

Defence Committee

Oral evidence: UK military operations in Syria and Iraq, HC 657

Thursday 17 March 2016

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Members present: Dr Julian Lewis (Chair), Mr James Gray, Johnny Mercer, Mrs Madeleine Moon, Ruth Smeeth, Mr John Spellar, Bob Stewart, Phil Wilson

Questions 216 - 260

Witnesses: **General (ret'd) Jack Keane**, Chairman of the Board, Institute for the Study of War, and **Dr Frederick Kagan**, Resident Fellow, American Enterprise Institute, gave evidence.

Chair: Good morning, and welcome to this extraterritorial session of the House of Commons Defence Select Committee's inquiry into UK military operations in Syria and Iraq. We are most grateful to the British ambassador in Washington DC for making his residence available for this session. I would be very grateful if our two witnesses in this first 45-minute session would kindly identify themselves for the record and perhaps say a sentence or two about themselves.

General Keane: My name is Jack Keane, and I am a retired Army General. I was an infantry paratrooper. My mother was born in London. My father was an Irishman—happy St Patrick's day. For the last number of years since I left the Army, I have been involved with national security very deeply—the Middle East, principally. I am the chairman of the Institute for the Study of War, which is a think-tank here in town.

Dr Kagan: Good morning. I am Fred Kagan, the director of the critical threats project at the American Enterprise Institute. I have been there for going on 11 years, working on issues of national security but particularly Iraq, Iran, al-Qaeda, ISIS and many other delightful topics. Before that, I was a professor of military history at the US Military Academy at West Point. I have a degree in Soviet studies, which I thought I would not need again, but it has, unfortunately, become useful.

Chair: Thank you both very much. Our first question will be asked by Madeleine Moon.

Q216 Mrs Moon: Good morning, gentlemen, and thank you for joining us today. Many in the Committee were in Iraq two weeks ago and we were very conscious that Daesh had not taken any territory for some considerable time. Do you consider that we are approaching the end of military operations against Daesh, particularly in Iraq?

General Keane: No—far from it. In terms of what we have witnessed recently, the taking of Ramadi was six to seven months in the making. That city is literally destroyed, obviously. It has been secured since around the first or second week of April by the Iraqi security forces.

The Iraqi security forces and the Government of Iraq obviously want to take Mosul, the second largest city in the country; they are making preparations to do that as we speak. They have moved forward a couple of divisions: the 15th division, trained by coalition forces, and the 9th armoured division. Most American military observers do not believe that is feasible in 2016 and that it likely will go into 2017, although the Government of Iraq, feeling the pressure that the second largest city is occupied by ISIS, wants to do it sooner. That is probably understandable, but whether it is realistic remains to be seen.

There are huge issues, which Fred and I can talk about in depth, as to what the challenges are of putting together an adequate military force. There are political challenges as well as military challenges in doing that—we may take that on in another question—but we are far from seeing any termination of military activity in Iraq.

Dr Kagan: I certainly agree with that. You never know what is going to happen. Mosul has been depopulated to a large extent, and it remains to be seen how hard ISIS or Daesh will fight for it, but the problem will have to do heavily with the composition of the forces that would clear it.

The issue is that the Iraqi Army certainly does not have the forces on its own to undertake this operation, so doing it sooner will require heavier involvement of Kurdish forces and also likely of Shi'a militias, both of which are likely to exacerbate ethno-sectarian tensions in Nineveh province and set conditions for the continuation of an insurgency even after Mosul might be liberated. I would note that ISIS has taken territory in Syria and their campaign there is not proceeding in anything like the same fashion, which is very important because the border is not meaningful to ISIS.

Q217 Mrs Moon: In relation to the decision announced by the Russians to withdraw most of their forces, has that caught us on the hop and does it indicate any potential for greater hope in relation to the peace talks?

Dr Kagan: Virtually everything the Russians do has caught us on the hop, although it should not have because it is all entirely predictable and in accord with Putin's strategy, which has nothing to do with Syria and everything to do with establishing and maintaining an air and naval base on the eastern Mediterranean coast. He has done that and we appear to have ceded it to him, which I would note is one of the most significant geostrategic infractions of modern times, although it has gone virtually unremarked upon.

I do think that Putin was probably to some extent attempting to press Assad, but, primarily, this move is actually meaningless. The only forces that he is taking out are those that could be very rapidly brought back. There are very good military operational reasons for rotating them. Fundamentally, he is undertaking a military movement with much diplomatic fanfare, and the diplomatic fanfare and political objective are secondary.

General Keane: I agree with that assessment. When you think about what Putin has achieved here, it is pretty significant. Largely unreported in the US media was the

precarious nature of the situation in Syria during 2015. The opposition forces had made significant gains—so much so that they were actually approaching the north-western corner of Latakia province, which is the western Alawite enclave, and endangering the preserve that the Assad regime would have; obviously, they had already taken Aleppo.

The Iranians convinced the Russian regime of this in a number of visits that they made, because their intelligence on the ground is considerably better; they have thousands of people participating. They waited until the nuclear deal was done in July 2015 before they inserted their forces. They came initially to stop the gains that the opposition forces would have and not to endanger the regime. So militarily they were able to do that, although I think they found—we observed this on a daily basis at ISW—that this was not as easy as they thought.

There were some challenges on the ground militarily. The regime forces themselves had low morale and equipment-readiness problems. The 100,000 versus the 220,000 that they started with four-plus years ago were not particularly well led. The Iranian Quds force and Hezbollah—good fighters—propped up the regime on the ground, certainly. None the less, it did not go as easily as they thought it would go, but they did create a security buffer for the regime. So, militarily, mission accomplished.

Politically, the gain is quite dramatic. They got the President of the United States and his Secretary of State to accede to the conditions of the Geneva peace talks that Assad could stay in power. That was a reversal of a four-and-a-half-year policy decision that the United States had. Strategically, it is also quite dramatic because of what they have done. The United States in the Middle East post-world war 2, as you know, has been the most influential out-of-region country. Virtually all of the Sunni Arab countries are our allies. They have been threatened dramatically by the state of Iran—I know that is not the subject here, but that is the pressure point that they feel mostly—and also by radical Islam.

Russia came in to prop up their ally, and that sent a huge message throughout the region. I am not making judgments; I am just stating facts. Contrast that with President Obama's abandoning of Mubarak, the No. 1 ally of the Sunni Arab states, and his abandoning of Iraq. Contrast it with his walking away from Libya after a moderate Islamic Government was established. The only thing that they asked for was to establish a security force to be able to put down the radical militants. After that decision was made, those same militants tried to kill your ambassador, killed our ambassador and ran us all out of Libya within an 18-month period. That is quite dramatic, and none of it is lost on the Sunni Arabs.

When it comes to Syria, despite the Sunni Arab states' encouragement of the United States to get robustly involved in arming and training the Syrian moderates, we refused. The President actually refused that recommendation of Secretary Clinton, Secretary Panetta, Director Petraeus and General Dempsey in July 2012. He refused it. We then had the Syrian chemical red line in 2013. At that point, it was clear to everybody in the region that United States policy as it pertained to the Middle East, and specifically to our Sunni Arab allies, was dramatically different from that of any President we had prior to that time, whether Democrat or Republican.

I contrast that with what Putin has done. As a result of that, as we sit here today, Putin now has arms deals with virtually every Sunni Arab state in the region. He has trainers on the ground assisting el-Sisi against ISIS in the Sinai peninsula, and he has entered into

four preliminary agreements to build nuclear power plants in the Middle East. That is a dramatic strategic shift at the expense of the influence of the United States in the region and all to his strategic gain. This was a catalyst for that to happen. First, militarily: mission accomplished. Secondly, politically: significant gain in terms of his stooges staying in power, at least for the near term. Thirdly, strategic geopolitical objectives: pretty significant.

Q218 Phil Wilson: I want to go back to the issue of Mosul. Is it strategically important that Mosul is taken? You said that Iraq could not do it on its own, and it is obviously going to take some time—it probably will not happen this year—but what else do the coalition forces need to do to help them to take the city?

General Keane: Fred Kagan and I come at this pretty much the same way. We have been very frustrated from the beginning of US policy as it pertains to the assistance provided to the Iraqis. When you look at the Iraq military and its collapse—it took place in front of us all on a television screen, and it was real—that is not the Army that your country and ours trained. What that represented was three years of al-Maliki changing out the military leaders and not resourcing training programmes for three years. If you have an Army that is poorly led by political stooges rather than military leaders and it is not trained, it is not going to perform. That is what we saw and the reason why we saw it.

But when you try to look at this in simplistic terms, you recognise that this mosaic of a force that was left was a very weak hand. The President's decision to use indigenous forces to retake the territory that was lost in Iraq is the correct decision. Where we disagree with that decision is, if that is what you are going to do and that is the right thing to do, at least initially—it is certainly not the right answer to bring back combat brigades of US or UK troops to do it for them—let us put it together. If you recognise that that hand is so weak, you have to strengthen the hand.

You have to do something significant. First, you have to accelerate the training process—in other words, the throughput you are going to get so that you can put forces back together. I would suggest that that takes thousands of trainers, not the hundreds we have committed to the task. You have to put advisers down at the fighting level with that force, as we have done so successfully in the past with your forces in the Basra area and US forces north of there.

