

Defence Committee

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

Tuesday 02 February 2016

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Members present: Dr Julian Lewis (Chair); Douglas Chapman; Mr James Gray; Johnny Mercer; Jim Shannon; Ruth Smeeth; Mr John Spellar; Bob Stewart; Phil Wilson;

Questions 89-148

Witness: **Tom Hardie-Forsyth**, adviser to the Kurdistan Regional Government, gave evidence.

Q89 Chair: Welcome to this session of our inquiry into British military action in Syria and Iraq. I thank Mr Tom Hardie-Forsyth for coming here as a specialist to give evidence and to answer our questions. I invite you first to say a little about yourself and your career, and to make any short opening comments on the substance of our inquiry that you feel are appropriate.

Tom Hardie-Forsyth: Thank you. I will keep it as brief as possible.

My first contact with the Kurds and later the Kurdistan Regional Government started in 1991, when I went out there as a British Army officer as part of the Safe Haven operation—what the Americans called Operation Provide Comfort. When the initial operation was over and the main ground troops had left, I stayed for about another five years and helped the Peshmerga with some of their work and the continuing fight against Saddam. I also helped with the first democratic elections in 1992 and with the reconstruction and security programme.

I left in 1995, and my career from then until 2005 was in the Cabinet Office, first as director of training for civil and military co-operation and emergencies, and later as head of standards and audit for UK civil emergency planning in the civil contingency secretariat. In parallel with that, I was chairman of the NATO Critical Infrastructure Protection Committee in Brussels.

From 2005 until 2010, I was sort of head-hunted by the then new Prime Minister of the first joint Kurdish Government, Nechervan Barzani. I went over there and became basically permanent under-secretary in charge of critical infrastructure protection and capacity building. I am now a standing adviser. That is a short version of my story.

Q90 Chair: Thank you. Would you like to make a brief opening statement about the subject?

Tom Hardie-Forsyth: This might seem a bit unusual, but I promise you that it will not take long. I want you to take yourselves out of this room and imagine that you are a Peshmerga. You are a small part of a dedicated army of men and women manning a 1,000-kilometre line. You are from a culture that values and respects all life, accepts all beliefs and puts family and the safety of your homeland first. You are also protecting 1.7 million displaced persons and refugees.

You do not need The Hague and Geneva conventions to remind you of how to behave—that is in your culture, and it comes from the top down. In front of you is a horror, which has none of those values and constraints. If it overran, it would commit unspeakable atrocities on you and yours. You know all this, and it stiffens your sinews. You also know that this is an existential fight—not only for you, but on behalf of all civilisation.

And yet when you look over your shoulder, you are not comforted. Your ammo keeps running out; it keeps coming in dribs and drabs. Forty heavy machine guns supplied by the UK have not had ammunition for months, and everything happens just in time. You are thankful for the coalition, you are thankful for the airstrikes, you are thankful for the training, but you know that only you can take and hold ground. You have not been paid for four months and you are desperately worried about your family and what is happening back there. You are wondering, “Am I an ally or just cannon fodder?” That has happened before, and you are scared to death that it will happen again.

Chair: That leads very nicely into the first questions, from John Spellar.

Q91 Mr Spellar: You partly dealt with this issue, but for example the Peshmerga were able to retake Sinjar with the assistance of coalition airstrikes, which were clearly welcome. Beyond that, what sort of support are you looking for the coalition to provide, to be fully effective in supporting the Peshmerga?

Tom Hardie-Forsyth: I had a very long telephone conversation yesterday with Karim Sinjari, the Minister for the Interior of the KRG. I would not be putting it too strongly in saying that the KRG and Peshmerga are now really in serious bother—and for two reasons, the first of which I gave you.

The ammunition and supplies still come in dribs and drabs, and they are having to hold the ground. Also—this will come as no surprise to you—there ain’t no money left. The Peshmerga have not been paid for four months. They are really worried; when they go back home to see their families, they don’t know whether they can even return to the frontline, because they need to feed their families and look for some other way, on the farm or whatever. Karim Sinjari said to me that there is a shortfall of \$197 million—let’s say about £100 million—per month, just to keep things steady. We are at a situation now where if that money, just to keep things going, is not provided, we are in really serious trouble if we are just to hold the line we have taken now.

Q92 Mr Spellar: That is a very compelling argument, but one of the concerns that you will be aware of is about the involvement of or links with the PKK. Would you care to comment on that?

Tom Hardie-Forsyth: When the fifth cabinet of the KRG first got together in 2005-06, one of its main policies was a rapprochement with the Government of Turkey. That

continues until this day, although it has had its ups and downs. The relationship between Ankara and Erbil is very strong indeed. Both Ankara and Erbil know that they have problems with PKK. It comes in waves because of the different vicissitudes. Fault is on both sides, let's be clear about that, but the relationship between Erbil and Ankara is very firm indeed. Indeed, Ankara provides training for Peshmerga.

Another point that is worth mentioning is that the real litmus test of whether that relationship is maintained is the main entry point between Turkey and Kurdistan at Ibrahim Khalil. Since 2006, even during the worst of the fighting and depredations between PKK and Ankara, this border area has rarely been closed. It is the lifeblood between the two Governments, and at an operational and working level, the populations still work together.

Q93 Mr Spellar: That is extremely useful. So the implication of what you are saying is that Ankara is not an obstacle to the coalition providing the extra support that you have been describing to the Peshmerga.

Tom Hardie-Forsyth: I would say absolutely not. I have not detected that. I am one person, and this sounds like name dropping, but I have a very close personal relationship with the President, Masoud Barzani—we have been friends for many years, and long before he became President—the Interior Minister and the Minister for Planning. We talk about this regularly. We know there are issues, and we saw them with Turkish troop movements in Baghdad, but between KRG and Ankara these issues do not exist.

Chair: I am going to call James Gray next, but I want to mention one point, which is that inevitably we are going to stray into areas involving foreign affairs and diplomacy, but our focus has to be on British military involvement in the area and the extent, therefore, to which there are realistic, viable forces that we can work with to achieve a military result.

Q94 Mr Gray: I was one of those who last year visited the Peshmerga last year. I was very impressed by all I saw, and you mustn't think the following questions are anything other than wholeheartedly supportive. I think they are a fantastic bunch of people. Incidentally, I think you are right. They went to great lengths to say they weren't interested in Turkey or indeed the Kurds in Iran. I will leave that to one side, because perhaps it comes under foreign affairs. What is the total manpower strength of the Peshmerga?

