in a way that, arguably, we have not seen for many years, if not decades. The anti-Kurdish sentiment among Turks is very high, and that is mirrored increasingly by the Kurds.

Mr Hendrick: I think the three panellists are all agreeing with each other, and I agree with them. The point that has been made quite bluntly is that, basically, domestic Turkish politics is getting in the way of Turkey playing a more proactive role in helping to solve the problems in Syria.

The example you gave, Mr Yıldız, on Kobane was an exception rather than the rule, in that America had the self-confidence to push the Turks into a position, in exchange for a

base—I think a base was involved—to allow Kobane to be taken from ISIS by helping those Kurdish forces to win it back. Obviously, it was won back—there is not much of a town left now, but it is not under ISIS control. The major problem is that, other than Assad’s troops on the ground, the other disparate forces that are against Assad are not being facilitated in any constructive way by Turkey or anybody else for that matter. We talked about—

Chair: Question?

Mr Hendrick: I will come to that. We talked about whether it is 7,000, 70,000 or 700,000. Daniel Levy on the previous panel was saying it does not matter. To my way of thinking, it does matter. I don’t think we can get involved to any great extent, obviously because of domestic problems in this House; the Prime Minister cannot count on it. That is why, Mr Yıldız, the FCO is not getting as involved as it should be.

I ask you all whether you see any possibility—or whether there should be a possibility—of Western ground forces getting involved. At the moment, other than the Russians and the Assad forces, what there is on the ground that is fighting ISIS and against Assad is not substantial.

Zeynep Kaya: Can I just respond to your comment about Turkey’s domestic context having an influence? There is a regional context as well. PYD is supported by Russia; the Kurdish groups in Syria are supported by external forces as well. Turkey has been wanting to increase its regional influence. Having Russia at its border supporting an unfriendly political group there is not what Turkey wants. So there is a regional political dimension as well that is hindering Turkey from maybe supporting ISIL in the engagement.

Mr Hendrick: So domestic and regional.

Zeynep Kaya: Yes.

Gareth Stansfield: I understand where you are coming from with that question. If we take Iraq, you can make the case that there is the possibility at least, if there were political will, for Western military intervention again in Iraq. But there is no political will and the evidence of that intervention succeeding in the past does not give us a lot of confidence.

At least there is a relationship with the Government of Iraq and with the Kurdistan Regional Government that could perhaps facilitate something like that. There is a far bigger problem with regard to Western forces in Syria, apart from working with the YPG and PYD Kurdish forces. But that introduces a further problem because those forces are not aligned against Bashar al-Assad. They are aligned against ISIS. In fact, there is a de facto agreement—maybe even stronger than that—between the PYD and the regime. I suppose it is an arrangement of convenience that they look after the north-east, they are no threat to the regime and the regime will not threaten them. Whether that unravels in the future if the PYD pushes for something more remains to be seen. It creates a whole series of uneasy bedfellows if we start saying that western military forces should be intervening more forcefully with the YPG against ISIS and we also have it in our mind that Bashar al-Assad is persona non grata in our wider plans.

Q76 Mr Hendrick: Well, you partly answered the question. You are describing the problem excellently between you, but short of western forces getting involved, how do you think this should and could play out and how would you like to see it play out?

Güney Yıldız: In response—together with your previous question—the saying goes that no ground troops have surrendered themselves to planes. In order to defeat ground troops, you need to have ground troops. Whether those need to be western troops is another matter. The pattern of the conflict is such that it started as a proxy war—Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the United States were supporting groups—but increasingly those external supporters came to the scene themselves. The main groups, such as Iran, came to fight early on, rather than relying solely on their proxies. Russia is there now. We see indications that the United States is getting involved even more. The only other groups who are solely relying on proxies are Turkey and Saudi Arabia, and they are not doing that well here.

Before coming to the western ground troops, there is a whole area that has not been exploited: bringing together the opposition. The opposition is not getting together mostly because of their external support. Kurds cannot come together with the FSA mostly because of Turkey's concerns. The different FSA groups and rebels cannot come together because they used to be supported by Saudi Arabia, Qatar or Turkey, and those powers have different interests that do not mirror each other. In that sense, the main path should be trying to unify the opposition.

It is interesting that Russia is trying to push for Kurds to be at the Geneva table—it is not out of love for Kurds. The rise of Kurds in Syria has worried not only Syria and the Assad regime, but Iran and Russia. The Russian, Iranian and Assad's position towards Kurds is that they should not get too much stronger and that their force needs to be limited. This is being done, in a way, with the fight against Turkey. When the YPG got help from America, for example, I know for a fact that Iran put a lot of pressure on all its proxies trying to push Kurds away from the west.

Mr Hendrick: Okay, the point you are making—

Chair: We have to move on or we will not finish the session.

Q77 Ann Clwyd: I was interested in what you said. There are several things that I would like to follow up on but we do not have the time. I have followed very closely over a long period of time the Kurds in the south-east of Turkey as well as in other parts of Iraq. It seems that everybody praises the Turks when they fight a battle for them, as they did in Syria with the Yazidis in particular. For the Foreign Office almost, it seems to me, to equate all Kurds with a terrorist group is very misleading. What role is the Foreign Office playing in trying to get these people included as part of the talks, which is essential? It is not just the Turks.

Zeynep Kaya: The concept of what constitutes terrorism should be clearly defined. None of the parties involved in the peace process are sure about what terrorists are, or what and who a terrorist group is. For PYD, Ahrar ash-Sham is a terrorist group but, from a western perspective, that might not be the case. From Turkey's perspective, PYD is a terrorist group but PYD does not consider itself a terrorist organisation. From a—*[Interruption.]*

Chair: Order. I am afraid there is a Division. We will reconvene at 4.45 pm if you will forgive us while we go to vote.

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

On resuming—

Chair: Order. While we are briefly quorate again, let me bring the session back to order. Thank you very much for giving evidence. Sadly, the two Divisions mean that we have run out time. I am hosting a further meeting with a delegation from Pakistan at 5pm. It is now 3 minutes to 5, so I shall be late getting there.

Thank you for your evidence. There are more questions that we wanted to ask you. If it is okay with you, we can submit them in writing and invite your comments. If additional questions have occurred to my colleagues, as they have to me, I ask them to include those as well.

I would be grateful if you looked at our wider terms of reference and the transcript of today's session and previous ones. If there is more you could help us with, referring to articles that you or others have written that you think we should take as evidence, I will be grateful for your wisdom and guidance. Thank you for your evidence today; I am sorry it has been curtailed.