

Defence Committee

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

Tuesday 9 February 2016

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 9 February 2016

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Members present: Dr Julian Lewis (Chair), Richard Benyon, Douglas Chapman, Mr James Gray, Mrs Madeleine Moon, Ruth Smeeth, Mr John Spellar and Phil Wilson

Questions 149–215

Witness: **Lieutenant General (retired) Sir Simon Mayall KBE CB**, gave evidence.

Q149 Chair: Good morning everybody. Welcome to this sitting of the Defence Committee's inquiry into British military action in relation to Syria and Iraq. Our witness today is Lieutenant General, retired, Sir Simon Mayall. Thank you very much for being here today and sharing with us your expertise. Would you mind making a few opening biographical and general scene-setting comments?

Sir Simon Mayall: Certainly. Thank you very much for the invitation to appear before your Committee. I am Lieutenant General, retired—sadly—Sir Simon Mayall. I was a 40-year career soldier with a lot of engagement, but my last job in the military, which I left last year, was nearly five years as the Government's defence senior adviser for the Middle East, which was funded by the FCO, UK Trade & Investment, DFID and the Ministry of Defence. At the very tail end of my career, just after the fall of Mosul, I was asked by the Prime Minister to be the security envoy to the Kurdish region, involving wider Iraq.

Chair: This is an inquiry on the military aspects. Inevitably, we will to some extent venture into foreign affairs and diplomacy, but we will try to keep that to a minimum, because we really want to focus on the strategy that is being and could be followed in relation to Daesh in these two countries. I would like to ask John Spellar to start off the questioning.

Q150 Mr Spellar: Could you give your view of the impact of the extension of UK airstrikes from Iraq into Syria?

Sir Simon Mayall: In evidence given before the decision was made, I believed that it would have strategic, operational and some tactical effect. I was clear that it would not be decisive in itself, and I don't think the air campaign is demonstrating a decisive, useful impact. On a strategic level, I felt that it gave the United Kingdom greater credibility in the discussions about the execution of the overall strategy. Operationally, it made eminent

sense that the air commander based in Al Udeid in Qatar should have as much flexibility from the assets that were committed to the operation against Daesh across Syria and Iraq. Tactically, on an intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, target acquisition, and strike potential basis, there were elements of the United Kingdom's contribution that undoubtedly would be of utility, albeit heavily constrained by the rules of engagement.

All that has been achieved, but I was equally clear—the Chairman will recall this—that I didn't think that it would be decisive, but I thought that all of it would be useful in the United Kingdom's attempt to be part of this coalition to turn back Daesh and its ghastly adherents.

Q151 Mr Spellar: Has extending the air campaign across the invisible line into Syria—a line not recognised by Daesh—adversely impacted on the operations that we are undertaking in Iraq?

Sir Simon Mayall: To my mind not. The air campaign is conducted by the American-led coalition, and you have probably been to the combined air operations centre—CAOC—at Al Udeid. To my mind, there is no downside to this. A point often made in the press is that we are now doing fewer air strikes or even sorties in a month than the Russians do in a day and that 75% of our sorties are not dropping ordnance because our rules of engagement do not allow us to strike when there is collateral damage. Personally, I think we are leading to far more civilian casualties by not striking Daesh properly than we are by making a virtue of not being prepared to accept casualties while trying to throw Daesh back. I do not see a downside to the extension, either strategically, operationally or tactically.

Q152 Mr Spellar: To pursue that point, what would your view be of the reaction of coalition partners if we extended the rules of engagement in the way that you suggest?

Sir Simon Mayall: We don't have a particularly strong lead from our United States friends. I don't need to tell the Chairman or members of the Committee about the political constraints that the Americans are operating under, which mean that other coalition partners are constrained. I am absolutely not advocating the sheer level of indiscriminate bombing that the Russians are doing, but there is no doubt about it that their entry into this conflict has dramatically changed the facts on the ground. Our air campaign, while it has been extremely helpful in reversing and buying time and chipping away, has been, from a military point of view, of a quality that is one of the slowest forms of any air strategy for achieving success against Daesh on the ground.

Q153 Mr Spellar: With the air campaign, people sometimes just think of the planes rather than all the impacts on training missions, intelligence collection, covert operations in order to assist intelligence collection, and so on. Can we sustain that over a prolonged period?

Sir Simon Mayall: I think we can. I don't think there is any problem from a physical perspective. From a political perspective, there comes a time when people will make their profit-loss or cost-gain analysis. It would be better from my perspective as a military man if we showed a bit more conviction in what we're doing. I don't think we would have had any success in Iraq without the air campaign, which has largely been led by the coalition. That success has been far slower than it might've been had we been more aggressive right at the outset.

Q154 Mr Gray: Sir Simon, we have seen great successes in Iraq with close escort, using Tornados, Typhoons, Paveway and Brimstone. It has worked well, and there have obviously been very good links between the ground and the air in order to achieve that. Can that close co-ordination really exist in Syria? In other words, do we have ground forces in Syria that can provide the same kind of communications to the air support as we have had from the Peshmerga and, indeed, the Iraqi army in Iraq?

Sir Simon Mayall: I would start by saying that I do not think it has been as good as it could have been in Iraq. We opted not to embed with the Iraqi security forces, although we have done training for the Kurds. I know that the *Daily Mirror* ran an article about special forces getting wounded, whatever they were doing at the time—I am no longer that close to it. The reality is that if we had been prepared to embed and go forward with the Iraqi security forces and the Peshmerga, we would have given ourselves more confidence about the rules of engagement being met and we would have had a much more effective air campaign.

Q155 Mr Gray: That was under parliamentary authority, so you could not have done that.

Sir Simon Mayall: I accept the constraints. That is largely replicated with all the other coalition partners. I would say that militarily it is not a good way to—

Q156 Mr Gray: I am sorry to keep interrupting you, but surely the Americans are forward in Iraq on the front line. Presumably they are providing the link to the close air support are they not?

Sir Simon Mayall: A lot of it is provided by air surveillance. They train and they push the trained troops out of the door, but they do not go forward with them. They may have some of their special forces. We have made a bit of virtue out of not going forward and therefore, quite rightly, we cannot have proper eyes on the ground that give us confidence, as opposed to a report from the Peshmerga or ISF that there is no collateral damage and danger. The fact is that we could go forward with certain elements in Syria, and we could certainly do so with the PYD.

Q157 Mr Gray: In Syria.

Sir Simon Mayall: We are back to Syria now. I do not think we are doing as much as we could do in Iraq, although—

Q158 Mr Gray: None the less, despite that it works quite well.

Sir Simon Mayall: It works well, but it could be better.

Q159 Mr Gray: And Syria?

Sir Simon Mayall: I think we could work with partners there, such as in the south, where they have been trained through the Jordanian effort, and moved up. Clearly we could work with partners in the Kurdish areas, where they are putting pressure on Raqqa, but we know of the sensitivities with the Turks about the PYD and the YPG. I'm afraid that it is getting a bit late to start embedding anyone in the Aleppo area; those days are gone.

Q160 Mr Gray: Coming back to who, the Kurds are a different kind of Kurds and the Peshmerga are Kurdistanis Kurds, rather than—

Sir Simon Mayall: Indeed.

Mr Gray: They are slightly different and a different bunch militarily, aren't they? Who are these people? You know them extremely well, of course. I have met them and we knew very well that there were people in Iraq whom we could rely on to provide that kind of service. Who are the people in Syria? We will come on to talk about the 70,000 in a moment, but who are the people in Syria we can reasonably rely on to provide close air support, the kind of ground-air link that you need to do the kind of thing that you did in Ramadi or—

Sir Simon Mayall: Which again, as I said, could have been done better, but that is for the Americans, because we are not even training down in Ramadi. Fundamentally, it would be the YPG. They were supported by the Peshmerga in the relief of Kobane, and they had pushed on very effectively, but there are huge sensitivities because our NATO allies, the Turks, believe that they are so closely linked to the PKK, so the Americans are very nervous about pushing people forward. Again, you get reports, and you may know far better than I do, of a certain amount of American special forces being trained to go forward. I have no doubt that the Americans have pushed the boundaries of the ROE. The other people I would talk about would be those down in the Daraa region.

Q161 Mr Gray: I mustn't press you too much on this one, but if we are going to carry out the same kind of close air support operations in Syria that we carried out in Iraq, we will have some reasonably reliable, competent, well trained, able people on the ground to do it. The YKK are not there and it is a pretty thin—

Sir Simon Mayall: The other thing is that in Iraq we have been invited in by the legitimate Government. That is fine; we are constrained by our own rules of engagement in Iraq and we have chosen not to get as heavily embedded or to go as forward as we could do. In Syria, you start again, and you are definitely putting foreign troops into a conflict that is already very, very complex. That is the real difference. The Russians have chosen to be invited in by the Assad regime.