Tom Hardie-Forsyth: 136,000 in the field.

Q95 Mr Gray: You said that with huge certainty, but the estimates vary from about 20,000 to about 150,00 depending on who you ask and when you ask them. Also, they are not one body, are they? The two parties have their own Peshmerga, don't they?

Tom Hardie-Forsyth: But they have a JOC and a Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs, so operations are usually—

Q96 Mr Gray: Surely the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs looks after the Government Peshmerga, the KRG Peshmerga, rather than—

Tom Hardie-Forsyth: There is no such thing, strictly speaking, as just KRG Peshmerga. The Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs looks after the strategic arrangements that cover both the KDP and PUK Peshmerga echelons. This has been an evolutionary thing. Let's not

pretend it has been easy. The two main parties came back together again after that rather unfortunate spate between 1994 and 1998, which, by the way, was why I left for a while in high dudgeon and wouldn't go back until they had started sorting themselves out again. Apart from that, they started working together. There are still issues, but on operational affairs, they still work together.

The number of 136,000 that I gave you obviously differs on the frontline, because they have to circulate. Many of the men and women have homes and families and farms to go to. That is a big issue for them, especially now when frankly they are on their uppers. I have not plucked the figure of 136,000; it is an official number from the Ministry of the Interior. There are other forces on top of that—that number virtually doubles when you take into account the Asayish, the Parastin and the normal police forces—but that is the actual, root Peshmerga.

Q97 Mr Gray: Let's assume you are right that it is 136,000—although, frankly, I think you need some verification on the ground. There is also a huge divergence in how well trained and equipped they are. Some of those 136,000 couldn't take part in a bar brawl, far less proper, highly kinetic warfare. Others are very well equipped and trained. We saw the British Army training some of them, and I must admit I was impressed. They were attacking buildings and learning fighting in built-up areas, and they did it rather well. I thought they were really rather good, whether or not it was specially laid on. Give us a ballpark estimate of how many of those 136,000 are fully trained, fully equipped and combat-ready, and how many are not.

Tom Hardie-Forsyth: At the very core, if you want to talk about the elite squadrons, you have got the Zeravani, which are basically the equivalent of what we call special forces. There are about 20,000 or so of them. Then you have the Peshmerga themselves.

What you are alluding to is an absolute truth. The nature of warfare in that area, until the threat from ISIS, was very much the Kurds carrying out guerrilla operations as best they could against what you would call conventional forces such as the Iraqi army. That is the nature of their training and their work. They then had to undergo a paradigm shift, because suddenly they were holding a line 1,000 km long and defending their territory as I described. I was there during Saddam's time, so I know how bad that was, but this new entity has rewritten the book on savagery. You are right that they have to learn new lessons. They are taking advantage of as much training as they can.

It is worth remembering that the first time the Peshmerga—those who are prepared to die—were mentioned was by Xenophon in 400 BCE. Even then, they were called honourable and ready to defend their territory. They have a long history of this, but you are quite right that the training is variable.

Q98 Mr Gray: I readily accept that, but if we are considering whether we provide them with further support—weaponry, ammunition and training, in particular—we need some kind of flavour of whether the money has been well spent there, or whether it should be spent elsewhere. My final question, with that in mind, is this. They no doubt do a pretty good job of defending Kurdistan, but do you detect an appetite among the Peshmerga for what we might call expeditionary warfare? In other words, will they assist us in our war against Daesh, other than around their own borders? In particular, are they likely to want to be involved in any kind of assault on Mosul?

Tom Hardie-Forsyth: With the permission of Ankara, they went through Turkey and helped the Kurds there in a major operation to finally get ISIS out of Koban. They have invested, moved forward and taken ground, and they are holding ground right up to Sinjar, which, as you know, is close to the Syrian border. What they decide to do after that will depend on whether we can convince them that it is in the long-term interests of the entire region. To give you one example—

Chair: We need to move on.

Tom Hardie-Forsyth: This is important. For instance, will the Kurds help in retaking Mosul? They will be very careful in that respect, because the consequences of the wrong type of forces retaking Mosul could be absolutely catastrophic. It could end up as a bloodbath. Masoud Barzani knows this, so he is very circumspect about it—very circumspect indeed.

Q99 Douglas Chapman: To follow on from some of James's questions, are you saying that the UK could be taking specific action at the moment to bolster the Peshmerga with armaments, non-lethal equipment, ammunition and so on? Is that a reasonable stance for the UK to adopt?

Tom Hardie-Forsyth: I would also say that at least in the next six months, we need to arrange PDQ—however it is done, whether a soft loan or so on—to pay these lads and lasses, because they are on their uppers.

Another thing I wanted to mention was that, since the start of the campaign, the Peshmerga have taken over 8,000 casualties. Many of them are seriously injured. We have a problem in the UK—if we tried to take these casualties we would have difficulties because, as you know, we have lost our military hospital facilities. But they have asked me to ask you about where we do have expertise—we are extremely good at forward field hospital work. We call it the “golden hour”—Colonel Bob, you will know this. That golden hour is when lives are either saved or not. They are desperate for that sort of thing. Fifteen minutes' drive from where I live in Yorkshire is Strensall, where all that training is done. That, as far as they are concerned, is something in which the UK, with its specialist abilities in battlefield trauma, could be really useful.

Q100 Douglas Chapman: I want to follow up something that John Spellar said about the relationship with Turkey. With Russia rumoured to be supporting the Peshmerga as well, how does that sit with the relationship with Ankara that you mentioned, for example? Does that change the dynamic in any significant way?

Tom Hardie-Forsyth: If I were to tell you, from my time there—since the fifth Cabinet—about the number of stories on Russia, the Israelis or the Martians training Peshmerga and giving them special facilities, you would not be surprised were I to say to you that we are all very cynical when we hear about this sort of thing. The Russians only really, as far as we can see, have that special relationship with the Alawites, and that is because of Tartus, as you know.

Q101 Jim Shannon: To follow up on the Russian thing, clearly there have been the attacks from the Russians and—to a lesser degree, but not the least part of it—Iran as well, deciding to take on Daesh. Will you give us your ideas on how the involvement of the Russian armed

forces has affected things from a Kurdish point of view? We are aware of some attacks on Kurdish emplacements and so on, but will you tell us whether it has been a plus or a negative? How can we improve it?