We also have to put air controllers on the ground to facilitate the use of air power. As we all know, air power alone cannot win any war, but it can be quite effective. It can be very effective, even in close combat situations, which is what we are really dealing with here. All of the infrastructure, so to speak, was taken out very early. We are not fighting a nation state as we know it. They may claim to be a nation state, but they don't have the infrastructure of a nation state, which lends itself to bombing—in other words, facilities. This is people and things that support those people, which are largely mobile.

The only way to deal effectively with air power in that kind of situation is to have somebody to control the bombs—not the pilot—and that requires an air controller. From the beginning, our President has said no to all of that. Our military has never been able to put together a campaign plan to help the Iraqis achieve a military objective, which is the eviction of ISIS. We are doing this incrementally. We are significantly and dramatically

under-resourced to do this task, which protracts the military campaign out, frankly, for the next President of the United States to resolve.

The second thing is that there is a huge political dimension to this. All of the land that ISIS is sitting on now in Iraq is Sunni land. The Kurds have retaken the land that belonged to them from ISIS, which shows that ISIS, to use an American expression, is not 10-foot tall—it is not something we can't deal with. Of course we can. It lost every major fight it had with the Kurds, who have retaken their territory in both Syria and Iraq.

What hasn't happened is that we have not put together a Sunni tribal force to join with the Iraqi Army to retake and to hold that Sunni land. We cannot get there with that force, as we did so successfully in 2007 in Iraq when we had a Sunni tribal force that tapped out at about 100,000-plus. That isn't even close to anything we have now; we have in the low thousands.

Inhibitive to that is the Prime Minister's inability to reconcile the political situation in Iraq where they were able to participate, and the lack of US diplomatic effort to help push this in the right direction. Secretary Kerry never goes to Iraq. He should be in and out of there on a regular basis. Secondly, the United States commitment to this tribal force, in terms of the resources and advisers we could put in there to show them that we are really behind them, is not taking place either. In the long term, the success of this military campaign is tied to that force. By and large, it doesn't exist in any consequential manner.

Chair: I am going to have to ask for slightly shorter answers. It is fascinating stuff, but otherwise we will not cover all of the topics we want to hear about. Can I hear from Dr Kagan? Do you have anything to add?

Q219 Phil Wilson: Is it strategically important that Mosul is taken?

Dr Kagan: Yes, of course it is. It is vital that Mosul be taken. We cannot leave large urban areas in the hands of ISIS for a number of reasons: practically, because of such infrastructure as remains; symbolically, because of the existence of the caliphate and the fact that that has become a thing that is generally discussed.

All I would add very briefly is that, to step back for a minute, we need to recognise that the West is generally pursuing a littoral strategy towards this problem. We are allied with the Iraqi Shi'a, the Iraqi Kurds, the Syrian Kurds and the Syrian Alawites, plus Russians and Iranians, basically to attack and invade the Sunni lands where Daesh is living. That will fail. The problem has always been within the Sunni lands. The solution to the problem will be Sunni partners. We are well on the path collectively towards persuading the Sunnis that we are their mortal enemies and that we seek to assist those who wish to exterminate them.

All of us in the US and the UK will say that that is not our policy and so forth, but it is in fact the policy of the Alawite regime and, to a somewhat lesser extent, of the Iranian regime and their proxies. The Russians have been very actively abetting it with a horrific campaign of indiscriminate bombing, which deserves condemnation but is instead generally receiving praise from the West. We have to adopt a strategy that focuses on the Sunni in the Sunni lands and ceases to imagine that an invasion of a collection of minorities backed by outside powers will somehow resolve this.

Q220 Mr Spellar: Pursuing on Syria, what is your assessment of the current state of the Syrian moderate forces, and is it sufficient for them, along with Western air power, to be able to defeat the regime, and also to defeat Daesh?

Dr Kagan: Jack has with him a superb report that has just come out from the Institute for the Study of War, which goes through the opposition powerbrokers in great detail. To summarise, it is not really an issue of talking about moderate opposition—virtually all the opposition is Islamist, one way or another, at this point. The distinction that we are making is between Salafi groups and others, particularly Salafi jihadi groups, which are, of course, Jabhat al-Nusra, the al-Qaeda affiliate, and Daesh, but also Ahrar al-Sham, which is not formally an al-Qaeda affiliate but is nevertheless a Salafi jihadi group, and a number of others. We make a distinction between those and political Islamist groups tied to the Muslim Brotherhood and so forth, which are, in the current environment, the likeliest source of acceptable allies that we could work with.

The advantage that we have is that most of those groups reject the ideology of Jabhat al-Nusra and Daesh and would probably fight, with limitations, against it once the regime had been defeated. The problem that we have is that our strategy is to avoid doing anything that might lead to the defeat of the regime and generally to constrain our partners on the ground from acting against the regime. That is a problem, because they see the regime, quite rightly, as an existential threat to their survival and their communities, which it most certainly is, and they see Jabhat al-Nusra, generally, as allies—unpleasant allies, allies pursuing an ideology that perhaps they do not like, but extremely combat-effective and willing to fight with them against the main enemy. They see Daesh with a much more jaundiced eye, but Daesh is fundamentally not present in much of western Syria. There are areas where it is, but that is not the main issue.

So until and unless we recognise that the requirements of any partners in the Sunni lands on the ground are focused on defeating the regime, we will not have partners on the ground, regardless of their political orientation. Furthermore, and this is something that ISW has been showing very clearly over the years, the opposition has been steadily, and now increasingly rapidly, radicalised and driven more and more into the Salafi jihadi camp by the combination of the Russian air campaign, the regime campaign, pressure on Aleppo and the Western passivity in the face of all this. So the longer we delay and allow events to move in the current direction, the more the opposition moves towards the Salafi jihadi camp.

General Keane: What Fred was referencing is this report that I have brought with me and we could get you a copy of it if you like—it just came out. We track these opposition groups on a regular basis. The report's title is "Syrian Armed Opposition Powerbrokers", and it lays out in some detail the opposition groups and what their affiliations are.

They are along the framework of the four tiers that Fred has mentioned. Tier 3, political Islamists, and tier 4, secularists, are largely groups that we can probably work with because they are not radicalised and they are willing to stand up against Jabhat al-Nusra, and ISIS itself. But the reality is that these groups are diverse and fractious and in and of themselves they are unlikely to cohere into something that is stable and has a unified structure. There was a huge opportunity for that at one time, when many of the tier 3 and tier 4 were actually working together, but when the red line was not executed, the political Islamists and other groups began to pull away from the secularists because they saw the

United States no longer backing the opposition forces that were allied with the United States.

General Keane: All that said, leadership, creative diplomacy and resources can still make a difference here, in bringing an opposition force together in a significant way to stand up against the regime and, eventually, the tier 1 transnational forces that are there and Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS.

Q221 Q221 Chair: Can I just ask about—

General Keane: I would like to finish—I'm your guest here. The fact of the matter is that our policy is as Fred stated. I want unequivocally to underscore it because we have never ever wanted to interfere with the agreements we were making with the Iranians, and the Iranians are supporting the Assad regime. We have made policy decisions that are contrary to what those opposition groups are trying to achieve and we are still doing that to this day.

Q222 Chair: I was not trying to shorten your contribution, General. I want you and Dr Kagan to expand on a point, please. I just want to get this quite clear. The consensus between you seems to be that there was a time when what we would call—by our Western standards—genuinely moderate groups were more viable, but now, to quote Dr Kagan, virtually all the opposition is Islamist at this point. You seem to be suggesting that it is a choice between very hard-line Islamist groups and less hard-line but still Islamist groups. The question to both of you is: if the Assad regime were to fall, do you believe that the result would be an inclusive, moderate Government or would it be an Islamist Government?

Dr Kagan: I would like to be clear about what we are talking about when we are talking about “Islamist”. There are a lot of groups in Syria that are political Islamist groups. That is to say that they believe—at least, they say—that the Government should be based on Islam in some way, and so on and so forth. I do not regard that, in and of itself, as a threat to Western interests. I think that we go much too far when we decide that all political Islamists are a threat to us or are groups that we can't work with.

The issue is, what kind of political Islam are we talking about, and is there a Salafi jihadi component to it? It is the Salafi jihadi movement, as distinct from the broader group or collection of political Islamists, that actually identifies the West as an enemy to be attacked and destroyed and so forth, and that will lead naturally into co-optation by al-Qaeda. Political Islamists are problematic for us—I won't say that they aren't—but I think that it is very important not to go down the road of saying, “Well, if they're political Islamists, they are a challenge.” There are groups that are moderate and there are groups that are secular. The Free Syrian Army elements, particularly in the south, continue to have secular components. But I do think that it is largely a choice at this point in the north of deciding whether and how much we can work with a series of political Islamist groups.

I will answer your question about the regime falling. How that happens is extremely path-dependent. Were the regime magically to collapse, right now I would say that the groups that are in the strongest position to take advantage of it are Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham and other Salafi organisations, which would be extremely problematic. Our challenge is to create conditions on the ground where there is an opposition that could take power and that would not be captive of those groups. That is why, again, I say that the issue is

working within the Sunni community and not imagining—I want to highlight this point because there is a flip side to the question—that holding our noses and deciding that the alternative to Assad is that the jihadis will win. We will virtually ensure that there will be a long-term Salafi jihadi safe haven with a considerable degree of popular support if we do that.