Q162 Mr Gray: I don't want to put words in your mouth, but what you are basically saying is that at this stage we do not really have the assets on the ground in Syria to carry out the kind of operations that we carried out relatively successfully in Iraq.

Sir Simon Mayall: That is my understanding: we are hampered in what we can do because we have no eyes on the ground there. Equally, of course, the Americans might, for all I know. That intelligence will be coming back through the CAOC. As I say, the air campaign is run as an holistic Syria/Iraq campaign for strike.

Q163 Chair: Before I hand over to Ruth Smeeth, when you were in post, were you aware of a widespread view among people with a lot of understanding of the area that one of the objectives of the Daesh and al-Qaeda organisations was to draw non-Muslim boots on to the ground because they believed that that would stir up support for them and lessen the differences between the different Islamist factions? The advice we have from other witnesses earlier in the inquiry is that non-Muslim infantry in these particular conflicts actually cause more problems than they help to resolve. What is your view of that and was it an issue when you were in post?

Sir Simon Mayall: My issue again is that the catch-all “boots on the ground” is something that too many people are hiding behind, in many ways. We have the capacity to put in very specialist people. We are talking about small numbers, so I understand that there is a force protection issue, but if they are prepared to go forward I have always said you need to say, “Come on,” not, “Go on” to the local indigenous forces. They are going to do the fighting, you are absolutely right. You will have Sunni tribes alongside ISF alongside Shi’a militia alongside Peshmerga. That is the sort of extraordinary mosaic we will have if we start operations in Mosul, but the capacity to give people the confidence that they have this instant access to the high-tech capabilities that we are bringing to the overall fight far outweigh that. Small numbers, with the communications, intelligence-gathering assets and connectivity to the airstrikes, would have made many of these operations a lot more effective, quicker.

Q164 Chair: When you talk about small numbers, do you mean primarily special forces, or do you mean small numbers of advisers in addition to special forces?

Sir Simon Mayall: Inevitably, people go for the special forces. We largely have only the SAS. The Americans, of course, have their Ranger battalions—all that tier-2 stuff that you know well SBS might be put into, and also the Marines might be. I have always felt that, given what is at stake—the sheer scale of the destruction and the casualties across that part of the Middle East at the moment—that using “no boots on the ground” and then hiding behind it instead of actually putting proper capability boots on the ground that would have really leveraged the other parts—

Chair: I am still trying to quantify—

Sir Simon Mayall: I don’t see that as having any sensitivities, to be honest with you.

Q165 Chair: I am still trying to quantify what you regard as a proper or effective capability. Are we simply talking about very small numbers of highly specialised troops? Is it right that we are not talking about quantity of any significance at all?

Sir Simon Mayall: No. That’s what I would say.

Q166 Chair: And you believe that were we to focus on those very specialised expert forces, they could be inserted without stirring up the sort of reaction that an overt intervention would create.

Sir Simon Mayall: I do. One is well aware of the political sensitivities here, but to my mind there is a military capability argument that would really leverage the capability of those who are doing the bulk of the fighting—be they the Shi’a militia or whatever. There would be sensitivities there, but there wouldn’t be sensitivities with the ISF, the Sunni tribes or the Peshmerga, so it would be a question of judgment on the ground. It would not be without risk, but it would certainly give the more formed operations a much greater capability and credibility.

Chair: Thank you.

Q167 Ruth Smeeth: Moving on slightly to our understanding of Daesh, do you think it is possible to understand the Daesh order of battle, or are we simply trying to apply conventional military theory to an unconventional force?

Sir Simon Mayall: I think there is an order of battle. I am a little out of this now, inevitably, but there is a politically, ideologically, religiously and militarily motivated and organising force within Daesh. Many of them, as we know, are—I hate to say it—the Ba’athists and the former generals who supported the Saddam regime, who went across to Iran and buried themselves in the Sunni areas and have come back. A blind eye was turned to them by the Assad regime at the time. Behind what they are doing in Mosul, behind the raids, the change of tactics and the very clever use of mines, booby traps, human shields, and tunnels of course now, there is a very strong thread of military capability and competence. I think that a lot of it is like ISIS itself; it gives mission command; it makes it very clear to its subordinate commanders what it wants, but equally it feeds logistics, ammunition and suicide bombers into the system. We saw this in Afghanistan, where you would ask for 20,000 rounds of whatever and four suicide bombers.

So there is a controlling instinct in either Raqqa or Mosul that has joined up Baiji to free Ramadi, Fallujah, which they still hold, and back to Iraq and over into the Assad area. It is pretty nebulous to spot it if you are trying to do a sort of organic, British Army-type organogram, but there are undoubtedly leaders and people do not need a huge amount of direction as to what they are trying to achieve, in terms of both the brand of ISIS and the idea of the success and the momentum—fight the Persians, fight the Shi’a, fight the Westerners, fight the Sunni apostates of professional classes.

They do not need a huge amount of military organisation and the brutality does not require a huge amount of logistics support. So I am sure that, whether it is the agency, the JIC or the intelligence services in the MOD, they have a reasonable handle on what the top structure might look like in personality terms. But for the sort of campaign that ISIS are doing you do not need a huge military organisation to underpin it to make it still very credible and perfectly competent in localised areas, joined up by some unified ideology and motivation.

Q168 Ruth Smeeth: Based on that analysis, you are confident that we have an understanding of how militarily to degrade them.

Sir Simon Mayall: I have to say that that would be better addressed to the CDI or the head of MI6. My feeling is that we had a bit of an idea, hence, of course, the amount of effort we put into the HVT hunting. We always said that if we got lucky with something like Brimstone mounted on a British tornado at a time when we had information that the senior leader of al-Qaeda or ISIS was on the move and we could do it without collateral damage, that would be a very useful asset to bring to the overall effort. So I think that we get some of the top hierarchy—the top level.

At the low level, as I say, having watched them in some of their assaults around Mosul against the Peshmerga, I think that they are resilient, motivated, adaptable and very well resourced, still—that resource is being removed from them with attacks on the tankers, blowing up their banks and so on. We know that from the cutting of salaries to the fighters on the frontline. The difference is that ISIS operates more like a proto-state with an army than al-Qaeda ever did, and that makes it an interesting new twist on the ghastly Sunni Muslim attack theory ideology.

Q169 Mrs Moon: Is the move into the tunnels, the increased inability to see the Daesh fighters, and their integration into civilian communities, making our capacity to carry out air strikes less effective?

Sir Simon Mayall: Very. You referred earlier, Mrs Moon, to our rules of engagement. Again, I am not criticising them. We know the moral high ground, the damage you can do reputationally and to the strategic aim of what the Russians are doing unconstrained. But there is no doubt it makes it difficult for us by not having our own intelligence assets on the ground, by not being able, probably, to be close enough to the local people to get the local information, by having to fight ISIS within the confines of the populated areas, by their resort to tunnels. The tunnelling is an interesting capability that is crossing over from Hezbollah, Hamas and Gaza Strip. I remember one Kurdish expert—he has a double-barrelled name; you will know it—talking about the tunnel system by Kirkuk and saying that we need to put some of these sensors out on the ground. We know from when the ISF went into Ramadi that it was about not only the booby traps and IEDs, but the tunnelling.

There is nothing new here. People who fight in urban areas have always very sensibly mouseholed through buildings or gone underground between open areas precisely to avoid our surveillance assets, to move equipment and supplies, and to form strong points. But it makes it difficult for us, because we are not close enough up front to begin to strike areas with confidence that we are having an effect on them and their military capability.

Q170 Mrs Moon: So has driving them into the tunnels and into this change of tactic been a military success, or should we have seen in advance that it would happen and changed our tactics to accommodate that?

Sir Simon Mayall: It's difficult. You have only got to look back at the siege of Warsaw, Stalingrad or any of those things to see that it is a very, very sensible thing to do if you are defending in a built-up area. Equally, it is really, really difficult, time consuming and casualty consuming for any army—even a really well-trained army such as the American army or ourselves—to go into. You'll remember how long it took in Tikrit, where basically well-motivated people from the Shi'a popular mobilisation went in. A combination of tunnels, snipers, IEDs and booby traps is very, very effective. Very small numbers can hold up very large numbers for a considerable time. It isn't anything that we are surprised about, but I think the ISF are particularly ill-equipped to deal with it. Again, that's not an argument for putting Western boots on the ground in numbers, but it is an argument for having people a little closer up front to make sure you're bringing the right capability forward.