Tom Hardie-Forsyth: One of the problems that Ankara has had with the Russians is that the Russian bombing campaign has hit the Turkoman and, invariably, Turkoman and Kurdish areas. That is a real problem for Ankara. I know that Ankara has its own problems with the YPD, which is a separate issue, but the reality is that if you want the spat with Russia, Russia's intentions there have in our view only really served to complicate the issue. But if you are talking about Russia, you are talking about a relationship that started in 1972 and is there and is going for a very specific strategic and military reason to do with Russia's need to have facilities in the Mediterranean, outside the Black Sea and beyond the Bosphorus. That is a very different issue. The Russians have a big agenda there, but it goes back to 1972, to the original agreement with Hafiz Assad and the preservation of the Alawite homeland—basically, because the Alawites in the end, no matter what happens, will have their backs against the sea now. If you look at Latakia and all that area, the Russians desperately need to keep that area. Their main issue will be to defend the Alawite heartland. You have got to remember that you are not talking about an insignificant part of the Syrian population. You are talking about 3 million people who are absolutely terrified of the consequences if Assad falls. We are not talking Gaddafi or a personal dictatorship; we are talking about a totalitarian state where the Alawites have been able to have influence well above their numbers. Before the Ba'ath state was founded in '63 and then '72, they were very much the persecuted minority in that region. The stakes are very high, and the Russians know it. There is very much a symbiosis there, which will invariably complicate the issue.

Q102 Jim Shannon: This is a question about Daesh. We are aware of their strengths, of where they are attacking and advancing and of where we can best defeat them. The question I want to ask is on their strengths and weaknesses. Some indicate that their weaknesses are in communication and staffing, and I want to get your thoughts on how we can exploit Daesh militarily, ever mindful that we need to know their weaknesses. Perhaps you might have some idea of what their weaknesses would be.

Tom Hardie-Forsyth: The Daesh operation is very slick. Have you seen their English magazine, *Dabiq*? You want to see that. It is quite something. Their communications, especially on the dark net, are extensive indeed. Their weakness is that they have to be able to get people in. The tighter that we keep all the borders—that is where the Kurdish operation is critical—the less able they are to replenish their main thing, which is manpower.

Obviously, the way that we have been doing targeted operations against their supply lines and their banking structures is absolutely right, but let me leave you in no doubt about Daesh's endgame. Daesh's endgame, and you might laugh at this, is apocalypse. They want to draw us into Raqqa—well, to Dabiq—which is where they believe the hadiths as they call them, or the prophecies, will bring us to Armageddon with them. They are desperate to engage western ground troops. Everything they do and every atrocity they commit is with that aim: to engage our ground troops in the final war. When Hitler wrote "Mein Kampf", we knew what he was doing for quite a few years before he did what he did. "The Management of Savagery", which is their handbook, has been in existence and

was translated in the mid-2000s, so we knew. I sent the Chair some copies of that, and there is no doubt that they want us to put ground troops in there. That is their aim.

My belief is that the best boots on the ground are local boots on the ground, properly supported by us, obviously with special forces, too. If you were thinking of putting Western boots on the ground as part of this in a major way, I am afraid there is only one option, and that is overwhelming force, not just to take the ground, but to keep it and to keep it in the way that we did not keep Iraq, where we made a complete and total hash of the post-war settlement. Basically, if we put troops on the ground, even major masses of troops of the ground, we will be playing right into Daesh's hands. We will be fulfilling their dearest wish.

Q103 Chair: On that point, I suspect that you would agree that the assassination of General Massoud 48 hours before 9/11 shows that al-Qaeda in its turn was anticipating the reaction to be the invasion of Afghanistan, precisely because they wished it to happen and they wished to see the most charismatic potential Afghan leader removed.

Tom Hardie-Forsyth: Massoud was an amazing character. A lot of people would disagree with me, but compared with most of his contemporaries he was a liberal. In fact, you are quite right: if he had been allowed to hold sway, then the whole situation in Afghanistan would have been a very different story.

When some people ask me, "What are Daesh like?" I like to remind them of children's magicians who make balloon animals that, if you squeeze one part, another part comes up somewhere else—it transmogrifies according to the situation. So if they are hit on one place, they will appear somewhere else. They will make temporary alliances and coruscations and when they are having a hard time on the battlefield, they will go back to increasing their asymmetric warfare spectrum. This is the way they will work.

Q104 Chair: We are now getting to the heart of where we need to be. In the light of that analysis, which I am sure many of us share, and it is the case that what fuels their ability when suppressed in one area to spread in another is the totalitarian doctrine, which operates in a strange way like the old Communist doctrine, which enables you to have fifth columns in many countries, we have to decide what sort of western military intervention will be effective. You are saying that there is no question but that they want us to intervene heavily-handedly or heavy-footedly with boots on the ground and therefore that is something that we should not do. But if they are not to be our boots on the ground, we have to find in each of these theatres—in both of the countries we are looking at now—other boots on the ground who can be supported militarily. The Peshmerga are one such group. Can you set out a wish list of the ways in which Britain could militarily support the Peshmerga?

Tom Hardie-Forsyth: Obviously, when we supply weaponry, make sure that we continue to supply the ammunition. That is a good kick-off.

Q105 Chair: I want to come back on that straight away. I have heard from Kurdish sources that the requests have to be funnelled through the Iraqi authorities and there is a blockage there. Is that true?

Tom Hardie-Forsyth: That sometimes happens. It usually delays, but not by the number of months that has happened here.

Q106 Chair: So what is the problem? What answer do the Peshmerga and the political leadership in Kurdistan get when they ask for ammunition for the machine guns that have already been supplied by the people from whom they are requesting the ammunition?

Tom Hardie-Forsyth: Well, they asked General Mayall and his successor the same question and they have not been able to provide a reasonable answer, just “it’s on its way” answers. But the more basic thing—how can I put this? This might seem rude, but let me tell you how these men and women who are on that front line feel. Some of them are asking the question whether they are genuine allies in the way they welcomed us with open arms in 2003. By the way, they had to be persuaded to do this. I was one of the team that persuaded Massoud Barzani to let us go back because he was very nervous about it after what the Americans had done to them in ’75 and after the catastrophe in ’91. He was not entirely convinced. They are still very nervous—I’ll be blunt—as to whether they are allies or just proxies, cannon fodder.

The best way we can guarantee that is to help keep their forces in the field by training with proper ammunition and also urgently—I know I’ve said this before—we have got to find a way at least temporarily of getting these men and women properly paid and uniformed. For example, their winter quarters at the moment are terrible, beyond words. I don’t know how they are surviving.