We need to recognise that the primary driver of radicalisation and of Sunni towards Salafi jihadism is Assad, the activities that he has undertaken and the bombing campaign that the Russians have undertaken. Those are the drivers and they will not go away.

One thing that we have done in co-ordination with the Institute for the Study of War is to conduct planning exercises to consider what would happen if we tried to back Assad to retake all of Syria, for example. The problem is that he does not have the forces to do that. We assessed that with high confidence. There would need to be a significant Western intervention—military ground intervention—on his behalf in order to facilitate the reconquest, particularly of the Daesh-held areas in the east. Even then, we would be signing ourselves up indefinitely to working with a vicious regime to suppress the majority population in Syria. This is a recipe for failure. So, bad as the possibility of imminent regime collapse might be if nothing else is done, the prospect of attempting to leave the regime in power as it is, or to strengthen the regime, is even worse in the long term.

General Keane: To emphasise a little bit more what Fred has said, when we look at political Islamists and secularists, we are absolutely convinced that we can work with both of them. We have actually armed political Islamists with TOW weapons, so they have obviously been vetted by our Central Intelligence Agency to a certain degree. The success of that programme, by the way, because it is a covert programme, is not much in the media. The failure of the Department of Defense's train and assist programme has been, but the CIA programme has been very successful. It is larger, in terms of numbers of success, but that number is classified and we cannot discuss it, but it has been a very successful programme.

What is happening in Geneva, what they are trying to work toward eventually, is some type of transitional Government. It is unlikely that the Russians would permit something like that: they want Assad to stand for re-election. The opposition groups, certainly after 260,000 or 270,000 dead, 11 million people—virtually half the country—displaced and many of the neighbourhoods, towns and villages literally destroyed, will not tolerate Assad staying in power. They would likely return to the fight if that was the condition. The political dimension of this, while there is a lot of lofty discussion about what may happen as a result of Geneva, I think we are largely sceptical about what the outcome is going to be here as a result of their efforts.

Q223 Ruth Smeeth: Thank you very much and happy St Patrick's day. When we were in Iraq only a fortnight ago, one of the concerns raised with us by the military was that military operations are getting increasingly further ahead of the political solutions. I would be interested in your views about how different they are and what we can do to militate against that increasing challenge.

General Keane: The political situation, I think from our perspective, is worsening, and it is largely because of the influence that Iran has in Baghdad. It makes the situation politically quite intractable. The Iranians do not want the Abadi regime to enfranchise the

Sunnis; it is not in their political interest. The Iranians will accept a weak Government in Baghdad, with even ISIS sitting on Sunni lands, being an ally of the Abadi Government, with that Government quite dependent on them.

So I believe they have more influence in that Government than we have by far. I think it should have been a strategic objective of the United States to diminish the Iranian influence from the outset. That has not happened. The situation with the Sunnis that we have both described is an intractable situation, and no concerted effort is being made to resolve it. In public testimony before our Congress on more than one occasion, even with Ambassador Ryan Crocker sitting next to me, I thought we should dispatch him—he is our pre-eminent ambassador in the Middle East, he served in Iraq, Afghanistan and many other places—as a personal envoy of the President to deal with this situation. We are not making a concerted effort to do that. If you compare the effort we made to do the nuclear arms deal with the Iranians, by comparison, what we are doing in Iraq is pitiful.

Q224 Bob Stewart: Gentleman, both of you have said that you have got to get in some kind of sympathy with the Sunnis in both Iraq and Syria, and that is one of your major points so far. So can I ask very quickly, because I know you are pressed for time, how we do that? How do we become visibly and practically more on their side?

Dr Kagan: There are a couple of things that we could do concretely in Syria, that would be extremely important. The large portion of the moderate political Islamist opposition with significant military force in Syria is now close to besieged in Aleppo, under air attack and subject to the usual regime pattern of starvation as a weapon of war. We can and should establish a humanitarian air corridor to provide supplies and we should consider ground operations as necessary to interfere with that siege, potentially to relieve that siege.

Q225 Bob Stewart: Using our forces?

Dr Kagan: Yes. We don't command anyone else's forces, and it is very important that we start to be realistic about that, because there is a lot of very airy discussion in this town—I don't know what it's like in London—on the subject of how we should get the Arabs to do this, that or the other thing; but we don't command them anymore. You used to; we don't—we never did.

So yes, it would need to be our forces, but in addition to that, the points that General Keane was making about embedding forces in Iraq would also permit a greater special forces footprint in other activities within Sunni communities in Iraq, which we need to do. It will be opposed by the Maliki—the Abadi Government; I don't equate Abadi with Maliki at all—and the Iranians, and so forth, and we will also have to think about doing this. You have to be there. You can't get people on your side if you are not willing to support their interests, if you are not willing to save their lives when they are dying, and if you are not prepared to be there in some way.

Bob Stewart: I don't disagree with that.

General Keane: It is so frustrating; we trained and armed, using our Central Intelligence Agency, a rather significant force, and backed a number of these leaders. When the Russians came in with their air campaign, it was largely and exclusively conducted against moderate Syrian opposition forces with the bull's eye on those that are being supported by

the United States. That is what they went after, for obvious reasons, because the larger threat to the Assad regime is Sunni and it is a moderate threat as well as a greater political threat to the regime; and that's what they were destroying. Jabhat al-Nusra, during this peace negotiation phase we are in—they are not conducting a ceasefire; but they are not fighting the regime. They are attacking US-backed moderate forces, trying to kill leadership and destroy that.

So if you are sitting in that force, and you have been trained and armed by the Central Intelligence Agency, and then we send you out there and here comes Russia, and others, and they start doing something to that force; we offer no measure of protection to that force. The political Islamists—those that could be motivated either way—are looking at that and saying, “My God; what is going on here? The Americans are just letting their force be destroyed. They are offering no measure of protection”—none of the things that Fred Kagan mentioned: safe havens, many things, could have been done to ensure some protection in that force. It is a sad commentary that it is still happening.

Q226 Bob Stewart: So you are both up for using Western military forces to prove that we care about the Sunnis?

Dr Kagan: It is not about proving that we care about the Sunnis. There are a variety of specific reasons that I think we should contemplate it. I am not prepared to recommend it to you yet; we are continuing to work on courses of action, and it is incredibly difficult because the situation deteriorates so rapidly that, frankly, as soon as we come up with something that looks like a least bad course of action, it is destroyed—deliberately, in many cases—by the Russians and the Iranians; but yes, we need to contemplate this for sure.

General Keane: I think in terms of safe havens that you have to have a ground element to that, as well as an air component. You would have to tuck up missiles close to the Turkish, Syrian and Jordanian border. I would try to fashion an international ground force to protect it.

Q227 Mr Gray: Would you both agree that sometimes in operations such as this, the generals and indeed diplomats become increasingly fixated on the tactical targets that they have to achieve, and in doing so, they often ignore the long-term strategic-level aims? In other words, the taking back of Mosul or the destruction of Raqqa may be good from the point of view of Iraq and Syria, or they may be good from the point of view of the egos of the people doing them, but do they necessarily help towards the long-term destruction of Daesh?

Dr Kagan: I will speak in defence of the generals and diplomats. On one hand, yes, of course that sometimes happens. I do not believe that that is what is happening in this case. In this case, I think the problem is that the White House is excessively fixated on a day-to-day tactical issue which is primarily shaping the narrative, rather than creating effects on the ground. It is essential when you have an organisation like Daesh, which has declared the existence of a caliphate—it is, unfortunately, an incredibly important moment in the history of Islam, and it is now kicking up many discussions in the region about who the rightful caliph is, which is having a lot of knock-on effects. The key thing about a caliphate is that it has a territorial expanse, and it really has to have control of some city.

We can go much too far, and I have heard people go much too far, saying, “If we take Mosul, they will collapse,” which is false, or “If we take Raqqa or both, they will collapse,” which is false. However, there is no scenario that I can imagine in which Daesh can be defeated and the threat that it poses to the West can be eliminated while leaving it in control of Mosul, Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor, Fallujah or any of the other urban areas that it has, including the areas in Libya, the bases in Sinai and so forth.

Q228 Mr Gray: That is current thinking, you are quite right, but surely there is an argument to say that we could kill a million people doing it, risk the Mosul dam or do God knows what else, and that all we would be doing by that is not destroying the poisonous cancer that is Daesh but encouraging it. That is rather what we did in Afghanistan and Iraq the first time around. We did not actually win those wars at all; we lost them, and the Middle East today is the disastrous result. Is there not at least a risk that the fixation on things such as the academic definition of a caliphate, which is interesting but not central, allows us to lose track of the bigger picture, which is about where we want to be. What is the endgame? Where will we be in 10 years from now? Is what we are doing today in Iraq and Syria actually going to achieve that endgame?

Dr Kagan: I have to dispute a number of your assertions on a factual basis.

Mr Gray: Good—that is why I made them.

Dr Kagan: I also commend to you a series of reports that we published with the Institute for the Study of War, one of which begins with a detailed consideration of our grand strategic interests, explains precisely how the defeat of Daesh in various ways falls into those interests and goes in quite a lot of detail through what we regard as essential and not essential for the defeat of Daesh. We were as rigorous and realpolitik in that consideration as you could possibly imagine. I would be very happy to make those available to you.