Q171 Mrs Moon: It's said that Daesh have lost about 40% of the land they took in Iraq and 10% in Syria. Can we sustain that sort of retaking of land? Why are we less successful in Syria?

Sir Simon Mayall: Again, watch this space as Assad, the Russians and Iranians go to. When I was here last time—I was interested to read the transcripts—I said that I thought the Russians would form a hard shoulder in Aleppo. We may come on to what the Russian motivation may be.

The difference is that we have at least a common purpose. If only we could get the Iraqi Government to make it a genuinely common purpose, with political outreach to the Sunnis

or an agreement with the Kurds. But at least the Peshmerga, the Shi'a militia, the ISF and the coalition have only one enemy. Although that is proving slower, from a military perspective, than it might have been, we are beginning to reverse the narrative and work on ISIS's morale. We are definitely showing that they are no longer expanding. Not only are they not expanding, they are falling back.

But they have made it quite tough. Tikrit, Baiji and even Ramadi have come under a huge amount of pressure from ISIS. Again, it is part of the narrative that they are pushing out on social media. It is no surprise to me—which is why I've always been a supporter of Iraq first—that that is where we have a Government and at least some security forces. It's less ambiguous and ambivalent than it clearly is in Syria.

Q172 Mrs Moon: So what's the difference that we need—

Sir Simon Mayall: Keep pressing on in Iraq is my strong advice to any of the Governments.

Q173 Mrs Moon: And mine. What would make the strategic difference in Syria? What can fill the gap of the Peshmerga, say?

Sir Simon Mayall: I hate to say it, but it's the regime. It's ghastly.

Q174 Mrs Moon: But they are not putting their efforts into attacking Daesh.

Sir Simon Mayall: They will get Aleppo, and I'm afraid we are going to live with the consequences. The refugee crisis is driven by that. That to my mind—even when I spoke here last time—is going to be the game changer. With Aleppo, Latakia, Tartus, Homs, Hama—all of it, less Deir ez-Zor, Daraa in the south and Palmyra—largely you have secured the heartland of the Alawites. It is going to come at huge cost. Aleppo is going to be absolutely destroyed, and who knows what will come. Then it really depends on whether the regime decide they wish to retake Palmyra. If they do, they will start to advance on real core ISIS areas. At the moment, we know they have been taking on Turkmens, moderate Syrian opposition, some of Jabhat al-Nusra—amen to that—and certainly ISIS, but we know they have been trying to crush out the moderates, so you are just left with the regime, Hezbollah, Iran, Russia and the Kurds up here against ISIS. If they start to move on Palmyra on their own—or Raqqa on their own—it will be interesting for policy makers whether they wish to be part of that. That is where I could see Russia beginning—let us assume the assault on Aleppo goes on for another few weeks or so. It will be ghastly, and we will see all the consequences.

Q175 Mrs Moon: Will there be anything left?

Sir Simon Mayall: There will be nothing left. At that stage, it will be very interesting to see what Russia comes back to the table with—whether it is sanctions, Crimea, Ukraine—in order to be helpful and say, “Look, there is no moderate opposition.” There might be some in the south, and obviously there are the Kurds, but, to all intents and purposes, the rest around Homs, Hama and Aleppo are gone. So we will be left with a fairly stark contrast. Do we want to crush ISIS in Syria in conjunction? That of course would make it quicker, but it would come with all sorts of sensitivities?

Q176 Chair: Thank you very much. We are going to have several questions a bit further down the line about Russia and her role, so I do not want to focus on that at the moment. What I do want to focus on is something that seems to be coming out very clearly from your evidence, which is that there are viable forces in Iraq that we can support and assist, and there are no such forces in Syria other than the regime's forces. As you know, there has been much publicity about a figure of 70,000 moderates, which the Prime Minister says was given to him by the Joint Intelligence Committee as their objective estimate. My first question is, do you think that President Assad and his intelligence services are pretty much aware of the nature and the names of all the groups that are supplying the forces that are fighting him and his army?

Sir Simon Mayall: I'm on not terribly sound ground here compared to other witnesses you could call on. I would argue yes. I would argue that they have got a pretty fair handle on much of it and on all the things that would constitute an opposition, all the way from ISIS to those whom we would naturally, a few years ago, have hoped would be the success story of Syria.

Q177 Chair: One of the things that this inquiry is trying to achieve is to test out the question of whether or not there are indeed tens of thousands of moderate troops—fighting forces—in Syria, which we could realistically hope to support. We have found it easy to get witnesses to say, “No, there aren't”, and to say that it is very much a binary choice, such as you have just described, between the Syrian Government forces on the one hand and Daesh and other Islamist organisations of fighters on the other. We are trying hard to get some of the people who have gone into print and listed groups that they regard as constituting 70,000 moderates, but so far, I believe, without success. Hopefully, we will persevere and we will get someone who will defend this figure.

You will be aware that the Prime Minister gave evidence on this point to the Liaison Committee of Committee Chairs on 12 January. When asked about whether there is or is not a third way between the choice of evils, between Assad's forces on the one hand and Daesh and other Islamist groups on the other, he said the following: “My answer would be that there has to be a third way—we have to find a third way. It should involve of course people, perhaps Alawites, perhaps even those who have taken part in the state run by Assad. We don't want to dismantle that; but to argue that the Sunni majority in Syria simply are too extreme, too hopeless or too whatever to take part in the future running of their country is a counsel of despair.” But your assessment is that there is not some third way between the Syrian Government forces on the one hand, and Daesh and other Islamist organisations on the other.

Sir Simon Mayall: Listening to what the Prime Minister said there, I would say that he is absolutely right that if we can get a political solution there must be elements of the Sunni Arabs—they are the majority. He is absolutely right to say that not every Sunni is motivated remotely by Jabhat al-Nusra. We saw that many of them did join what we will call the moderate opposition. I think many of them are still down in the south—as I say, I think the south, along the Jordanian border, is very different from where they have been crushed, really, in Homs, Hama and now Aleppo.

In some ways I would go with what the Prime Minister is saying. If we can get a security solution, or at least a political solution, there will be Sunnis there. Sadly, I think many of them have now left. We found that with Iraq, and the great and the good have been

crushed between the Assad regime and the brutality of ISIS or Jabhat al-Nusra. We saw this in Iraq: the professional classes were actively targeted, precisely because they are the people who would bring in a moderate thing and would have that community of interest with the moderate element of the Alawite community, who know that they remain a minority in this country.

I have to say that, outside the Kurds—I defer to people in the JIC or whatever about the state of play in the south—I find it difficult to see any really significant, joined-up numbers of people we would put in the “moderate opposition” category in the area where, largely, the major fighting is going on, between Palmyra and Raqqa, and the Euphrates across to the Syrian highlands.

Q178 Chair: This fits in of course with what you told the joint session of the Foreign Affairs and Defence Committees in October last when you said: “It would be very difficult now to build up a credible opposition to Assad that would meet any of the criteria that we would look on as acceptable for us to support.”

Sir Simon Mayall: I stand by that, in the northern part—not Damascus and the south, which is a very different equation; we know that, and the Russians are not remotely interested in that. But with the combination of IRGC—from Hezbollah—the Russians and the regime up in that area of Homs, Hama and up to Aleppo, I think it is very difficult to see anything that you could remotely put any effort into that would not just be lost, wasted, shot, captured, turned, etc.

Q179 Chair: To conclude this section, although for the moment we have authorised, for better or for worse, air strikes in Syria, other than the Kurds, there are not ground forces in Syria that we could use those air strikes to support.

Sir Simon Mayall: Well, I would defer to people who may have better information, but my feeling is that there is nothing there trapped between ISIS and the now reinforced regime that would form anything remotely resembling anything other than a very local tactical advantage to the sort of outcomes that we would have been hoping for a few years ago.

Chair: That is very clear, thank you.

Q180 Richard Benyon: There are of course millions of displaced Syrians in the region—

Sir Simon Mayall: Indeed.

Richard Benyon: Who have in many cases military experience and come from those educated, secular, what we in a Western way call moderates. If there was a meaningful operation on the ground, perhaps involving other troops in the region, these people might be mobilised. Is that a naive wish?