Q107 Chair: One of two things must be the case. Either the West is being very inefficient in their support of these forces or they are doing this very slow drip feed of military help deliberately for some reason; maybe they don’t want them to get too strong. Is it a cock-up or a conspiracy?

Tom Hardie-Forsyth: There is an obsession with maintaining the territorial integrity of Iraq that is at the bottom of all of this. The Kurds voluntarily rejoined Iraq in 2003 when we asked. They rejoined Iraq under certain guarantees of federalism, human rights and so on. Very few of those guarantees have been fulfilled. Everybody knows—it’s not a secret—Massoud Barzani has promised the Kurds another referendum. He has also said that if there is, whatever you call it, a split with Iraq or a new sort of confederation it will be done in negotiation with Baghdad.

Okay, but somehow or other there is something in the mentality, which frankly the present Shi’a Government in Baghdad are helping to foster, that the Kurds are going to go hell for leather, guns firing in the air and all the rest of it, for independence. There is no evidence of that. I’ve been there a long time and, in fact, the evidence is that the Kurds will do everything constitutionally. If they do separate from Iraq, it will be on a proper constitutional basis. The fears, which frankly I believe Baghdad is promulgating, are unfounded.

Q108 Chair: Does that mean that you think there is an element of trying to keep the Kurdish forces in play but at the same ensure that they do not get too strong?

Tom Hardie-Forsyth: Absolutely.

Q109 Chair: Our time is coming to a close but I just want to get back to this point again. You said that absolutely the wrong thing to do would be conventional, Western forces on the ground in these countries en masse. You also said that special forces have a role to play.

We have not mentioned much about airstrikes. I would like your view about whether there is sufficient infrastructure there for a viable relationship to be built up between those who would mount the airstrikes and those forces on the ground, perhaps including special forces from Western countries, to take advantage of the potential for mounting airstrikes.

Perhaps the most important question I want to put to you is this. If Western forces should not go into these countries en masse, does that not suggest that our long-term strategy has to be one of containment, so that the poison does not spread, until such time as there are strong enough forces from the region to play the role of the infantry, which you are strongly advising us not to send ourselves?

Tom Hardie-Forsyth: My core belief is that unless we are prepared to go in with overwhelming force—though even that has major risks and I could tell reams of stories because I have very deep knowledge of what we did and did not do in Iraq—even then, there would be lots of places where we were not welcome. So, unless we are prepared to do that, then it is containment. We are not just talking about military training—

Q110 Chair: Sorry, I don't want you to break off that sentence. You started to say that it is containment. Can you just elaborate on that? What would the components of that be?

Tom Hardie-Forsyth: You are talking about containment and shrinkage. You're talking about containment of IS until the Roman candle partially burns out anyway, or starts to work with other groups. Frankly, we know what happens after that. But we must also continue to deplete their ability to recruit—to bring in people and supplies. It's all part of a containment and shrinkage capacity, but on top of that there is obviously the bigger issue of what we call counter-insurgency training, which includes helping with the democratisation process.

This is a big picture and I think what we're best to do—I mean, when we train—Colonel Stewart will know this; when the British military train people, it's not just about military training. We look at the whole military-civil spectrum, including the Geneva and Hague conventions, and so on. These are all things that we can also help to do.

Al-Nusra is a case in point. I know for a fact that when IS are gone and burnt out, al-Nusra, for instance, and organisations like that will still be there, because they are older, bolder and cleverer in the end, and we'll have to deal with that when the time comes. But containment of Daesh, choking its lines of supply, money, weapons and its oil revenue—

Q111 Chair: You are smiling at that. Who do you think are the biggest culprits in relation to its oil revenue?

Tom Hardie-Forsyth: There are lots of rogue actors in the field, so it's not just Governments. There are rogue actors across every border—the Turkish border and every border that you know—who are prepared to take their oil. You are going into a different field there. There are lots of people prepared to take oil, just the same as there are people prepared to take conflict diamonds; there are always people prepared to do those things. If we can choke all of these groups off and deny them the means of resupply and replenishment, that's a damn good start.

Q112 Bob Stewart: Tom, can I ask you a few questions in more depth on the military side? Of the 130,000, what percentage of them are front-line troops?

Tom Hardie-Forsyth: They circulate, because the reality is that they all have other things—

Bob Stewart: Yes. I take that point.

Tom Hardie-Forsyth: I would say that at any time in the field, holding that line, you've got about 65,000 to 70,000 personnel—men and women.

Q113 Bob Stewart: Which is a company every 2 km on that frontage. So, that's not a bad percentage.

Tom Hardie-Forsyth: Not too bad—as long as it's properly supplied.

Q114 Bob Stewart: So you have a company of 130 every 2 km, which is quite good.

I'm really concerned to hear about the 48 machine guns having no ammunition. I think that is appalling, particularly as we've sent teams in there to train those guys.

Tom Hardie-Forsyth: When I go there, everybody says how good our trainers are.

Q115 Bob Stewart: They are very good, but if they're not giving them ammunition they might as well actually play with matchsticks.

Tom Hardie-Forsyth: I was talking to Karim Sinjari about it yesterday and he said, "They might as well have toys."

Q116 Bob Stewart: This is a really big point that we should concentrate on. I am really concerned also about the lack of pay for these guys. If they don't get paid, their motivation and morale will be rock bottom.

Tom Hardie-Forsyth: This isn't just about pay in the sense that a British service—I will not go down that route. I'm an ex-Army officer myself. It's not just a matter of pay in our terms. It's a matter of— Look, I don't want to give any gifts to Daesh by saying things to you. We might have to talk about this later. But when these boys and girls go back home, what they see is that while they're fighting on the front and trying to hold a line, everything's falling to pieces. Families haven't got enough money, or food. There are all sorts of horror stories.

Q117 Bob Stewart: If they get wounded, CASEVAC is pretty non-existent.

Tom Hardie-Forsyth: A lot of them die on the way back to the line.

Q118 Bob Stewart: So CASEVAC is golden hour business, but it is worse than that because beyond that, they haven't got second line medical.

Tom Hardie-Forsyth: I am very good friends with somebody who was an expert in battlefield trauma there. He is now the Minister of Planning—Dr Ali Sindi. He was a battlefield surgeon and in fact still looks at that regularly. It is not funny, because a lot of these—

Bob Stewart: May I ask some straightforward questions?

Chair: Bob, it will have to be just one or two.

Q119 Bob Stewart: Do they have morphine syrettes on the frontline?

Tom Hardie-Forsyth: Not as a rule, no.

Bob Stewart: Pretty poor.