Mr Gray: Thank you.

Dr Kagan: In short, the discussion of the caliphate actually is extremely important. It is a very important recruiting tool, and it has changed the recruiting narrative among Salafi jihadi groups globally. It really does matter practically, and there are varieties of evidence about this. There is no risk to the Mosul dam from an operation in Mosul, frankly. First of all, the dam is not that close to the city; secondly, we can perfectly well secure the dam; thirdly, the problem is not the security of the dam but providing the various maintenance that it requires.

Q229 Mr Gray: Al-Qaeda took out the twin towers. Daesh could take out the Mosul dam without even thinking about it.

Dr Kagan: Yes, it is an enormous task, but I have to tell you that if you are really concerned about the dam, then securing the area to make it easier to provide repairs and so forth to the dam would be a good idea. Leaving it a war zone is a bad idea, from the standpoint of the security of the dam. There is no question of killing millions of people, because there aren't millions of people in Mosul anymore. The city has been depopulated. Most of the people who are still in Mosul are Daesh fighters and some of their captives. I understand the portrayal that you are laying out, but it doesn't accord with the facts on the

ground. I will leave to another time the discussion about American intervention in the region and what its consequences might or might not have been.

General Keane: We have never, in my framework, participated in a campaign quite like this. Our military planners have never been able to put together a campaign plan that accomplished the President's objective, which was to defeat ISIS. We have never put that together. From the moment those words were used to our military leaders and the national security team, the President put and imposed significant constraints and those constraints were widely reported. "No boots on the ground. But we need advisers with the units. I said no boots on the ground. But we need air controllers. No boots on the ground."

If we were putting a campaign together, we would recognise that Syria is an ISIS safe haven. A major lesson from 9/11 that we learned certainly was that we permitted the safe haven in Afghanistan for many years despite al-Qaeda declaring war on us in 1996 and despite dropping two of our embassies in Africa, and the USS Cole. We still permitted that safe haven to stay there and eventually we got 9/11. The longer we permit the safe haven to stay and permit their headquarters and their internet campaign—they have now expanded it to nine affiliates, Libya being the largest, with three more about to grow into that organisation. There is no comprehensive strategy to deal with any of those affiliates, I may add, except tactical decisions to deal with them. We have no campaign plan to deal with this issue, even though we have been at war since 2014. I don't have a frame of reference for that in the United States military.

Secondly, if the safe haven in Syria is all that it is said to be, General Votel in testimony before Congress said, "We have no plans to take Raqqa or support somebody in the taking of Raqqa. Zero plans." That was spoken last week before the Congress of the United States. We have no campaign plan to defeat ISIS. That is the harsh reality.

Q230 Mr Gray: That's right. My question was: shouldn't we?

General Keane: Yes.

Q231 Mr Gray: One last question, if I may, Mr Chairman.

General Keane, you mentioned I think the political drive coming from the White House rather than anything else. Do you detect a change in tactical level planning as a result of the timing of the elections? In other words, is the current President determined to see something done on the ground in Iraq or Syria prior to his demission of office? Is there an acceleration, of you like, in what's happening?

Dr Kagan: I haven't detected any change in the White House attitude towards this. I think we have some very competent officers on the ground in Iraq and, not on the ground in Syria, but thinking about and conducting operations in Syria, who have been getting their heads deeper and deeper into this, generally thinking strategically about this and trying to move things along within the constraints that the President has imposed upon them. I don't think the President is going to change his approach radically leading up to the election, but I think and hope that the personnel carrying this out on the ground find ways to make it work as best they can within those constraints.

General Keane: Our Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Dunford, took over in the last six months or so and has been considerably more aggressive. He has tried to push out on the margins as much as he possibly can within the constraints, so that is why you see a larger presence of US special operations forces in Iraq. They are going to be trying to capture people and also, I think, to do some significant raids in certain functions, and that will be very helpful. There is also a special operations force presence in Syria, although it is likely not as large, and this is all media reported. There is so much more we could do, but I think the constraints are pretty significant and he has pushed them about as far as he will be able to until he is serving a different President.

Q232 Johnny Mercer: General, would you say that, given what the Russians have done—I was very interested in your remark, Dr Kagan, about not having an interest in Syria—would you put it as strongly as that? But first, to the General, Assad is never going to go—he is not deposable—so how do you see that ending? He has obviously got so far, and the Russians have come in and said, “We are not going to tolerate that.”

General Keane: First, we have virtually no influence on this at this point. I can only speculate. What the Russians are interested in is the Alawite regime continuing as an ally of theirs. They have been there since the '50s. There is now an airbase as well as a naval base. It is very important to them strategically. I don't think they are as wedded to Assad as they are to the regime. I don't believe they will tolerate anything other than an Alawite regime, whether it's Assad or another stooge like him.

Q233 Johnny Mercer: Do you think there are some in the regime who do not have blood on their hands and who could feasibly form some sort of Government that would be acceptable in Syria?

General Keane: I will let Dr Kagan deal with that one, but I am not aware of anybody like that.

Dr Kagan: Quickly on that point—I appreciate the Committee's forbearance in going beyond the given time—this is an insurgency. The aim of the insurgents is to overthrow the regime. If Assad leaves and son of Assad, whether literally or figuratively, takes over, the regime will not have been overthrown; we will simply have facilitated a succession within the regime. That amounts to the complete and total defeat of the insurgency; it's not what the insurgents are going for. So first, no, I don't think there is anyone senior in the Assad regime who doesn't have blood on his hands at this point, but beyond that I can't imagine a transition of power of that variety being acceptable to the majority of the Sunni population of Syria over the long term.

You asked the question about Russian interests. Yes, I think Putin has a very specific interest in securing the permanent Russian presence at the Latakia airfield and the Tartus naval base. He is going to use that, and already has been doing so, to create an expeditionary air and sea capability in the Mediterranean, which will become contested space for the first time since the end of the Cold War. NATO is going to have to think very fundamentally and profoundly about the long-term force requirements. Even if we wish to operate in the Middle East when Russia does not wish us to, he is keeping, he has announced, the S-400 air defence system in Latakia, which can have no purpose other than to threaten NATO. Certainly ISIS does not have any aircraft to be shot down, and neither does Jabhat al-Nusra.

That system ranges into Turkey and gives Putin the ability to interdict NATO air operations over the territory of a sovereign NATO ally without putting aircraft in the air, which is quite remarkable, and he also—well, there are reports that the Yakhont anti-shiping missile is already in the hands of Hezbollah. If he actually is going to retain the Latakia airfield, as he says that he will, he can continue to stage long-range air superiority fighters and bombers out of it, which will threaten NATO in profound ways, and he can create an anti-access/area denial or A2/AD zone in the eastern Mediterranean, including creating conditions that would allow him to disrupt the sea line of communication to the Suez canal—all of this, again, for the first time in many, many decades.

It is a profound shift in the geostrategic alignment of the world and it is very much what he is after. As you watch what he has done in Syria and what he is not prepared to do, it is very clear that what he requires is an Alawite regime. It doesn't necessarily have to be Assad. I believe Putin would ditch Assad personally if that were necessary. I think Assad knows that. But it does have to be a friendly Alawite regime that is nevertheless sufficiently under pressure that it is totally dependent on Russia and therefore has to give Russia whatever it wants. In other words, Putin has no interest in seeing this conflict permanently resolved, because that would remove the pressure on the regime that he needs in order to get what he actually wants.

Q234 Johnny Mercer: Finally from me, we have seen the benefits of the UK working with partners in Jordan, Lebanon and the Kurdistan region of Iraq. Are there any other places that would be on your list in terms of where we could have any sort of influence, operating within the constraints that, as you have so clearly laid out, the current President has imposed? Clearly, that is reflected in our country by the Prime Minister as well.

Dr Kagan: Fortunately, when we established our independence from you, we did not make you dependent on us, so you don't have to operate under the same constraints as we do, however foolish we might be. That having been said, I think the UAE is probably the best bet for a very serious ally. They actually, I think, do have their values on straight, in terms of the need to confront Salafi jihadi groups of all varieties in general. They stand in contrast to some of the other potential Gulf partners we might look at. Keeping the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan alive is certainly vital.

Working with the Saudis is extremely important, not so much because of what they can do for us as because of what we need to do for them. The stability of the kingdom is at risk more than it has been in many decades from a combination of the low price of oil and the foolish and hideously expensive war that they are engaged in in Yemen. To the extent that one could help the young prince think through how best to extricate the kingdom from that particular quagmire in an intelligent way, I think one would find the Emiratis to be strong allies in that effort at persuasion, and it could facilitate regional stability in important ways.

Another challenge is going to be persuading el-Sisi that the enemy is not the Muslim Brotherhood and that the solution to his problem is not crushing the 40% of his population that believes in political Islamism, which is his current strategy, and which will fail and lead probably to the same result that Mubarak had when he tried that approach. I think there is a very important political, diplomatic and educational leverage component involved in trying to help our allies to do the right thing, as much as trying to subcontract our policy to them, which I think would be unwise.

General Keane: I have believed for some time that the threat of radical Islam—an ideological movement of the 21st century compared with Communist ideology in the 20th and fascism. To push back against Communist ideology, we formed political and military alliances—one in Europe and one in south-east Asia—and were largely successful in doing that. We shared intelligence, a training strategy and at times, a political strategy.