Sir Simon Mayall: No, I do not think that it is naive, but it does mean—something I remember David Richards advocating a few years ago—taking people out of the country to train them in an area without being in contact every day and squeezed. You might find those people in the Turkish border areas. Then, as you say, we have had this awful ambivalence from many of the other Sunni countries in the region, who loathe ISIS and everything it stands for, but see ISIS as Muslim, Sunni and Arab against the Persian, Shi’a

and Russian. That has been one of the real weaknesses—there is no blame attached; it is a comment, not a criticism—in getting a really effective coalition against ISIS, because too many of the Sunni Muslims see defeat of ISIS as simply empowering the Russians, the Alawites, Hezbollah, the Iranians and the Shi’as.

I sound like a broken record, but I go back to why I see that one of the best things we can do to get a better solution in Syria is to re-establish the Iraqi-Syrian border on the basis of military, diplomatic and political success in Iraq. That is much easier for us within our own sensitivities. They are perfectly legitimate sensitivities; it is not a loaded thing. It is easier to do business in Iraq. I just wish we had been more aggressively forward in doing our business in Iraq, because we could have been a lot further forward in damaging ISIS and pushing them out and closer to something to do with Mosul by this stage, which would have had its own effect on the situation on the ground in Syria. But that is looking ahead.

Q181 Richard Benyon: Do you think that militarily, we would be assisted if we had more eyes-on in Syria? I am talking about the possibility of embedding, advising or assisting troops with ground forces that are operating in Syria.

Sir Simon Mayall: I would not, Mr Benyon, but I would have said it if we had done it three years ago, when there was real evidence there were credible moderate Sunni forces. They have been either driven out, radicalised or defeated by a combination of the Assad regime—as I say, with its supporters—and the move to the more radical elements of Sunnism. Now it is quite difficult to take any moves that would put the type of boots on ground that I would say would be useful in Iraq into Syria. I think you would find it very difficult to find anywhere you would feel confident you could put Western coalition troops in.

Could we go to our UAE allies, our Saudi allies and our Bahraini allies? That keeps coming up, and we know what Iran throws back at us. That is why I find the whole mosaic in Iraq much easier to get a grip on, to come up with ideas of how we could really move the political dynamic forward through military success.

I find it very difficult to look at Syria. What you do in Syria, of course, is continue to take pressure off Iraq. That is why I argued that we should be part of the coalition that was striking in Syria. Going back to Ms Smeeth’s question, knocking the order of battle in Syria undoubtedly helps us in Iraq, and the quicker we can move in Iraq, the quicker we give ourselves a better negotiating place for being part of whichever way the Syria dimension of this goes.

Q182 Richard Benyon: Do you buy into the idea—doctrine is probably the wrong word—that ISIS actually made a mistake and a tactical error in trying to seize and hold land and develop this whole concept of a so-called caliphate? If they had operated rather more like al-Qaeda did in Afghanistan and elsewhere, not specifically holding ground and trying to exude all the trappings of statehood, they would be less vulnerable to the kind of tactics that are now seeing the land they hold reduce. If they want to be more sustainable, and there for the long term, destabilising the region, they should operate differently.

Sir Simon Mayall: To my mind, it is part of the centuries-old battle for the heart of the Sunni Islamic world. What ISIS did, of course, was outbid al-Qaeda as the most effective

part of the takfiri ideology—and very attractive it was too. We have not had a caliphate since Sharif Hussein made a brief bid after Atatürk abolished it in Istanbul. It was quite a ballsy move by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi to declare this caliphate. There is no doubt about it: it fed off selective grievance and selective inspiration and has been a remarkably successful brand. We know it is now moving across to Libya. We see it still in Indonesia. Redefining itself and setting itself in competition to al-Qaeda, and bleeding off from al-Qaeda a lot of that takfiri support, has served them very well.

It depends, at the end of the day, on what you are looking for. Operating as a proto-state, where you need to have revenue because you need to pay armies, and you need to have logistic support because you need to put people in the field, has made them a little bit more vulnerable to saying, “We’ve got this land here, and we are losing this land”, or being an organisation that could be hit slightly more conventionally. You are drawn into fighting pitched battles in a way that al-Qaeda in the Euphrates or in Iraq never did.

It is interesting, but there is no doubt that by not tackling it fast enough, we have allowed it to grow. I think I said last time that if I was in the caliphate and somebody told me there was a 60-nation coalition led by the Americans, I would be thinking, “I’m doing pretty well against that, frankly. It looks like we are standing up to this.” That goes back to the fact that we did not strike quickly enough after Mosul to reverse both the narrative and the expansion. And through social media and networks they have spread this idea that they are actually more effective than the illegitimate Government in Baghdad, the wretched Persians in Tehran and the so-called greatest Western nations on Earth who have come up against them. It has fed their global narrative, even though at the moment they are losing ground in Iraq.

Q183 Richard Benyon: Is there a risk that we could get obsessed by the figures that JIC came up with as possible troops on the ground, and meanwhile be missing the key point that if we do not hit them as hard as we have done, and possibly harder in the future, the influence of Daesh will be manifest in the countries you listed elsewhere in the region, north Africa and Indonesia? In Parliament we could be completely focused on trying to dance on the head of a pin about the number of forces that might be arranged against them and miss the wider picture that this is at least a regional—if not global—cancer that we must deal with in any way we can.

Sir Simon Mayall: You do need a global strategy for this. It is a very powerful motivating ideology at the moment. Of course, it is feeding not just on all the political, social and economic problems in the Islamic world but certainly on the fault lines. My worry is that if we allow ISIS to destroy the state structures—we have already seen the consequences of state structures such as those of Libya collapsing, and you will see it in sub-Saharan Africa—we will not be able to put them back together again. That, to my mind, is why it is important to try to move more quickly in Iraq to stop that part of the Middle East unravelling.

I really do worry about their capacity. This is really hard work. If Iraq was not an oil-producing country, I think it would have collapsed. The Syrian regime, of course, is supported by the Iranians and the Russians. We could have put money into Iraq, but we did not need to—although the oil price is collapsing. But if Iraq collapses, as I say, I do not know how you put these places back together again. I feel the same about the Chads, the Malis, the Upper Voltas and whatever, let alone Libya. If people can begin to get their

hands again on resources—oil, et cetera—as they proved early on in Syria, they really are in a position to make a very compelling, attractive package for these disillusioned, disenfranchised, brutalised young men across that band of the globe.

I do think we really are in a generational fight here—a very difficult one, and our own structures, politics and way of dealing with this is not best suited to this type of global challenge. I worry about the Americans not seizing this. The Byzantines in the same part of the world, on the Euphrates and Tigris, stood off against the Sasanians for 500 years, but you have got to have a historical view about what you are prepared to defend in your civilisation, and I fear that we do not quite have the mindset—that is for very understandable reasons, but I am an historian by inclination.

Richard Benyon: We should all read T. E. Lawrence.

Q184 Chair: What is quite interesting about the enemy’s mindset is that they seem to understand this method of provoking their enemies to the point at which their enemies feel that they have to react with tactics that serve our enemy’s narrative, and that was the intention all along. They seem to be rather good chess players, don’t they?

Sir Simon Mayall: I think they are very effective. I remember when we were up against al-Qaeda in Iraq—AQI—their capacity to move along the fault lines of coalitions or where the media, public opinion or sectarian divides were was very effective. They are very clever in knowing which buttons to press either to attract their own side or to drive a wedge between potential opponents.

Q185 Chair: Part of this scenario is the idea of a showdown between the infidel forces and the caliphate, is it not?

Sir Simon Mayall: Yes, and the heretic and the apostate who support the infidel forces and the illegitimate regimes, particularly of the Gulf.

Q186 Mr Spellar: Following on from that, are we putting sufficient emphasis and resource on psychological operations, or psy-ops, in all of this, as opposed to just physical operations?

Sir Simon Mayall: I suspect we’re not, Mr Spellar. Again, I don’t really go surfing the jihadist websites, but those who do tell me they are highly effective, very sophisticated and very cleverly done, and again they play very strongly to selective grievance and selective inspiration, set against people for whom life doesn’t have many upsides in terms of personal relationships or jobs or aspiration or ambition.

Q187 Mr Spellar: But that’s their psy-ops.

Sir Simon Mayall: Exactly. And I think it’s a really important part of both our counter-narrative and counter-offensive, if you want to describe it in those terms. Again, there would be far better people than myself from GCHQ etc. to talk about this, who will google or YouTube or whatever.

Q188 Mr Spellar: So, both in this context and maybe in other contexts as well, should we be looking at and indeed pressing the Government to get a much greater emphasis on communications and psychological warfare as part of a total package, rather than seeing these as accessory or indeed just seeing these in different compartments?