Q120 Chair: We are finishing spot on time. May I thank you very much indeed for some very interesting observations that I am sure will help us in the drafting of our report? I hope we may remain in contact to put any follow-up questions to you in writing. Please feel free to remain for the second part of the session, if you have time.

Tom Hardie-Forsyth: It will be an absolute pleasure. Thank you very much for asking me along. I hope the answers I have given have justified—

Chair: They have been very interesting indeed. Thank you.

Witness: **Peter Ford**, former Ambassador to Syria, gave evidence.

Q121 Chair: The second session is with Mr Peter Ford. Peter, would you like to start off by telling us a little bit about your background, and especially your expertise? Maybe you could give a short opening comment, remembering that we are focusing on what military action in particular the British can take and in support of whom.

Peter Ford: I was the British ambassador to Damascus from 2002 to 2006. Before that, I was ambassador to Bahrain, and for 35 years I was a British diplomat—an Arabist trained in Arabic many years ago in Lebanon. Most of my career was spent in the Gulf and the Levant. After I left the diplomatic service, I joined the United Nations. I was based for eight years in Amman, just down the road from Damascus, working for UNRWA, which is the UN agency for Palestine refugees. In that capacity, I had frequent cause to visit Syria and I was in some senses the agency's point man for Syria in the light of my previous experience there.

I continue to stay very much in touch with Syria, even though my diplomatic service ended there nearly 10 years ago. I left the UN one year ago. Since then, I have been semi-retired, but I do some consultancy work for humanitarian organisations. In that capacity, I travel frequently to the area. I was recently in the Gulf and also up on the Jordan-Syria border, attending the opening of a school for Syrian refugees, so I have stayed in touch.

I will move on to an opening statement. First—full disclosure—it is no secret that I opposed the bombing in Syria. I appeared in the media arguing against it and arguing for a different policy towards Syria, one more understanding of the Syrian Government. That is my full disclosure out of the way; you see where I am coming from. I appreciate that the focus needs to be on Britain's military role in Syria and Iraq, but I beg you to bear it in mind that “military” includes not just bombing and having a military presence, but also certain acts, such as the provision of non-lethal military support, which our Government are providing to elements of the opposition and about which I think we need a lot more transparency. It includes giving some civilian dual-use aid—even a bakery can be a field

kitchen—and it includes supporting with training and command and control as well as supporting the morale of the preferred combatants, as our Government have done with their undisguised support for elements of the opposition and their constant calls for regime change in Syria and the removal of President Assad.

Q122 Chair: I am going to bring in Phil Wilson in a moment, but first, please carry on where our previous witness left off on the military concept that we ought to apply if we are intervening in these two countries. Do you have a view similar to his that Daesh and related extreme Islamist groups actually want us to intervene with force, with non-Muslim forces on the ground in their countries?

Peter Ford: Yes, I share Tom's view entirely. I think Daesh/IS has a strategy of trying to entice the forces of what they call "Rum", which is a term for Byzantium, but now means the western world, onto the battlefield. It is notable that the title of the IS magazine, Dabiq, means Armageddon. Dabiq is a place in northern Syria which is identified in the Koran as the equivalent of Armageddon, and IS ideology calls for hastening Armageddon, bringing the forces of "Rum" onto the battlefield. One could see the Paris attack, in particular, as an attempt to carry that forward. It would, as Tom said, be self-defeating for the west to allow itself to be drawn down that path; it would increase the appeal of the jihadi movement and likely not succeed, unless the west was to use absolutely overwhelming force. We saw in Iraq that even shock and awe and full-spectrum war only engenders more problems.

Chair: So if we are not going to do this ourselves, we have to select other military forces to support. Would you agree with the way in which Tom put it—the concept of containment and shrinkage? I believe that we have heard from other witnesses that Daesh's success depends on its ability to hold land, even though by holding land it loses the invisibility that is normally the greatest asset of terrorist groups.

Peter Ford: Yes. If you like, this is the Achilles heel of IS. Unlike al-Qaeda, they go out into the open and stand their ground. They are being picked off with bombing campaigns, particularly by the Russians and the Americans. It has to be said that these campaigns are having their effect in terms of personnel being lost, and particularly in terms of economic resources—oil wells and oil tankers—being taken out. IS has had to cut back on salaries, and they have lost about 14% of the territory in Iraq and Syria that they previously controlled. Yes, a process of attrition is slowly working.

However we, Britain, need to be clearer about how we want to promote this, and I don't think we want to promote it by supporting some preferred Islamist groups over others and hoping that they will be the cavalry who come riding over the hill. No, we should do what is obvious but difficult to do politically, which is to allow the Syrian army and the Russian air force to do the job for us. We should effectively contract it out, with some role for the Americans. Since we have already begun, we will continue with our two penn'orth, but essentially we should stop trying to hobble the Syrian army in the efforts that it can make, and is making, against IS.

We are seeing that, for example, in Deir ez-Zor, a beleaguered outpost on the Euphrates. The core of the city is held by Syrian Government forces, but IS has been making inroads recently. The Russians have gone in heavily and appear, for now at least, to be keeping the jihadi hordes at bay. When a similar scenario arose about a year ago in Palmyra, another

beleaguered outpost—the Syrian army, again, was being besieged by IS—the Russians were not involved. The Americans were, but the Americans took a conscious decision to let Palmyra be taken over by IS. I think the conclusion is clear: we should rely more on the Russians, because they are less inhibited about helping the Syrian army, and we should practise more realpolitik about this.

Chair: Colonel Bob wants to come in briefly, and then I will come to Phil for the main questioning. Then Jim Shannon.

Q123 Bob Stewart: Let's go for a quick strategy, shall we? The opponents to Assad should somehow be brought together with Assad's force so that they can fight Daesh. The Peshmerga are fighting Daesh, and we should support that movement. The Russians are prepared to support Assad. We have a problem with Assad, which we should bite on and deal with a long spoon. In strategic terms, the aim must be to beat Daesh first of all. Therefore, would you accept the following? An air campaign is keeping Daesh holed up so that they can't expand their area of operations, so the more air we keep on top of them, the more they are pinned down. Meanwhile, we work diplomatically to try and get those people who are fundamentally opposed to Daesh—they may oppose one another, as well—to work together to beat this scourge. Once we have got that scourge under control or defeated, we can start politically talking to Assad. That possibility is probably something along the lines that you've already been arguing. Is the Syrian army up to it? I think it probably is. Have we got it wrong militarily to actually rule out any working with Assad? I know the answer, but I'd like to hear you say it.