This part of the world begs for something like that: a comprehensive alliance to deal not only with radical Islam, but with the considerably ambitious and aggressive reach of what the Iranians are doing in the region. You would have to bring north Africa into this equation and those countries as well. This is not about our country and your country doing all the heavy lifting; it is about them mostly doing the heavy lifting, but then organising and helping them to do that. It begs for leadership and the partnering and intelligence sharing that would take place.

What we are doing now is bouncing around the Middle East tactically and dealing with this problem, when the problem is considerably more comprehensive and deserves to have a better strategy to deal with it and the means to cope with that as well—to form a strategy and then a partnership in training, intelligence and equipment. That would make some sense. It is right for it, and it has been right for it for some time.

Q235 Chair: We have deliberately used up most of our transition time to the next panel because what you are saying is of such interest. I know that Madeleine Moon would like to squeeze in a very brief, short one, and can I just ask you whether I am correct in interpreting, from what you have been saying, that the least bad outcome therefore, if you had your way—in terms of who would take over in Syria, for example—would be a Government oriented as the Muslim Brotherhood is oriented rather than what you describe as a hard-line Salafist Government? Before you answer that, can we let Madeleine ask her question, so we can take the answers to the two questions together?

Mrs Moon: You can answer my question very briefly. Is there a risk that both the US and the UK are failing to understand the impact that our obsession with domestic issues—in the US, your presidential selection process and in the UK, our focus on Brexit and the immigration crisis that Europe is facing—is having on allies in the Middle East, and failing to recognise how much of a gift those focuses are to the Russians in ensuring that they weaken the alliances that we have?

Dr Kagan: Yes, absolutely. We are totally self-absorbed and furthermore, we have made it even worse, because as things happen that are clearly tied to strategic issues beyond the borders, we have collectively tended to turn them into domestic issues. Here we have turned them into a debate over gun violence rather than terrorism, and about immigration rather than terrorism, and in the EU we have also seen them turned into a debate about immigration policy that obscures the deeper issues. So, yes, very profoundly.

The least bad outcome—the outcome that we have to drive for—is an outcome in which there is an inclusive Government, or Governments. I am not caught over on whether Syria needs to be unitary or not, although it is much easier to imagine an acceptable outcome, frankly, with a unitary Syria than with a partitioned Syria. There needs to be an agreement among all the Syrian groups, including the Sunni majority, the Alawite minority and the various other minorities in Syria, about a Government, or set of Governments, that they all can live with. In the Sunni lands, that may take the form of political Islamists in some

way, but they cannot be radical political Islamists—they cannot be Salafi jihadi groups—because those groups are intolerant of the minorities who require protection.

We need to be very clear about something, too. As we think about overthrowing the Assad regime and recognising the risks—I have spoken about this issue—one of the risks that we need to put on the table is the risk of an anti-Alawite genocide, which could well result from a mishandling of this situation. There need to be protections, and guarantees of those protections, for the Alawite communities, for the Druze communities and for the other communities in Syria. I cannot imagine a successful outcome, or even a barely successful outcome, in which you have political Islamists of such a stripe dominant in the Sunni lands that they would be problematic for us to deal with, more problematic than other Governments that we have in the region. It is a heavy lift. We are not moving in the right direction, frankly. Just about everything we are doing is wrong from the standpoint of trying to get there, but that is the minimum solution that would be required.

General Keane: I would agree with that. The only thing I would add to your comment about the situation, in terms of people's attitudes, is that Paris and San Bernardino got the American people's attention, as did the beheadings in 2014, which really were the catalyst for our President to act. In our country—I can't speak for yours, because I just don't know—we do not educate and inform our people about radical Islam in any basic way. The Bush Administration was as guilty as this Administration in not trying to define it or to help people understand it. What is the ideology? What is wrong with the ideology? What can you do with this? None of that is really done, so what happens is that a sort of weariness seeps in among the American people that the Middle East is a real problem and that we want it to go away.

There is now one failed state after another. Why is that our problem? What is our interest? The culture is dramatically different, and they see people on TV whose behaviour they can't identify with—screaming and hollering, ranting and raving, although we do a fair amount of that here. You know what I'm getting at. They just want them to go away, which reminds me of the '30s in Europe. All the experience of world war one and a new ideological movement rising, and then you hear the vitriolic comments being made by those leaders and what Nazism represented, and people didn't want to deal with it. They said, "No, it's not going to affect us." And then eventually it swamped us. We have got to pay attention to this; it is in our strategic interests—your country and mine. The radical Islamists are not going away. If we don't stop them, they will just continue to expand and kill. Their barbarism will continue, and thousands of people will die as a result and our strategic interests will be impacted.

Chair: On that cheerful note, General, thank you very much indeed. As you can see from the way that we have extended the session, we have very much valued your contributions. We will now do a very brief handover to the next panel. Thank you both very much.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: **Michael Eisenstadt**, Senior Fellow, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, and **Charles Lister**, Fellow, Middle East Institute, gave evidence.

Q236 Chair: We now move to the second panel. I am grateful to both gentlemen for their patience in waiting to begin. For the record, please make a brief opening statement identifying yourself and telling us a little about your background.

Charles Lister: My name is Charles Lister. I am a Fellow at the Middle East Institute, newly arrived here in Washington DC. I am also writing several long papers focused on Syria for the Brookings Institution. I am a senior consultant to the Shaikh Group's two-and-a-half-year-long Syria Track II initiative. I have been meeting with the leaders of over 100 armed opposition groups from inside Syria—roughly every four to six weeks for the last two and a half years.

Michael Eisenstadt: I am Mike Eisenstadt. I am a Senior Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy where I direct our military and security studies programme. I have been at the institute for about 26 years or so. I worked in the US Government before that as a military analyst, and I served as an Army Reservist for 26 years, including stints in Iraq, the Palestinian areas, Turkey and the like.

Q237 Mrs Moon: Daesh's progress in taking territory seems to have been slowed. Are we approaching an endgame in terms of their capacity to take new territory, and what would you say the impact of Russia's decision to withdraw some of its personnel in Syria has had on the move towards a peace conference and a peaceful resolution of the war?

Michael Eisenstadt: To quote a great British statesman I would say we are at the end of the beginning, but it may be just the beginning of the end with Daesh. There is still a long way to go. We are seeing that, as US military officials will point out, they have not had a major success since the conquest of Ramadi in May last year. There has been a number of successes. Right now there is an offensive to extend from Ramadi to take over Hit. Baiji and Tikrit have been taken back, setting the scene for the battle of Mosul, which I do not expect to happen for quite some time. The bottom line is—I think it needs to be stressed—our strategy is contingent on the politics of our allies, and ultimately our ability to convert battlefield success to political accomplishments depends on our allies.

Right now we have very limited leverage, and a change in their political culture is required: the end of the winner takes all, zero-sum game types of politics that we see in Iraq and in Syria, which brought them to this point. So on the most difficult piece, we are still a long way from battlefield victory. I do not think we have cleared Iraq of Daesh. I think we have pushed them underground and they will revert to an underground terrorist network like they were between 2011 and 2014. The Iraqi Government on its own has shown that it does not have the ability to deal with that kind of challenge. They will not go away. They will get pushed underground, and as long as they are in Syria they will have a base of support. I do not believe you can seal the borders completely.

With regard to the Russians, it is important to note that the Russians left a lot of business unfinished: they did not encircle Aleppo; the opposition still has a foothold in Latakia province; Idlib is still largely in the hands of the opposition; and the Government still has

a tenuous connection to Daraa. I think that was probably intentional. It gives them leverage over the Assad regime and over the international community to say, “We could go both ways”, “We could redeploy our forces.” It is an exemplary use of military power to achieve limited objectives that we should learn from, because I do not believe there is an endgame to this conflict that we are in right now that we could foresee: that if we do A, B and C we will achieve our objectives. So we have to husband our resources, but use them in a judicious way to advance our interests, and that is what the Russians have done.

This is my last point, and then I will open it to Charles. Our President previously said, in order to justify non-intervention in Syria, that he could see no way that the use of military force can solve this problem. We should forget about solutionism. We are not going to solve these problems; we can manage them. At least now, that is the best we could hope for. We can manage them and advance our interests. Therefore, the limited use of force to advance our interests is the way we should think about our intervention there. So it has to be husbanded because we have other interests in other parts of the world, and any use of force would probably have limited benefits, but, if you do not visit the Middle East, it will visit you, so we have to be involved and engaged.

Charles Lister: I agree with basically everything that Mr Eisenstadt has already said. I think you are right to suggest that ISIS’s momentum has certainly slowed, if not stopped, certainly in the last month or two. However, we should not necessarily read that as ISIS being on its path to defeat. ISIS has demonstrated over almost the last 15 years a capacity to continually cycle through a process of very fast momentum, a pull back, and then to prepare for a new phase and adapt. Since 2003 ISIS’s adaptation to both internal and external threats has been impressive, to say the least, and that is something we should not forget.

That being said, I think specifically in Iraq a corner has been turned. ISIS is certainly feeling under more pressure than it has done since its capture of Mosul in June 2014. The targeting, largely from the air, of ISIS’s financial resources seems to have had a significant impact on the organisation’s internal morale, and that, by extension, seems to have impacted on its ability to be on the offensive on the battlefield.