Sir Simon Mayall: I do think so, but of course the danger is that it can look like a Western product, so it depends which audience you are—

Mr Spellar: So is Coca-Cola, but it does pretty well.

Sir Simon Mayall: Well, that's the attraction of soft power. But there is a huge element out there that needs a very sophisticated look at, because you've got to work out whether you are trying to tackle what's coming out from there, or trying to mitigate what people are listening to in their rooms in wherever it is in Western Europe and so on. But I think it's a very important part.

As I say, I'm an old-fashioned pen and paper person, and I don't take a huge amount of joy out of surfing the internet and so on, but I am very conscious that it's a very powerful tool in both the right and the wrong hands. And I'm sure there is a large element of that that comes very firmly within the political sensitivities or the amount of resources you can put into it, compared with what we put into the military operation.

Q189 Phil Wilson: Do you think lessons have been learned as a result of the Libya campaign, and do you think that Whitehall now has a greater understanding of how to stage an intervention than it did prior to 2011?

Sir Simon Mayall: I do; I'm not sure it's learning the right lessons. I remember saying to the Prime Minister when he was still Leader of the Opposition—it was at the Iraq memorial service for the 179—“Were you ever to become Prime Minister, Mr Cameron, the lesson to take from this Iraq memorial service is not, ‘Never do this again’; it's, ‘Never do it like this again’.” Because to make a virtue out of saying, “Well, that worked really badly that time, let's just stand back and watch it go horribly wrong again and not intervene, and phew, I'm glad we didn't get involved”, is the wrong lesson.

We will move on a bit to Libya in this instance. I particularly feel that just allowing ISIS to move from where it is now, on the back foot in Iraq, and I think it will be on the back foot in Syria for, I'm afraid, the wrong reasons—an Assad-Russian hard shoulder—and then allowing it to move to a place where it could again get its hands on oil wealth that it could use to fund itself, and sitting back and just saying, “Ooh, it's always difficult when we intervene. We just make things worse. I think we'll stand back”, would be the wrong answer.

However, as I say, we will again have to identify the lessons and learn the right lessons. I simply don't see how we can just look at this Venturi effect on the migration routes from the unpoliced shoreline between Benghazi and Tripoli, and then just watch the growth of ISIS in Sirte, and then see a threat to the oilfields, given everything that would come with that, and given what would then be needed to get them out of that, while they take that oil wealth and again begin to re-accelerate certain elements of their ghastly philosophy.

Q190 Phil Wilson: So do you think we should be intervening in Libya sooner rather than later? And if so, in what way?

Sir Simon Mayall: I certainly think it won't be for the British to do it on our own, even were we to go there. I have no doubt about the sensitivities, but I do think that our Italian friends, our Egyptian friends and the Tunisians are worried—there, funnily enough, because you don't have a sectarian divide, there are elements we should adopt. I was

negotiating with the Jordanians to have a stabilisation force when Gaddafi fell; we backed away from it. Here, there are areas where you could possibly find Muslim boots that would more effectively go on the ground, supported by the UN and supported by precisely the technological advantage that the West can bring to these hybrid operations.

Q191 Chair: Wouldn't it make sense to try to set that machinery up before the situation becomes critical in Libya?

Sir Simon Mayall: I couldn't agree with you more, Chair. This could spiral out of our control very quickly. Yes, I really think we should focus on Libya, because although things are not out of hand in Syria, there are some interesting dynamics there. Things are going slowly but in a positive direction in Iraq. I worry about Libya because of the dynamics there. It would be messy and complicated.

Chair: We will pursue Libya a little bit.

Q192 Mr Gray: Are we in the West focusing on the wrong thing? Is this Committee in its current inquiry focusing on the wrong thing—the question whether we send eight Tornados across the Sykes-Picot line? Is it not time that we talk about Daesh internationally and particularly in Libya? You have probably answered that question. My second question is linked. Am I right in thinking that you subscribe to the view that both in Libya, where we destroyed the infrastructure and allowed a failed state to emerge, and also in the destruction of the Ba'athists in Iraq in 2003, we did exactly the wrong thing and we should not have done that? Extending that logic to Syria, having read some of the things you said when you gave evidence to the Foreign Affairs Select Committee, you seem to me to be implying that at least the regime has some form of quasi-governmental structure and we should be seeking to stabilise it, rather than destroy it. Am I misinterpreting your comments?

Sir Simon Mayall: No, I think that's right. As I said last time, we had wishful thinking. Mubarak had been overturned, Ben Ali had left the country, Gaddafi had been overthrown, and we genuinely believed—I think a lot of people did—that one last heave and Assad would go. I always argued that, to my mind, Assad in 2011-12 looked more like Saddam Hussein in 1991. He owned all the state assets; nobody was going to be strong enough to overthrow him, particularly if people were only going to cheer from the sidelines. It is interesting to see that in Damascus, the post is still delivered, the rubbish is still cleared, bread is still in the shops, et cetera. The trouble with all these countries is that the institutions are so weak. That is what we have found. You cannot decapitate if you don't want to drive all the way down through them. I think this is what the Geneva conference is about.

It is a different dynamic now. I do not see anything strong enough now to get Assad to go except and unless it is part of an overall deal. You then come—this thing just keeps growing—to the relationship between the West and Russia. At what stage are we going to have to work out what the Russians want out of this in order to be constructive players in Syria, having largely, probably, established what they want to establish—a line from Aleppo down to Damascus? Even though in the Gulf—I have just come back from Kuwait—they cannot stand the Alawites, they cannot stand Assad and they cannot stand what the Russians are doing, the word is out there that the Russians are making a very clear case: we have always stood by Assad and we still stand by him. I'm afraid they are contrasting that with some of our mixed messages to our friends in the Gulf—I know they

are difficult sometimes—and America's. They do not feel reassured or secure in Western assurances of support.

Q193 Mr Gray: So Russia's relations with the West or Saudi's relations with Iran—that's what is important?

Sir Simon Mayall: Yes. It is interesting that Mohammed bin Salman, Crown Prince and Defence Minister of Saudi Arabia, has been to Moscow six times, but he has not been to Washington or London once.

Q194 Mrs Moon: In some respects you have answered my question, which is about the way we are just firefighting. It is almost as if we never go anywhere for a long-term commitment. If you look at Britain's glorious past, it was because we had long-term investments in countries and we were there to stay. We were not there to just rape, pillage and go; we were there to invest and build and create. What we are doing now is relying on technology, with no understanding on the ground of what aspirations are, and damping down a fire, and then when another one bursts out somewhere else we dash off there. Do we have a clear endgame in sight that accords with the endgame of local populations? That is the question that I always feel we need to look at. We have our own analysis of what we want to achieve rather than it being the aspiration of the countries that we are involved in. Is that a fair assessment?

Sir Simon Mayall: I think it is. I never wanted to be a supporter of Huntington's clash of civilisations, but equally I never bought Francis Fukuyama's view of the end of history and we have won all the battles. Unfortunately—we have seen it in history—a mixture of social disenfranchisement, social disillusionment and failed political, economic and social structures, set against the burgeoning demography, has made people very prone to buying into this selective grievance and selective inspiration that certain elements of Islam have.

Mr Gray mentioned this; we are fixated by the nation state and the lines on the map to an extent, and of course the whole basis of takfiri ideology, and actually a lot of Islam, is that there is a global Muslim identity that has been illegally or illegitimately divided up by these illegitimate nation states. So there are two very different philosophies vying for people's attraction.

It is interesting that you mention our glorious history and so on. I think our sense of identity is very firmly tied up with the strong sense of national identity—within that there are of course Scots, Welsh, Irish, et cetera. That is very low down on the list of where people's loyalties lie in the Middle East, and at certain stages ISIS and AQI have been able to push their Islamic identity—and within that their Sunni identity, and within that their Arab identity—much higher up than any attraction to the state. We are trying to put a series of national policies on top of something that, however effective—we do not want to overstate it—has the capacity to be very dangerous: the philosophy that views the whole Islamic world as one. That can appeal across national borders in way that we sometimes find difficult to understand.

On your point about a mindset, their mindset is, "We are in this for the long haul." That is why they still use references back to the crusaders, Richard the Lionheart and the attacks on the Muslim countries, which means nothing to the average Joe in the street, but still has the capacity to resonate, with an appeal either to past greatness under the initial caliphs, or to past grievance and the sense of frustration and disenfranchisement.

Q195 Chair: We have seen upsurges and cycles of this Islamist extremism at various periods in the post-second world war world. Is there any sign that the Western democratic model is able to cope with this, or is it what our Prime Minister calls the “counsel of despair” point of view, which is that the only way to cope with it is to have secular dictators clamping down on it? There seems to be a bit of a record of that happening in countries like Egypt, but not much record of democracy triumphing, sadly.