Peter Ford: I agree broadly with the strategy that you laid out at the beginning. We should try to work with any credible forces with boots on the ground in the field, which could include some of the rebel groups. In fact, optimally, what one might hope to see emerge from the current round of Geneva talks is an agreement to work towards a ceasefire between the Government and, for example, the so-called Free Syrian Army. That would help to release Syrian army forces to tackle the really bad guys, such as al-Nusra, Ahrar ash-Sham and, of course, IS, possibly with some co-ordinated operations with elements of the Free Syrian Army.

The problem for the Syrian army is that they have been haemorrhaging fighters for a long time. Many of the young men we see heading towards Europe are deserters or fleeing conscription. Also, many Syrian Government fighters have been killed. The Syrian army is greatly outnumbered by the Islamists against which it is arrayed. This is why they rely so much on so-called barrel bombs and on air support. A ceasefire on some of the battle lines would release some of those Government troops to tackle IS. This is without a doubt the best way forward, and I believe this is the Russian strategy. I believe that it may also be the covert American strategy. If it's not, they're not doing anything to stand in its way.

Q124 Phil Wilson: We have covered a lot of the questions that we were going to ask, but I will ask them anyway just to get them on the record. What is your assessment of the effectiveness of UK military action in Syria, both in a political and a military sense?

Peter Ford: As I mentioned, I opposed the action from the outset, and I don't think it has been up to spec. We were told, were we not, that we were going to go for the head of the snake in Raqqa? As far as I am aware, there has only been one raid on Raqqa and maybe a dozen far from Raqqa. As for the numbers, I am sure that you have had other experts and

have done other studies, but it seems to me that our contribution has been—I won't say negligible, but it has been a drop in the ocean and not comparable with Russian or US efforts. I am unsure whether we have even unleashed the secret weapon—the more effective missile that we apparently have—so I don't think the bill of sale has been respected thus far. The impact has been marginal as far as I can see.

But in the meanwhile, we have, as I mentioned, continued to try to hobble the Syrian army, with sanctions, a ban on arms sales, moral support and diplomatic support for the opposition, training and non-lethal equipment. This is only prolonging the agony and preventing the Syrian Government forces from tackling IS.

Q125 Phil Wilson: What do you think Daesh's strengths are, and what do you think the potential weaknesses are in their ideology and their resources, such as manpower and equipment or how they fight? Where do you see their weaknesses as an organisation?

Peter Ford: Their weakness, like that of almost any fighting force, is money. First and foremost they need money, and their income is being decimated by the attacks on their oil convoys. It is noticeable, incidentally, that these began in earnest only after the Russians entered the campaign, but this does now seem to be happening, and it is a potential game changer; it is the No. 1 point of weakness. Perhaps another weakness is just the difficulty—

Q126 Phil Wilson: So are you accepting that the coalition's air attacks on their oil infrastructure, including the ones by the RAF, are having an effect?

Peter Ford: Yes, although the proportion that is the British effort within that greater effort is not negligible but not highly significant. But I wouldn't try to say it was useless. It has helped a little, as part of a broader effort; and since we have started, we should continue down that path if we are going to be doing it at all. But it is noticeable that we have failed to bomb Raqqa, for reasons that are not clear but that we can guess at—that it might be dangerous for our brave pilots. Everyone remembers the poor Jordanian pilot who was shot down and burned to death. There is a higher risk of collateral damage.

Q127 Phil Wilson: You have said that the UK military operations in Syria are distinct from the operations in Iraq. Why do you think that is?

Peter Ford: Perhaps I misspoke. I didn't mean to say that they were operationally different—I take it on trust that they are co-ordinated—but there is an important political difference, which is that in Iraq we are working with the endorsement of the local Government and in Syria we are working without that endorsement; in fact, we are going against the stated wishes of the Government, which is recognised in New York as the legal Government of Syria. To that extent, the action is illegal.

Q128 Phil Wilson: Can I just say that the RAF have attacked Raqqa? They used their ordnance in Raqqa on 10 January and 25 December. They have not just hit the oil infrastructure, but used their weapons strategically in Raqqa, where the head of the snake is.

I have one final point. You have disputed the existence of moderates among the Syrian opposition forces. On what basis do you believe that all Syrian opposition forces are extremist?

Peter Ford: Partly on personal experience. While I was the ambassador in Damascus, my residence was attacked by a group of jihadis and I had my 15 minutes of fame on the BBC. This was a small harbinger of the trouble that was to come. I have met many Syrian Islamists and I believe that they vastly outnumber anyone one could legitimately call a moderate. The vast majority of the fighting groups wish to impose sharia law and they are intolerant of minorities. In particular, they hate the Shi'a. I will quote the leader, now deceased, of the Army of Islam group, which was described as moderate by my namesake, the former US ambassador to Syria, Robert Ford. Its leader had visions. He believed in prophecies, and he said he was working for the restoration of the Umayyad caliphate in the Levant. They were known for their persecution of the Shi'ites, and this man, Allouch, said, "We will bury the heads of impure Shi'ites in Najaf, God willing. The Umayyad glory will return to the Levant in spite of you," and more of that ilk. This is typical of the rhetoric of the jihadi groups.

Some of them more recently, having been given coaching in Istanbul by the Americans, have said more moderate things, but it is noticeable that no journalist has actually gone to put their moderation to the test and come back alive. In fact, nearly all western journalists have carefully steered clear of actually setting foot in Syria and frequenting some of these so-called moderate groups. They are largely a figment of the imagination.

Q129 Jim Shannon: Much has been made of the anti-Daesh coalition of some 70,000. I am keen to get an opinion from yourself on how these 70,000 can come together. The previous speaker referred to the Kurds and their job being very much to protect their own homeland. They do not see the battle as going beyond their homeland when it comes to combating the Daesh forces. They have different cultures and different tribal allegiances. I am keen to get your thoughts on how the 70,000 forces will work together. They may have a common enemy, but there are many things that divide and separate them. How realistic is it to say that these 70,000 can help the coalition defeat Daesh?

Peter Ford: If I understand the question correctly, I do not think the other Islamists are up for pushing IS back, except in very limited locations. You have to remember that many of the opposition fighters in Syria are purely local militias. I would say that applied to the great bulk of the fighting forces on the opposition side. They are not the kind of troops that you can deploy to other theatres of the war. They fight to defend their villages or to extend their territory locally. It is only incidentally, when they come into territorial conflict with IS, that they get into battle with them, but, ideologically, there is not much between them. IS basically believe that we are already in the end of times and that the caliphate has been established, whereas the other groups tend to say that we are approaching the end of times and the caliphate will come about through the institution of other Sunni models of Government, such as the Saudi model.