These are things that we need to take advantage of but, crucially, as has already been said in this session and in the previous one, what about real victory against ISIS? In this I agree with Michael, we are not going to totally destroy ISIS—no one is. It is not going away. All we can do is revert them back to something that can be managed. None-the-less, getting ISIS to that point is entirely dependent on local allies—we cannot do it from the air and, arguably, we cannot do it ourselves by ourselves. In that respect, we are coming up with a significant shortfall in Syria and, certainly, we are now facing significant challenges politically in Iraq, which may impact that.

With regards to Russia’s withdrawal from Syria and how that will impact the political process, I think the opposition has been quite encouraged at least—or it is encouraging to us. Statements coming out from the HNC opposition bloc in Geneva already suggest quite strongly that they see this as a positive step. Russia’s total withdrawal from Syria was one of seven demands that the opposition issued prior to the Geneva peace talks. But, fundamentally speaking, we need to see what this really represents. Putin has just given a speech to his armed forces newly returned from Syria this morning in which he has already indicated that all his anti-aircraft missile systems will remain in Syria for the long

term, and that anti-terrorist operations in Syria will continue for as long as is necessary. And we all know what Russia's definition of "anti-terrorism" means—it is something that is quite a lot broader than what we would agree with. So, fundamentally speaking, the dust is still in the air and we need to see what comes of this.

The last point I will make on this, in terms of the trajectory of the withdrawal, is that, while Russia appears to have withdrawn a lot of its fast attack jets—at least half, I understand—what has newly arrived in Syria are a number of attack helicopters, models that have not previously been seen in the country. To someone like me, this suggests a strategic shift in terms of the kinds of operations that Russia sees itself fighting—perhaps more urban operations, with much closer air support, rather than high-altitude bombing. In that respect, if that proves true, we have not seen any change at all, and that certainly will not help the political process.

Q238 Mrs Moon: Our Prime Minister said that the head of the serpent that is Daesh was in Raqqa. Would you agree that ISIS is less of a serpent and more of a Hydra—that you take it from one place and it emerges later at a different point and with a different focus? Is that the risk that we are facing—we can remove them from one place, but they just emerge somewhere else?

Charles Lister: That goes to the point about adaptation that I was making earlier. If there is anything that ISIS has demonstrated a particular proficiency in, it is moving from front to front. What has been interesting in the last two to three months, particularly in northern Syria where the group is coming under continued pressure, primarily from Kurdish forces, is a relatively new tactic. In places like Kobani we might have seen ISIS fight to the death, literally throwing in hundreds upon hundreds of fighters, knowing that they will be killed in a battle that ISIS almost certainly would never have won, but what we have seen lately is a number of strategic withdrawals, presumably for the sake of saving fighters.

That is certainly interesting with regards to the broader strategic situation. Raqqa, Mosul and Fallujah are three particularly significant areas for ISIS. If it comes under pressure in one, it will reinforce the other two—that is practised ISIS strategy. That is something that we need to be looking at in terms of syncing strategy in Iraq and Syria together. Unless we establish conditions on the ground whereby multiple significant targets can be attacked at the same time, ISIS will continue to be able to be, as you suggest, a kind of Hydra force that is always significantly strong in one area of strategic significance, even while taking losses elsewhere.

Michael Eisenstadt: I would like to build on that point; I will be very quick. This is part of their strategic art. They are low-tech, high-art in the way they wage warfare, in that when they suffered a reverse at Tikrit they then moved on Ramadi, and when they suffered reverses in Ramadi they then moved on Palmyra; I am not sure I have the chronology right. Then when they had problems in Syria—when they ran into the buzz saw in Iraq or Syria—they did overseas operations and tried to attract new adherents overseas, in order to create the image of momentum and that they are still gaining ground somewhere. That is really brilliant, and they have many options as a result because they are playing on a regional chess board.

As a result, I agree that the flagship operation is in Syria and Iraq, but they are now setting up camp in Libya and have operations elsewhere, and then they have the overseas

operation. They can use that to create the perception of momentum, because image and image management are key to their success.

Chair: In order to manage time best, would you mind if we took the next two questions together?

Q239 Mr Gray: What you described to us the other day as “jihadi whack-a-mole”, if that is the right expression, is a completely pointless thing to do. Your pragmatic “Let’s manage Daesh” approach, which incidentally is no doubt in Mr Eisenstadt’s paper, is quite different from what other people are saying and what our first witnesses this morning said. They said that the important thing is the caliphate, and if Daesh do not have land and territory, they are nothing and they are finished, so we must focus our attention on defeating them on the ground—we must take towns and cities and defeat them in a conventional military way.

I hope I am not misinterpreting what you are saying in thinking that you would much rather see us destroying their ideology, their financing, their command and control, their spread around the world using electronic media, their terrorist approach in Europe and other things of that kind, rather than simply making a conventional military strike against them on the ground in Iraq or Syria.

Q240 Ruth Smeeth: I hope this is complementary to that question. Mr Lister, you talked about Daesh in terms of 2003. I would suggest that actually it was not Daesh then, but it has evolved and developed. Every time we beat an entity, the ideology is still thriving. Feeding on from James’s point, how are we now meant to challenge the ideology? We do it militarily—that is fine—but our counter-radicalisation strategy is miserable. Is that your perception?

Charles Lister: I will tackle the latter point before the first. Specifically with regards to the counter-narrative, I happen to take quite a sceptical view of this. When you talk about an organisation like ISIS and the kinds of recruits it seeks, by and large—of course, there are exceptions—we are not talking about the kind of people who will read a Western counter-narrative and be convinced.

Perhaps my point was slightly unclear in my first comments. I absolutely advocate a strong military approach to fighting ISIS. The key is showing that ISIS is not invincible, and that it cannot claim to represent a caliphate. It can claim that it represents a caliphate as long as it wants if it only controls villages, but so far it has one of the biggest cities in Iraq, a major provincial capital in Syria and the vast majority of the eastern desert, the Sunni heartland in Syria. With that, it can claim to its supporters—of course, we can argue against it—to represent some kind of state structure. That is what we have to target in a military fashion.

With regards to managing, what I meant was pushing it out of the major, strategically valuable urban heartlands, thereby taking away ISIS’s various claims to credibility both within its existing fighting force and with potential recruits. In that sense, that is where I see the current whack-a-mole strategy—that term has been frequently used—as far insufficient, precisely because it can show how successfully it can adapt.

With regards to the adaptation point, strictly speaking, on paper, you are right: it was not the Islamic State in 2003, but it was exactly the same organisation. It has just steadily

expanded by swallowing up various groups. It swallowed up various groups in 2006. You can—I have done; I wrote a long paper profiling the Islamic State—date it all the way back to Afghanistan in 1999 if you really want to. This is an organisation that has continued to grow, adapt and evolve in order to survive, and its particularly brutal strategy is what has allowed it to do that, by essentially out-competing its various rivals.

Q241 Mr Gray: Given that that is the case, are we really doing the right thing with a straightforward military approach in Iraq? That is what we did in Afghanistan, and it did not work there. Why should destroying them in Mosul—if indeed we could ever do that; we probably could not, but let us imagine we could—necessarily defeat Daesh?

Charles Lister: It has to be a sequenced and multi-aspect strategy, not just a military strategy. If we were talking about al-Qaeda in Syria, I would be saying a very different thing, but precisely because ISIS presents itself as a superior military force that vanquishes its enemies with extreme brutality, the only way of undermining that narrative—which, whether we like it or not, is extremely successful at recruiting people—is to fight it more successfully on the battlefield. But there needs to be a counter-narrative component, albeit one that we are facing significant difficulties with. We also need to empower a credible alternative. In this respect, in Iraq, we are going in the right direction but we are not really there—and in Syria, we are way off on the wrong track. We can probably get into that more in the discussion.

Michael Eisenstadt: I endorse what Charles just said. Early on, our counter-narrative efforts consisted of trying to get Muslim clerics to sign on paper saying how un-Islamic ISIL or Daesh was. The problem is that those clerics are, by and large, employees of the Arab state system that these people are trying to dismantle so are discredited clerics in their eyes. So those kinds of claim have no weight. Then people said, “Well, what we need to do is get drop-outs from ISIL to show how terrible ISIL is.” It is very easy to discredit those people as weaklings or shills for foreign intelligence services.

You might be able to succeed around the edges, but ultimately, as Charles said, the most effective way to discredit them is to show that they are a failed god, to dismantle the caliphate and to defeat their army. If there is no caliphate, there is no lording over non-believers. There is no glory. There is no victory of their version of Islam. There are no sex slaves or spoils of war: all the reasons why people go over there to fight. That is a necessary but not a sufficient condition of victory—of defeating the ideology.

I am doing a study on this. If you look at Nazi Germany after World War Two, you see that the defeat of Nazi Germany did not discredit Nazism. People said, “Well, we had some stupid leaders who made stupid mistakes,” but if you look at polling data through the ’50s and ’60s, it took a generation of change, social engineering, the rise of the left in Europe and Willy Brandt’s policies in the ’60s to finally bury the ideology and the fact that you had an occupation for several decades.