Sir Simon Mayall: The problem, of course, is that there are no institutions to fall back on—maybe Egypt is better than the others. That is what we have proved in so many cases. So it is very difficult to see a way ahead. My worry in the Middle East, of course, is the demographics. The Middle East, however you want to define it, is due to grow by about 35% in the next 15 to 20 years, and there is nothing going on there, particularly if the oil revenues fall and we move away from a carbon-based economy. How quickly can you change the social, economic and political structure of a part of the world where more and more young people are coming on to the street? I am interested because we have always said that violence is declining in Western society because the population is getting older. If you draw a correlation between youth and violence of whatever description, you can say that that is rather worrying, because it is going in exactly the opposite direction. The median age is going down. We are 44 and rising, and theirs is going to 24 and falling.

The speed with which we will have to move—there will be firefighting. We have no option but to firefight, but it would be quite useful if we did it within a much longer timeframe, context and understanding of these seriously global shifts. Because we were observers—I won’t say disinterested observers—of Syria or the consequences, we are now seeing the domestic consequences of the horrors in Syria, with these huge migration flows. Nothing remotely tells me that it will get any better this year or the next year.

Q196 Phil Wilson: How are UK military operations in the region contributing to an eventual political solution in the area, which arguably must address the sectarian elite and their hold on power?

Sir Simon Mayall: Well, this comes back to my argument for being involved militarily. It is actually an issue that is wider in defence engagement, which I think the Chairman and I may have talked about some years ago—leveraging our political objectives off our military capability and credibility. In the Gulf at the moment, those objectives could be commercial, defence sales or just more issues of stabilisation. We want to empower our ambassadors in Iraq in particular. Frank Baker is there. The more we are doing, the more he has the capacity to go in and talk to Haider al-Abadi and say, “Look, we’ve got to have this agreement with the Kurds,” or, “We’ve got to have an outreach to the Sunnis.”

An interesting one will be precisely where Iran goes. Now that we have reopened diplomatic relations, we know that we have a nuclear deal there. We also know that we want to find some ways in which we can say to Iran, “Be part of the solution, not part of the problem.” With our ambassador there we can begin. I am not saying that we have anything militarily that we can use there. There are elements of getting engaged that can be used diplomatically and politically. Ultimately, that is what this is all about. We will have to have political solutions. In the absence of that, we just have war and conflict.

Chair: I appreciate that this is getting slightly more into the diplomatic sphere and I do not want to get too sucked in. However, we have mentioned Iran and we always think of

them and Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia has put together a coalition. What do you think about the military potential, if any, of that coalition to intervene in Syria in particular?

Q197 Mr Gray: What does that coalition amount to?

Sir Simon Mayall: It is a good question. It is like the question of what the 70,000 amounts to when you break it down. I mean, it has a leadership—I will focus on the Gulf states, as the so-called coalition is wider than the Gulf states. It is not simply Arab—it is certainly all Muslim, but it is not all Arab. It is Sunni. There is the GCC and there is Dar al-Jazirah—the Peninsula Shield Force. So there is a command structure and there are assigned forces from the Gulf states into that. Of course, as with any coalition, it is a bit like NATO. You can bring other people in—Jordan has always worked closely with them; the Egyptians could come in there—but you are going back to the sectarian issue.

There is one problem with bringing infidels in, as it were; there's another with bringing in Sunni or Shi'a who are quite categorically Sunni or Shi'a Muslim forces. There will be a lot of breast beating, as there is at the moment, with people saying, "Unleash the gates of hell if you bring these Arab Sunnis in." Funnily enough, southern Syria is an interesting dynamic. It would be very difficult to introduce Muslim coalition forces into the area in Syria that we are talking about—up around Aleppo. Some of that might be very interested if we started to engage with it over Libya. Again, most of these Sunni Muslim countries view this ISIS trend—it is, of course, Sunni Muslim and not Shi'a. Shi'a have their own problems, but ISIS and AQ are all part of a Sunni Muslim phenomenon. It is something worth looking at. It is easy to dismiss it. If we are thinking that this might be bigger and that we don't want to do more than firefighting, we should be looking for coalitions of the least sensitivity if they are committed. I could only really see something like that being largely accepted in southern Syria, because that is largely a Sunni area. There is regime there, but I don't think it is real regime heartland, and there is of course ISIS.

Q198 Chair: Madeleine is going to start exploring the role of Russia in all this, but arising from what you have been saying, events over the past few months have clearly proved you right. You said that Assad was not going anywhere and that, with the backing of Russia, this was a game-changing situation, if I can use that terminology without disrespect. Is it your present view that, if things go on as they are, Assad could ever establish control over most or all of the country? If not, in light of what you have just been saying about a Saudi coalition in the south, is the alternative that we might end up with a country divided into perhaps two, three or four sectors?

Sir Simon Mayall: It is a perfectly feasible scenario. It would be a very bad one, and I don't think it is inevitable. That is why I say it will be very interesting to see where the Russians go to after this latest offensive. There are times that you like to be right and other times when it is just sad that you are right, but I just felt that that was the way it was going. We could not be at a worse time with the personal animosity between the President of Russia and the President of America, and we couldn't be at a worse time in the American political cycle, with Iran, Russia, Syria and Iraq. My slight worry is that we will just continue to dribble on through 2016, with the weather being made largely by Iran and Russia in Syria, unless we can engage in some way. Russia is not remotely unaware of the dangers from Islam or Sunni-Arab takfiri ideology. We keep seeing that it is not under threat from the Shi'a; the threats definitely come from manifestations of extremist Sunni

ideology. It is very firmly in Russia's interest to find some solution, having protected their strategic interest.

It is a question of whether we collectively have the cohesion to engage Russia. Again, holding our nose—I am afraid that there is a lot of nose holding to be done, even to get a remotely decent outcome in Syria—it will be interesting to know where the Russians see the next move. Having established that line, I am not entirely sure that the Russians necessarily want to drive on to Raqqa, but they might collectively want to.

Q199 Chair: I am not sure I got a complete answer. Is it at least a possibility that Assad might re-establish control over most or all of the country?

Sir Simon Mayall: I don't think he could, no. Hence you are left with whether you can find a political solution that holds it together or whether you accept a de facto split—the Kurds, ISIS-stan, the grubby area around Jordan where we probably would intervene, and then the Alawite heartlands from Damascus up to Aleppo.

Q200 Chair: I am intrigued that you say ISIS-stan, which implies that ISIS would not be completely removed from the geographical area. I thought the idea of holding land is absolutely essential to their continuing worldwide appeal.

Sir Simon Mayall: That is why I say it. I am interested to know who has enough skin in the game to take on Raqqa.

Q201 Mrs Moon: You have made some interesting comments about the dominance of the Russian narrative across the Middle East at the moment and how Russia has demonstrated loyalty to the Assad regime and, at the same time, to the Iranian regime. There is quite a strong coalition there, and you can pull in Hezbollah—talk about supping with the devil. It is quite a powerful force. Do you see any way in which the Western coalition can begin a conversation about working together to bring about a mutually acceptable end game, or is it impossible for us to contemplate even beginning that conversation?

Sir Simon Mayall: What I find interesting about the Russians is that they have supported Iran and have absolutely supported the Alawites, but they have not alienated the Sunni Gulf Arabs. They have done it really cleverly. They have said, “You know our interests in the area. We are not pro-Shi’a, but we stand by our friends.” It is very interesting. The Emir of Qatar was in Russia last week. Mohammed bin Zayed has a good relationship with Putin. Mohammed bin Salman has been six times from Saudi Arabia. The Russians have managed to say, “Yes, we support Iran and, yes, we support Assad, but, hey, we are reliable allies and you might want to think about what we can bring to the party, and not much is going to happen unless—”.

I think there is scope. I think it will be grubby stuff that will not play well in the papers or in certain media outlets, but there is no option but to adopt a sort of global approach to a threat that is going to continue to come at us—not because it is going to existentially threaten America or Western Europe, although the significance of the refugee flows has not been fully thought through. There are ways in which we could find enough community of interest. I do not think that we are wildly out with the Russians about needing a solution in the Middle East that gives us longer-term stability.

Q202 Mrs Moon: Am I right in thinking that they have also been very careful in building relationships with the Israelis, promising that Hezbollah will not be attacking in Israel? It is not just about the Sunni-Shi'a split. They seem to be working successfully across the tensions in the Middle East.