Q130 Douglas Chapman: Going back to your introduction, where you outlined your extensive diplomatic experience, do you believe that there has been a diplomatic cost to the UK's involvement in military action in Syria? Does that in any way compromise our position to participate in a negotiated political settlement in the longer term, given the level of involvement?

Peter Ford: I think there is very little we can bring to the table in present circumstances. We could have played a bigger role in applying brakes on American and Saudi action at an earlier stage of the game. In fact, we had a chance to do so. Sorry to bring up bad

memories, but Parliament voted against military action in Syria in 2013. That was the moment when, paradoxically, Britain did lead. Our non-intervention then led to American non-intervention as Congress got cold feet. But we did not try to capitalise on that. On the contrary, we went off in the other direction and continued to call for the overthrow of Assad.

We were, effectively, working for regime change, and we still are. We tried to call it other names, but when you call for the leader of a country to leave, you mean that you are working for regime change regardless of the wishes of the people of that country. You are saying that we, the west—Britain—know best and that that leader has to go. Until we come around to saying, more reasonably, that we support the principles of the Vienna and Geneva process—that it should be a process of transition that, not inconceivably, could lead to an election that will produce a leader who might be Assad or might be someone other than Assad—we disqualify ourselves from playing any kind of significant role. But while we continue to demand that Assad must go, the only thing to argue about is whether it is in six, 12, or 18 months, or in two years.

Q131 Douglas Chapman: In other inquiries, we have looked at the position of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the way in which its ability to act in a more open way across the globe has been stripped back. Those cutbacks have been a recurring theme. In terms of Syria, has this been an issue from your perspective?

Peter Ford: The FCO, I am sorry to say, has got Syria wrong virtually from the beginning. In 2011, one of my successors as ambassador to Damascus said that Assad would be gone by Christmas. Admittedly, he did not say which Christmas, but that was 2012 and we are still waiting. I am afraid the FCO provides the sort of advice that its political masters wish to hear, and will provide rationalisations to order. ‘Twas ever thus, perhaps, but it has been more noticeable in the case of Syria.

Q132 Chair: Imagine that you were the political master to which the Foreign Office was responding, you had your way and, indeed, it was decided that the lesser of two evils was the existing regime rather than Islamism, and that there was nothing in between on the menu. Could you see circumstances under which Assad and the existing Syrian Government re-established control over most or all of the country militarily?

Peter Ford: Yes, realistically I think I can. Nearly all insurgencies take a long time to resolve. They almost always result in a return to the status quo. Abhorred leaders remain abhorred leaders. The Algerian insurgency of the 1990s went on for a decade, and it was the same leadership at the end. I suspect that the same would apply to the Assad regime, but I have some hope that it would be a chastened Assad who would emerge and return to the reform-minded Assad of whom we saw some signs in his early days. I arrived in Damascus in 2003, a month after President Assad had been having tea at Buckingham Palace with Her Majesty the Queen. It is still the same Assad. At the end of the day, it comes down to the security/military situation. Sometimes, repression works.

Q133 Ruth Smeeth: I want to clarify what you just said: repression sometimes works, and he is the same Assad he has always been. Although I appreciate the realpolitik with regard to Assad, are you seriously suggesting that there have been no crimes that would result in the requirement for Assad to be removed? Given everything you have said thus far and your involvement in UNRWA, I find that extraordinary.

Peter Ford: I am not saying that there have not been atrocities on the Government side as well as on the opposition side—

Q134 Ruth Smeeth: I am asking specifically about the Government—specifically about Assad's regime.

Peter Ford: That would be a matter for a court of law to decide.

Q135 Johnny Mercer: She is asking your opinion.

Ruth Smeeth: Absolutely. I don't necessarily disagree, but—

Peter Ford: I think we are very selective with our indignation. The King of Saudi Arabia has made similar decisions to bomb civilian populations, currently in Yemen, where a little-noticed war is going on. We had two reservations—

Q136 Johnny Mercer: Sorry, but, with respect, we are just about to finish and her question was very clear. Are you saying that no atrocities have been committed by the Government in Syria? You seem very reluctant to say that for some reason, and it seems quite bizarre to me.

Peter Ford: No, don't misunderstand me, I condemn many of the actions taken by and authorised by Assad. They have been totally morally unacceptable and worthy of condemnation.

Q137 Ruth Smeeth: Condemnation, but not intervention.

Peter Ford: Are you saying that we should send in the Army to get rid of him?

Ruth Smeeth: I am saying that we have sent in the RAF to help.

Peter Ford: I am saying let international legal action take its course.

Q138 Ruth Smeeth: So this should all have been done through a court, even for someone we would not have been able to get hold of.

Peter Ford: I am saying that in civil wars horrible things happen.

Q139 Ruth Smeeth: This was before the civil war. I don't want to take it into Foreign and Commonwealth Office territory, but many of the atrocities that are now attributed to Assad's regime happened before the civil war, hence the emergence of a civil war. I do not want this to become a discussion that relates more to the FCO, but it is fundamental to your analysis of whether Assad is—

Peter Ford: In a nutshell, I am saying that Assad is the lesser evil.

Ruth Smeeth: Okay. Thank you very much.

Q140 Bob Stewart: I don't want to hold things up, but the Royal Air Force tell me that the reason why they have not attacked Raqqa is that they are holding back because of the danger of collateral damage when they are flying. The targeting above Raqqa is currently very difficult, so they cannot send in Brimstones. That is the reason: they are worried about collateral damage.

The Chairman might stop me very shortly, but my question is: you talked about the weaknesses of Daesh—fundamentally, money—but what about its strengths? If I could lead you a bit, how about dedication, lack of fear of dying, three months' solid training on their weapons from various people from Chechnya who actually are training them, and a determination to achieve their objectives? Is that how you would define their strengths?

Peter Ford: I would just add to that list high morale fired up by ideology. They are like cult followers and are ready to die for their cause. I would also add to the list that their technique of practising terror works. They do tend to intimidate their enemies who frequently run away. That is why, in particular, they scored their only successes in Iraq. Terror works, sadly.

Q141 Bob Stewart: It is not surprising they run away if they haven't got ammunition or medical support. We are talking about peshmerga there, let alone the so-called Free Syrian Army that must be a rag, tag and bobtail outfit collectively, including AQ for that matter.