Right now, Daesh is indoctrinating a new generation of young people. They are putting a lot of emphasis on that; that is a problem. We are forced by reality to adopt a strategy of strategic patience, but there will be a long-term cost, because there will be young people today who are indoctrinated in the ideology and will be true believers their whole lives. They may not act on their belief. In the long-term, there is a challenge to create frameworks where they are unable to act on their belief. After Nasserism lost its sheen in

the Arab world, there were still lots of Nasserists, but there was no Nasserist state after Nasser's death.

That is what we have to realise: this is a long-term problem. You cannot defeat them by counter-narratives. You have to defeat them by creating an overwhelming reality problem—that their whole ideology flies in the face of the reality on the ground, which is that they are defeated.

Q242 Mr Gray: One final question. We destroyed communism without any form of military action; there were no battles at all. The iron curtain fell, and communism was destroyed. We didn't attack Moscow. You indicated that we must attack Mosul in order to destroy Daesh.

Michael Eisenstadt: Because they are on the offensive now. They are an actor in the field and, at least until a year ago, they were on a roll. There are some people who say, "Contain them and let them collapse from within." That is not an unreasonable proposition but I think that, given the fact that we have seen terrorist attacks sponsored by them already using their base of operations in Iraq and Syria, there is a price to be paid for that. It is quite possible, as Charles said, that they have gone through ups and downs, and right now they might be on the defensive, but there could be a geopolitical development somewhere or a revolution in Saudi Arabia. Who knows? I am not predicting that—I am not saying that that will happen—but that could suddenly make things look very different and reverse the tide.

Keep in mind that twice the Assad regime had its back against the wall and then came back. We are seeing a constant reversal of fortunes. Therefore, when your enemy is on the ground, I say you keep kicking him. You do not say, "Leave him alone and he will die on his own" because he may not.

Q243 Mr Spellar: Your last comments rather remind me of the comment by Max Planck that scientists do not change their views but just die out, and that science advances one funeral at a time. Maybe we need to wait for that time. But in the meantime, we seem to have a military strategy, as you have outlined; it is, however, a lot less clear whether we have a political strategy. You talked about leverage, but even if we had leverage, do we have a strategy to try to leverage the regional powers and the regional forces towards it?

Michael Eisenstadt: This is an area where I do not think we have done particularly well in the past. The history of American policy towards the region is one of trying to tame rogue regimes, if you accept that term. In the '80s, during the Iran-Iraq war, people were trying to engage Saddam Hussein in the hope that he would become tamed. He even talked about, "Well, if the PLO signs peace with Israel, I will accept that." After the war, he reverted to form once the pressure was lifted. Likewise, with Arafat, there was the hope that he could become domesticated, but once he got his toehold in the Palestinian Territories, he kind of reverted to form. We saw that with al-Maliki when we were in Iraq and had 150,000 people on the ground. He needed us and was willing to sign on to things that, once our leverage finished, he reneged on.

In that part of the world, they are there for the long game, and they live there; we are intermittent visitors and our attention waxes and wanes. When we really apply diplomacy and leverage, we can sometimes bend them to our will temporarily but, inevitably, we are going to leave, our attention will be diverted elsewhere and they will revert to form.

This leads me to basically the conclusion of my own research. It might sound somewhat academic and I am trying to find a way to operationalise it policy-wise. It says that there is no avoiding a transformational agenda in our policy. I am not talking about democratisation. I am talking about something that is much more humble and limited but again, like I said, is about abandoning the zero-sum, winner-takes-all approach to politics towards a more inclusive approach.

You have monarchies that are authoritarian regimes—there is no doubt about it—but that have a certain legitimacy because those kind of regimes fit in with the patrimonial political system of the region. There are diwans and there are ways that the leaders meet with their people so that the people feel that they have a voice. All I am saying is that we need to find a way to move the region forward. Otherwise, it will simply replicate its dysfunction, and that is what we are seeing now. I do not have the answer to that and I do not think that anybody has an answer.

I will cease on this last point. Rory Stewart wrote a book in which he said that Westerners tend to focus on structures. We go over there and want to fix it. We create a constitution that is well balanced and well constructed, and create governmental structures and institutions, but we do not deal with the software—the political culture. I do not know how you do that.

Wars transform political cultures and change peoples and nations. Maybe out of this, the trauma will change them, but I think that is a long shot. All I have seen thus far is the hardening of identities and lines in a way that is counterproductive from these kind of politics. I do not think we are there yet. I do not have an answer—I do not think anybody does—but I think it is the political culture more than the structures. You have to have, of course, conducive structures, but it is the political culture—the software—that we have to work on trying to fix.

Charles Lister: I agree very much with what Mr Eisenstadt has already said. With regards to leveraging regional forces, I think the biggest problem we have had in terms of using regional allies in the fight against ISIS is the fact that our regional allies have longer memories than we do with regards to why this problem has arisen and why it is so significant today.

Having been living in the region for the last two and a half years, the reality of that is plain and simple, and there is no way of arguing against it: ISIS as it is today, the significant force it has represented since 2013-14, is there because of the Assad regime's facilitation of jihadist militancy between Syria, Iraq and Lebanon since the late 1990s. It is unavoidably true: the scale of complicity the Assad regime has had in building al-Qaeda in Iraq, then the Islamic State in Iraq, then ISIS and now the Islamic State, first in fighting against the US-led occupation of Iraq. Arguably, hundreds of US soldiers would still be alive if this complicity had not happened.

In the first 11 days after the US invasion of Iraq, as many as 6,000 Syrian jihadis were bussed in Government buses from Damascus and Aleppo into Iraq to fight the occupation. Although there was a decrease from that very significant scale at the very beginning, that complicity continued throughout the 2000s. The Assad regime's complicity in allowing ISIS to fight the opposition in Syria by not fighting it in places like Raqqa is equally significant.

We have to remember that this is how the region sees the fight against ISIS. Their argument is that you cannot fight against ISIS by ignoring the broader context. To them—I agree with this—ISIS will always be there if Assad or an equivalent of Assad is still in power; ISIS will still be there, as will al-Qaeda. Unfortunately, our strategy on fighting ISIS is either ignoring or has not realised that broader context. Until it does, as I say, we will be fighting against a significant organisation somewhere in Syria and Iraq for a very long time to come.

Michael Eisenstadt: Can I add something to that?

Chair: Very briefly, please.

Michael Eisenstadt: My argument for supporting the opposition in Syria since 2012 has been that we do not want Assad to go until we know what might take his place. Therefore, arming the opposition was an argument for testing the proposition of whether you can create a third way between the regime and the extremists that could govern in a responsible way and eventually perhaps overthrow the regime. But I do not think we want to go there until we know what we would get, based on our experiences in Iraq and elsewhere.

Q244 Chair: I want you to clarify that. You are saying you do not think we want to go there until we know what we would get if Assad disappeared.

Michael Eisenstadt: Yes.

Q245 Chair: This will lead into the Johnny Mercer's question We discussed this with the earlier panel and Dr Kagan said—I am quoting as accurately as I can—that virtually all the opposition is Islamist at this point, but then he went on to explain the difference between hard-line Salafist Islamists and what we might call the Muslim Brotherhood style of Islamists. Would you broadly accept that something that conforms to that model would take over if Assad disappeared?

Michael Eisenstadt: At this time, yes. We have gotten to that state of affairs because we did not play a more active role earlier, trying to shape the complexion of the opposition. It may be too late for us to do that—I don't know—but the proposition still needs to be tested. People migrated to groups like Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIL because the Free Syrian Army was poorly resourced and a lot of them were not well vetted; they were involved in criminal activities. Maybe we can shape them in a direction where we can rebuild a centre. Maybe that is quixotic, maybe that is impossible at this point, but we need to test the proposition because it has gotten to where it is today in part because of our inaction, so maybe our actions can change it moving forward.

Q246 Chair: Charles, before you respond, Johnny's question directly relates to this and to your list of organisations.

Johnny Mercer: In November, you identified 75,000 moderate fighters. What were the specific criteria that that was based around? How many do you think are still fighting?

Charles Lister: The vast majority of them are still fighting: 90% or 95%. I know that article got a lot of attention at the time for obvious reasons in the UK. The short length of

that article did not allow me to give sufficient backing to what I was trying to say. The main background for why I make these claims is that I know all of the groups.

With all due respect to much of the work done in Washington and elsewhere, I feel like an awful lot of the assessing of the opposition has been done using YouTube, Twitter, social media and from reading *The New York Times*. In my experience from knowing these groups and seeing them almost every month for the last two and a half years, nothing could be further from the truth than the way they have been described. It was good that the previous session qualified some of the claims that were made early on, which were fairly sweeping, and against which I would have taken a very hard argument. The claim that the vast majority of the opposition is political Islamist does not spell out, in truth.

There is an extent to which, in my experience, we need to disconnect ourselves from being almost obsessed with Islam as a frame of reference for assessing people's reliability. Someone can call themselves a Muslim and pray five times a day, but that doesn't mean that he wants an Islamic state in Syria. That's a vast generalisation, but it paints a picture of how I—at least someone who knows the opposition as I do—look at the way that many people are being measured.

Specifically on your question, all of the groups that I listed in the table in that article, and many more, have committed both publicly and privately, in Track II work, for example, in front of international observers, to things like an outright rejection of any ethnic, sect or gender-based discrimination and a desire for full, representative Government. Almost all of them accept and want democracy. They certainly want friendly relationships with the entire international community. The vast majority of these groups are desperate for engagement with the West, and they feel like they have not been given that kind of acknowledgement. For obvious reasons, they want an end to dictatorship, a constant rotation of power, etc. Despite the fact that many of these individuals might appear Islamists to us sitting in London or Washington, you have to get behind the simple image to understand fundamentally what they want.