Sir Simon Mayall: Yes, and we are not. The twin pillars of American policy are unqualified support for Israel and unqualified opposition to Iran. I don't think they have been very helpful and, now, they are looking flaky with the Sunni Arabs. I think American policy looks really bad. Inevitably, our policy and that of the Germans, the Italians, the French, the Spanish and so on is slightly tarred by the uncertain message that is being sent from Washington.

To answer your question, we absolutely must be working towards the responsible powers, particularly the P5, and trying to acknowledge that we are in a new ball game. I think I said last time that funnily enough—it's a ghastly thing to say—the Russians may have done us a favour, because they have said, "Right. We're going to do something and you're going to live with the consequences." It may well be that achieving their strategic aims, closing things up, giving us new facts on the ground and leaving us just with ISIS means that we can have a rather nasty realpolitik discussion about how we now stabilise that part of the world with a longer-term solution.

Q203 Mrs Moon: If such a step were taken, who has the political credibility and the critical political strength to undertake that discussion with Russia? In taking the step to have that discussion, do you alter the political balance of power in Russia's favour?

Sir Simon Mayall: I think you do. This is the problem. Our policy was all about ends, not ways or means, and has not served us well. The Russians have come in with a much clearer objective of what they want. As you know, that reflects the way that their politics works compared with Western democracies. It is not a pretty sight. We have ended up in a position where defeating ISIS, which we all want to do, will empower the Iranians, the Shi'a and the Russians. Until recently, Mrs Merkel may have been a really good interlocutor given Germany's position and strength. I am just rather gloomy about the American capacity to talk with the Russians without it just being completely soured by personal relationships and differing strategic aims. I just think it is a bad time for American leadership not to be decisive and firm.

Q204 Mrs Moon: So if you shift into a diplomatic and military focus that says that the lead is going to be with Russia and with Iran—

Sir Simon Mayall: In Syria.

Mrs Moon: Yes. What are the long-term consequences for the region going to be? Is it going to swing into being a Russian sphere and an Iranian sphere of influence? What happens then to the Sunni states?

Sir Simon Mayall: At the end of the day, you've got a lot of Sunnis, although people are leaving, in Aleppo, Damascus and Baghdad. They have no resources—well, that's not strictly true. I don't know how we can manage to get Iran to reach out. I know Russia would reach out—and it is, quite clearly. The fact that Russia is close to the Gulf states

tells me that they have made it very clear that they are backing not the Shi'a as such, but their own interests, which they are going to pursue very aggressively.

There's no doubt about it. We must continue to drive in Iraq and put political pressure on Tehran and Baghdad to reach out to the Sunnis in Iraq, and accept that we might be in a position early this year to have a rather more realpolitik discussion with the Russians. We must say, "Do you wish to be a minority state with these radicalised Sunnis on your doorstep? You can't kill all of them. There's more chance you are going to kill Alawites"—a lot have been killed, as we know. You can see how there might be some sort of solution that can suit a lot of people, although not the ideologues in ISIS, al-Qaeda or even Jabhat al-Nusra. The trouble at the moment is that things are running away from us. All of the people you might have wished to deal with in the Sunni Arab elements of Syria are now leaving.

Q205 Mrs Moon: Is Iran going to give up on its dominance in trying to control what happens in Iraq?

Sir Simon Mayall: It costs it a lot of money, so again you are back to where Iran's self-interest is served. The trouble there is that, having made concessions on the nuclear deal, as far as they are concerned, they are having to buy off the hardliners by continuing to play in Assad, the Houthis in Yemen, the eastern provinces such as Bahrain, etc. What you see in Iran's foreign policy, which you know well, is a lot of domestic power struggles, particularly as you get up to the Majlis elections. On the whole, I was a supporter of the deal with Iran, because I thought pushing it out into the cold was a real dead end. At least there is a feeling that you can appeal to Iran's sense of itself as a great nation and a great civilisation, which is, of course, what many Iranians feel about themselves. They do not feel a strong allegiance to the mullahs or the regime at the top, other than when we criticise Iran or treat it as if it is an Arab state. As we know, it's a 4,500-year-old civilisation, and yet you still find Americans who say, "Well, of course the Iranians are Arabs as well, aren't they?" If you approach the Iranians through that prism, they will just clam up.

I won't say there are reasons to be cheerful, but there are elements in Russia, Moscow and Tehran that we can appeal to. We just need to be a lot more reassuring to our Gulf Arab friends. They are very skittish and nervous about the pivot to Asia and the nuclear deal. People say, "Well, we've always been let down by the Sunni Muslims. They're the ones who produced al-Qaeda, etc. Perhaps the Shi'a element of Islam is easy to deal with." It's casual talk, but that sort of thing really makes people nervous in the Gulf.

Q206 Chair: Our last sets of questions are about alternative scenarios: what happens if Assad survives, which is your prediction in some form or another, and what happens if he goes? I would like to read you a short extract from an interesting article by the American journalist Seymour Hersh in the *London Review of Books* from 7 January. He sets out a scenario in America, where the military appear to have been taking a much more pragmatic approach towards the situation than the politicians. In particular, he says that the military's resistance to the approach that Assad must go at all costs "dates back to the summer of 2013, when a highly classified assessment, put together by the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, then led by General Martin Dempsey, forecast that the fall of the Assad regime would lead to chaos and, potentially, to Syria's takeover by jihadi extremists, much as was then happening in Libya."

Later on, there is a quote from General Michael Flynn, who was apparently forced out as head of the DIA over this matter, who says: “I was shaking things up at the DIA...It was radical reform. I felt that the civilian leadership did not want to hear the truth. I suffered for it, but I’m OK with that.” He said about Russia in a recent interview with *Der Spiegel*, “We have to work constructively with Russia. Whether we like it or not, Russia made a decision to be there and to act militarily. They are there, and this has dramatically changed the dynamic. So you can’t say Russia is bad; they have to go home. It’s not going to happen.”

I see you nodding at that. Were you aware there was this separate strand in American military thinking to what the politicians were saying in terms of what was or was not acceptable about Assad being part of the future of Syria?

Sir Simon Mayall: As I say, because we had not seen the consequences of Gaddafi going and what was going to happen with Mubarak, the early cries for “Assad must go” were based on some idea that there would be a good outcome. By 2013, if that is the time they are talking about, with what we already knew about getting rid of Saddam and what we now saw was going on in Libya, a lot of people found that the politicians, with respect, were hung out on the “Assad must go”.

The military were saying, “Are you absolutely sure? Of course we get what you need, but do you mean Assad and the whole regime must go or do you mean just Mr Assad must go?” and how far down and so on. There has been a lot of unease in the American military about a political rhetoric that the regime must fall, with people saying, “At the end of the day, is it really in US national interest to extend this chaos even further across the Middle East?”

Q207 Chair: Is that view shared by the British military?

Sir Simon Mayall: It probably would be. I think we can all agree we do not like Assad, but do we think that that is a good enough reason, on the basis of what we have learnt from 2003 onwards—2001, you could say, in Afghanistan—and when we put our own national interests up, to say, “That must go and we’ll just live with the consequences”?

Is it a very difficult one, and I am deeply conscious of just what moral and ethical dilemmas are posed by appearing even to contemplate letting people who have just conducted such heinous crimes against their own people be part of any solution. The other side of it, if we put it in the context of long-term potential chaos or instability across this region, is do we have any building blocks? I would say that the Russian dimension is really critical and, again, a difficult one because dealing with the Russian regime carries all sorts of sensitivities, as we know.

Q208 Chair: Just before I hand over to Douglas, working on the assumption that Assad stays in control over part of the country, do you feel that that would require long-term Russian military troop presence and/or Iranian forces in order to maintain that stability, or do you think Assad would pretty quickly manage to re-establish his own control?

Sir Simon Mayall: No, I think the Russians and the Iranians will stay as long as it is necessary. I think the Iranians would quite like to get—this, of course, plays badly, because the Iranians would like to keep their influence in Damascus, a bit like the Syrians went into Beirut, as they are keeping their influence in Baghdad. Although it cost them

quite a lot of money, I think they will be comfortable to stay there and Assad will probably need them to stay there.

The fact of life is that what they will establish is a boundary where there are very few sectarian divisions within it. It will be relatively homogenous, and therefore it will not take much for Assad to control it himself. But I think the Russians will not relinquish the bases, and I think the IRGC will stay there in order to continue to influence the Damascus Government and whatever the political settlement is.

Q209 Douglas Chapman: If we move forward to a negotiated political settlement, what would be the security mechanism of a post-Assad transition and over what timescale would that need to be developed?