Q142 Phil Wilson: If we re-establish the Assad Government requiring a long-term presence of Russian and Iranian forces in the country to maintain stability, what do you think the strategic implications of that would be, not just within Syria but, if there is a coalition between Iran and Russia, what would be the significance of that beyond the prism of Syria as well?

Peter Ford: Of course, there has been a Russian military presence in Syria for many years and they have had an important naval base at Latakia. But if we are trying to imagine a post-war scenario when most if not all of Syria has been pacified, there would no longer be any need for air support. The Russians are essentially providing air support with very little ground support. I think the Russians would be backing off over the horizon should trouble reappear, but as there would be no more besieged Syrian Government forces or whatever, the Russian air force would have no reason to be there and Syrian security forces, backed by local allies, would run the country.

Q143 Phil Wilson: But do you think there would be wider implications for the region with a closer alliance between Russia and Syria?

Peter Ford: No change. This has been the de facto situation for half a century. Syria was beginning to move away a little bit from Russia when I was there—witness the tea with the Queen—and there was something of an opening up, but of course when the Iraq war intervened and now civil war, they have been brought closer together. This is nothing new and I don't think it changes the geostrategic equation in any way.

Q144 Chair: We heard earlier that the risk was that the suppression of these very vicious extremist totalitarian Islamists in one area leads to an expansion in another and, at the moment, looming not far over the horizon is Libya. There are already reports in the British press that the Government are considering the use of British military personnel in Libya. Would you give the same advice that seems to apply in Iraq and Syria against putting non-Islamist boots on the ground in Libya or any other country where Daesh was starting to reappear?

Peter Ford: Yes, very much so. We have already bombed Libya once and helped to bring about this situation where IS is moving in. I think it would be a mistake of the first water

for us to go back like a dog returning to its vomit. Not a good idea at all. But I would point out that we must be careful what we wish for. If we succeed in driving Daesh out of Syria and Iraq, there are other places to which they might turn, as well as Libya. They might turn south, towards Saudi Arabia, where I believe they would find northern Saudi Arabia a pushover. The cities of Saudi Arabia are very much like Raqqa: weekly beheadings in the public square, women veiled and so on. IS has a lot of latent support in Saudi Arabia. So let us be a bit careful what we wish for. We might get what we want in Syria and Iraq, while a new problem pops up somewhere else.

Q145 Chair: But even if we adopted a successful counter-insurgency strategy and found moderate forces in some of these countries that could succeed, would there not be a danger that Daesh would go into new territories in any event, if they were defeated by a correct strategy rather than overwhelmed by a heavy-handed and incorrect one?

Peter Ford: Yes. These scenarios are becoming a bit fanciful. Optimally, one would hope that the fighters of IS would just melt away—return to their towns and villages and go back to being what they were before—but many of them could not, especially the foreign fighters. We must expect, for the foreseeable future, a level of insurgency to continue in Syria and Iraq.

Q146 Chair: We are grateful to you for the frank way in which you put your cards on the table at the outset and explained your point of view. It was our hope to have with you someone with a countervailing point of view. In particular, we are still hoping to do that by getting Mr Charles Lister, a visiting fellow at the Brookings Doha Centre, to take part in this inquiry. We have had some contact with him, but we have not yet managed to secure his participation.

In his absence, I still want to ask the question that I would have asked had he been present. You are well aware that the Prime Minister has stated that there are an estimated 70,000 moderate fighters other than the Kurds. Mr Lister has done something that the Government have not: he has set out a table in which he analyses—he comes to a similar total—10 groups of organisations that he regards as sufficiently moderate to qualify for participation in any peace talks that go forward. Do you believe that this analysis is flawed? Do you believe that there is any basis for saying that it is not a choice, as you said earlier, of the lesser of two evils? Between extreme Islamism at one end and authoritarian repression by the Syrian Government or something similar at the other, is there a moderate space with viable ground forces that our military intervention could support?

Peter Ford: I think Mr Lister's analysis is fatally flawed. I will quote to you something he says. He talks about 75,000 fighters who are nationalist in terms of their strategic vision, which is possibly true, and local in terms of their membership, which is certainly true, but then he goes on to say that "they seek to return to Syria's historical status as a harmonious multi-sectarian nation in which all ethnicities, sects and genders enjoy an equal status before the law and state." Mr Lister, this is not serious. Somebody else famously said he was describing a liberal party convention, not the Syrian jihadi opposition. I cannot help but point out that Mr Lister is also based in Doha and, whenever I see that byline, an amber light flashes in my mind, given the known position of the Qatari Government supporting groups like al-Nusra, which is an avowedly AQ-affiliated group. More seriously, Mr Lister provides no evidence to support his claims that there are so many moderates, and earlier I quoted a spokesman of one of these groups and they are almost to

a man Salafist, Islamist, jihadist, Shi'a-hating, democracy-hating people. I think most Syrians would agree with that.

Q147 Chair: But apart from that there is nothing wrong at all.

Peter Ford: Exactly.

Q148 Chair: I want to ask one supplementary and then that really will be the end, because I know we have gone slightly over time. Unlike Mr Lister, who I hope to give a similar platform to that we have given you, the Government have consistently refused to identify the 70,000 troops or the groups to which they belong on the grounds that that could assist Assad in his repression of them. In your professional opinion and knowledge of the Assad regime, is there any likelihood at all that Assad and his intelligence organisation would be unaware of the identity of the groups that are fighting against him?

Peter Ford: No, there is no chance at all. If there is one thing that the Assad regime does well, it is intelligence. They will have tabs for sure on any groups, whether they are full-blown terrorist fire-breathing jihadis or timid democrats, of whom there are few, mostly sipping small cups of coffee in Istanbul cafés.

The Government give one particular group: they say that the Free Syrian Army are an important component of the alleged 70,000, but they do not give numbers and they do not say which part of the Free Syrian Army—the FSA breaks down into variously stated as 30, 40 or 50 factions and many of these are purely local, so it is very difficult to say with accuracy that this one is secular and this one is Islamist. It does appear—the Russians seem to be on to this—that there may be elements in the FSA who can be detached from the main jihadi opposition. As I mentioned earlier, hopefully a possible outcome from the Vienna talks is that they do get detached and agree to local ceasefires, which releases the Syrian Army to tackle IS, possibly with some co-ordinated support from some elements of the FSA. But the idea of an army of 70,000 is fantasy.

Chair: On that note, thank you very much for coming to give us your expert advice today and for putting your case so clearly. We are very grateful.