Sir Simon Mayall: Well, at the end of the day, at one stage—this is why Syria is just so complex—you would have had a “moderate opposition” that was largely Sunni, you would have had the Kurds and you would have had the regime. The trouble at the heart of it is that a politically backed security solution has got to assume that ISIS are no longer a threat. Somewhere along the line, we are going to have had to have dealt with ISIS in order to have “Syrians of good faith” coming up. It may be that Assad does go but the Alawite structure stays the same to an extent, so how that power-sharing is achieved I don’t know. Do you need UN-sponsored troops on the ground? Would an Assad regime allow that? Would the Russians allow it?

You can easily see how certain elements of the fighting could stop as a result of a political solution and other elements would not, because ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra are quite clearly not part of any political solution. Do you then have the Kurds, the regime and some of the people who are now back in the political tent, plus other interested parties, all now focused on ISIS? The trouble at the moment is that we focus on ISIS but we do not have a political solution, so we are still facing in two directions in Syria in a way that we are not in Iraq. It is a very difficult question for me to answer unless you can give me a political context and tell me at what stage the fight against ISIS is at that point.

Q210 Chair: In terms of the regional plan for defence engagement, how do you see the UK being able to make a useful contribution, given the fact that the tenor of everything we have been discussing is that we are not going to get the outcome that we are still subscribing to, officially, if the Government’s pronouncements about transition and inclusive Government in Syria remain official policy? Do you feel that there is much of a role there for the United Kingdom? If not, could there be a role for the United Nations? I believe that you want to ask about that too, Madeleine.

Mrs Moon: I just wondered how critical in all this Staffan de Mistura is. Is he the only person who is actually talking to all the different groups? How critical is the UN and its special envoy in holding together the elements who would never be seen talking to each other and getting them to talk to each other?

Sir Simon Mayall: I think there is a big British role there. I am disappointed. I remember advocating the new base in Bahrain. I thought we were going to get a Gulf strategy. I watch with a bit of dismay a concerted effort in the media against the Saudis, because after everything we know, if anybody thinks that there is anything better than the Saudis—or

there is some idea that we should have a further burst of the Arab spring in the only relatively stable part of the Middle East at the moment.

I think we could be giving our Gulf allies, friends or however you want to describe them—they are all difficult to deal with—a lot more reassurance that we have a plan in Iraq, that we recognise the problems in Syria, that we are engaging on a longer term basis and that we absolutely get their concerns about Iran. While we are engaging with Iran, we have to absolutely reassure our Gulf friends, because for all sorts of reasons it is still the driver of the Western economy. I am slightly dismayed that things that I think the British Government could have done to contribute to that sense of reassurance and security have not been done.

We have talked about a Gulf strategy for ages. Some of it is high-level political messaging and some of it would be that these are parts of the world where British military engagement is hugely effective—the Sandhurst bit and the exercises bit—let alone the fact that they are the base for all our operations in Iraq. I just think it is such an easy thing for the British Government to lend their weight to people in that region who feel under threat from Persia, under threat from Shi’as, under threat from anarchy, under threat from ISIS and under threat from al-Qaeda. It would be easy just to say, “No, no. We value your security. We also believe that your long-term stability requires you to diversify your economy and address women’s rights and your human rights record.” We all know the more nervous you feel, the more you roll up like an armadillo. To my mind, the best way to get the sort of reforms in the Gulf that we believe are really important for long-term stability, and about which they are criticised daily in some of the papers, is to give them the security that they can continue to advance on their reform while we continue to defend them against the contagion of ISIS or the IRGC.

Defence engagement is something that we do really well, but I just don’t think that we do it as well as we really could. To my mind there are strategic, operational and tactical advantages to leaning into this, and by God there are worse places and even more complex places in the world to do that than a place that instinctively feels an affinity with the United Kingdom.

Chair: I know that we are going slightly over time, but we cannot resist. Richard has a question, and then I will make a closing point.

Q211 Richard Benyon: Your last comment was very powerful and I hope that we run with that idea in our report. If you were able to speculate what Prince Mohammad bin Salman said when he went to Moscow on all those occasions, why do you think he is going there? What is his purpose? In terms of his announcement that ground forces could possibly be available with an Emirati contingent, are we talking years, months, weeks, or is this just rhetoric?

Sir Simon Mayall: My big worry in Saudi Arabia, and we all have our own views about the Saudi Arabian Government, is that we are a little uncertain as to who is pulling the levers at the top and where the policy is coming from. Is it a personal policy? Is it driven by ambition? Is it driven by hubris or fear? Keeping our lines open to Mohammad bin Zayed and to Mohammad bin Salman about precisely what the Russians are doing would be really helpful. Once again, one cannot appear to criticise them at every turn and then expect them to tell the British or the Americans what they are discussing with the Russians if they have no faith in our security guarantees. Again, they are looking for reassurance,

and they are saying, “If the Americans really go flaky on us, we might offer you another base in the Gulf. Or we can help you out with this, or there is OPEC.” It is wide-ranging security in the wider sense, way beyond military. Equally, I suspect that they are asking of us, “What are your red lines now in Syria? What are you prepared to back? What are the circumstances under which you might let Assad go?” It would be face-saving if Assad were to go; it would not be the Alawites being driven into the sea. You constantly need to keep such high-level personal engagement in that part of the world to allow you at least to join up the dots and to triangulate what we are hearing.

Q212 Chair: To wrap up, given what we discussed earlier about the military taking a rather different and arguably more realistic view of the situation than the US politicians, and you said you thought that might be shared among some of the UK military, do you feel that the voice of the military is sufficiently integrated into the decision-making process over here? It does seem that our policy has been driven, as I suppose it must be in a democracy, more by the politicians, and the question is whether the military voice was sufficiently taken into consideration beforehand. As an example, we now have a situation in which the Americans are putting more troops back into Afghanistan, and the British announced in advance in 2010 that we would be pulling all of our troops out from a combat role at a named end point, which is not normal military practice during an ongoing campaign. Do you feel that, as I say, the military input is being insufficiently considered by the politicians who, of course, rightly have to make the final decisions?

Sir Simon Mayall: Very sensitive. Mrs Moon quite rightly referred to how long you are prepared to conduct a campaign for. These timelines that we set make it very difficult to achieve the change on the ground that you need. I used to refer to global Marcher Lords. We just defended the Scottish or the Welsh borders, or the Byzantines on the Euphrates for 500 years, because you just knew that threat would never go away. We do not seem to have the capacity to do that.

Mrs Moon: What makes you think the threat on the Scottish border has gone away?

Sir Simon Mayall: There was so much enthusiasm, and that surprised me after 2003 and what we knew by 2011 about what had happened in Iraq and what we had opened up by getting rid of Saddam. There was a lot of enthusiasm. I think it went on for two years with Assad. Again, I am not trying to be smart after the event, but I said, “Unless you are prepared to invade Syria, I do not think that feeding weapons into well-meaning people is a good idea, when the Alawites are going to fight to the death to protect themselves and they own all the security apparatus. Unsurprisingly, a lot of minorities and a lot of secular Sunnis are going to cluster under the regime. It is going to look a bit like Saddam when we liberated Kuwait and then we encouraged the Kurds and the Shi’a to rise.”

Q213 Chair: What post were you in when you made that prediction?

Sir Simon Mayall: I was in the Defence Senior Adviser role.

Q214 Chair: Do you feel that your views were given sufficient weight?

Sir Simon Mayall: I don’t. I have said, “Do not look on this as Gaddafi.” There were no people with a huge stake in the country when Gaddafi went—then there were. But the Sunni minority under Saddam Hussain were determined to fight for their position in Iraq

in 1991 and were only overthrown by a huge, full-scale American invasion, and I said, “That’s what the Assad regime looks like to me. The Shi’a minority are going to fight to the death, because anything other than success means they are going to be pushed into permanent subordination.” Of course, they had seen what had happened to the Sunnis in Iraq and they could see what was going to happen to the Shi’a themselves. So they were never going to just roll over and say, “Elections, democracy, Sunni majority.”

Q215 Chair: Did the chiefs of staff and the Chief of the Defence Staff share your view? Do you know?

Sir Simon Mayall: I don’t. I wrote about it and it went to the Ministry of Defence and across to the Cabinet Office. I just said, “I think we want to be really careful about how fragile we genuinely think the Alawite regime and Assad are. He will not be going quietly.” I could dig that up from somewhere.

Chair: Thank you very much for a marathon session, which has been tremendously informative. We are very grateful to you and I am sure that the session will influence the results of our inquiry.

Sir Simon Mayall: Thank you very much.