What has been particularly interesting in the past few days—this was referenced in the previous session—is that in Idlib in north-western Syria there is a fairly significant number of armed groups in the Free Syrian Army that have been backed by the Central Intelligence Agency for two or two and a half years. One of those groups has very recently been targeted by al-Qaeda. Their headquarters in a big town called Maarrat al-Nu'man was taken over by Jabhat al-Nusra about four or five days ago. The first real evidence of the fact that the Syrian people and the vast majority of the opposition do not support that kind of al-Qaeda vision has finally been seen. You are now seeing women, children, men and other rebel groups protesting in the streets and flying the Free Syrian Army flag, which al-Qaeda thinks is tantamount to being an infidel. You have children taking over one of these retaken bases. There is now a small but growing popular uprising against al-Qaeda in Syria by the very forces that I mentioned in my article.

I know that I've gone on for a long time. I will briefly conclude. The only reason why people have been able to use the argument, "You co-operate with al-Qaeda tactically on the battlefield; therefore you are tantamount to being an extremist," is because no one has given them a sufficiently good, credible alternative. The amount of support they have received has not been enough to overpower the extremist alternatives that they have been forced to submit themselves to. It's only been through this kind of pressure through a

cessation of hostilities, whereby al-Qaeda can no longer prove itself as that dependable ally on the battlefield, that people have started to rise up. As complicated and as nuanced as it is, I would encourage you to see that there is a deep level of nuance here beyond what you see, beyond videos, beyond someone saying, “Allahu Akbar”, when they fire their gun. That does not mean they are an extremist. This is cultural, rather than religious. I can speak about this forever.

Q247 Chair: What I am going to ask you, Charles—because we’re not going to be able to go into it in depth today—is, is it possible to correspond with you on some of these points to go into it more deeply? I’ll just do a couple of the things that I have on a long list that I can’t ask today. First, you said you have dealings with all of these groups. Are you confident that, by naming the groups in the way that you have, you haven’t put into the public domain any information that would be damaging to the groups by, for example, identifying moderate groups to Assad? Is it not the case that Assad presumably knows all about these groups already?

Charles Lister: Yes—very much so. Assad knows about the groups, but obviously defines them in a very different way. Of course, Russia knows exactly the same and all the groups together know what each of them represents, who their respective external backers are and what their political positions are. Very briefly, on a Track II level, which, as I say, I have been doing for the past two and a half years, I have put together meetings of the leaders of 60 to 70 groups, together in one room for three days, and they all spell out their political vision in front of each other, so it is not a mystery.

Q248 Chair: Where do these meetings tend to take place?

Charles Lister: Turkey¹.

Q249 Chair: That is helpful to know. Sorry to cut you short, but I want to get through a few questions. The reason why I asked that question is that we have been struggling to get the British Government to identify their 70,000 of supposedly moderate groups. Are you satisfied that they are not talking about some other 70,000 people who are different from the 70,000 or 75,000 people you have identified.

Charles Lister: I have not seen their specific list—

Chair: They haven’t published it.

Charles Lister: My Track II work is funded, at least in part, by the Foreign Office, so we have British observers in all our meetings. Without having seen their list, I am aware that it corresponds very closely with what I came up with myself. I am also aware that in the United States my list comes close to their upper estimate of what they term here as moderate opposition. There is a strong basis for this, and of course it is based on people who regularly have face-to-face contact with these groups; it is not people who only sit in London or Washington.

¹ Note by witness: Meetings containing only armed opposition groups take place in Turkey. However, meetings that include armed group leaderships, but also comprise senior representatives of minority communities, tribal leaderships, the business community, academia, civil society, women etc., have taken place in Norway, Sweden, the Netherlands, and Switzerland.

Q250 Chair: I will not ask you to speculate why our Government will not publish the list. They say it would compromise their safety vis-à-vis Assad, whereas you are confident that it will not.

I have just a couple more things to ask you briefly. First, it is generally estimated that there are 25,000 to 30,000 Daesh fighters in Syria. Here we have a list of 70,000 moderate fighters, plus, of course, the Kurds to be taken into account as well. Why is it that such a large number of supposedly moderate fighters do not seem to be able to cope with a much smaller number of Daesh fighters? Is it true that, although the people on your list to whom you refer as moderates are united in being opposed to Assad, they may not be so united in being opposed to Daesh or al-Qaeda?

Charles Lister: The very simple answer to your question is that they are all absolutely 100% united in forcing ISIS out of Syria. The problem is that for a significant majority of these groups, the primary priority—their primary day-to-day urgency—is protecting themselves against the regime and Russia, Hezbollah and the various Iranian-backed militias that are in Syria. There are some groups on that list, and others that I could name, who are fighting ISIS on a day-to-day basis, but that is because they are locally rooted in an area that has a front-line against ISIS.

The primary reason why the CIA train and equip mission in Syria has succeeded is because they have accepted that Assad is a significant obstacle to the broader fight against terrorism. The CENTCOM or DoD-backed train and equip mission fundamentally failed because it ignored that reality. It asked civilians to ignore the regime in favour of, essentially, doing the West's bidding in fighting against ISIS. If you look at the casualty numbers—I am pulling a number out of a rough estimate—ISIS might kill perhaps five Syrian civilians day-to-day. When the conflict is at its full intensity, the regime is killing as many as 100. How can we blame Syrians for prioritising their protective or defensive fight against the regime rather than fighting ISIS? We have to recognise that the two things feed off each other; they are not separate.

Q251 Chair: Just one more question with two parts to it. First, you mentioned numbers and gave some reasonably precise estimates of them. What are your sources? Is it just what the groups themselves declare their numbers to be? Is there any way you can check that they are not exaggerating?

Secondly, you say that just because somebody prays five times a day that doesn't mean to say they are hard-line Islamists, but one or two of these groups have titles that translate into things like "The Call of God", or the "Islamic Union/Armies of Syria", with sub-battalions entitled things like the "Battalions of the Beloved" and the "Battalions of the Companies of the Prophet". A lot of comparisons have been drawn with the cold war and communism, and so on. There was a cold war saying that if it walks like a duck, looks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it's a duck. These look like pretty duck-like Islamist titles to me. What do you say in response to that?

Charles Lister: I would say that it is not always to do with religion. Religion and culture are very closely in sync in the Middle East. The fact that these people have been under such severe brutality for the last five years has made people more personally religious—not politically, in all cases—than they might otherwise have been. Syria was a largely

secular, very modern state, before this revolution; and the vast majority of these groups want to go back to that previous status quo ante.

The use of Islamic terms came out in 2011 when there was no al-Qaeda, when there was no extremism. This was just their way of searching back into their old culture and to old, brave fighters from the region, who happened to be fighting at the time for Islam. These were just popular commanders who fought hundreds of years ago in the Middle East; so we shouldn't generalise and say therefore they must laud this person as a representative of an Islamic state; because while there are, of course, exceptions to that—some of these groups are undoubtedly Muslim Brotherhood-oriented, for example—that does not have to mean they want an Islamic state. This is the kind of nuance I am trying to draw out here.

Q252 Chair: And the source of the numbers?

Charles Lister: Certainly not from the groups themselves. That is one aspect, but groups do, as you suggest, tend to exaggerate their own numbers. It is from a variety of things: my engagement with different Governments who work on this subject; my own personal assessments, according to where groups are fighting, how many fighters they are able to deploy to certain areas; and groups' own assessments, etc. They are rough estimates; I am pretty keen on saying that, but they are, by and large, as far as I am concerned, relatively representative.

Michael Eisenstadt: Can I just add something quickly; I just want to say that we have to accept the possibility that, to some extent, identities are pliable. We saw in Iraq a lot of the people who were involved in al-Qaeda in Iraq were former Ba'athist Army officers. Now, you did have a process in the '90s of greater religiosity in Iraqi society that was promoted by Saddam Hussein, but people go with the flow, and after the US invasion the most effective resistance was under the flag of Islam. Many people identified with these groups and transformed themselves into Islamists. I think we saw the same thing in Syria as well, that people who wanted to fight with the strong horse redefined themselves as Islamists. Those were the backers—the people were backing them because they were mujaheddin against the Assad regime; so they defined themselves as Islamist. So I think there is a certain degree of pliability here, in terms of identify.

I just want to say as a last point—and I would defer to Charles, who has a lot more experience dealing with the opposition than I do—that my experience is that by and large the Islamist groups, not just in Syria but elsewhere, tend to have greater in-group solidarity: *asabiyyah*, in Arabic. As a result they very often are able to outmanoeuvre their secular competition—I won't use the term "secular"; it is not appropriate in this context. Their competitors may be Islamo-nationalist, or a softer kind of Islamic, with a small "i", if you will. I will just say that in a power struggle I worry how moderate groups would stand up to groups like Jabhat al-Nusra if there was a political struggle in a kind of end-of-regime scenario; which is all the more reason why we have to support the people who—

Q253 Chair: So is it your collective position, then, that—I am trying to put this as objectively as I can—precisely because the hard-line Islamists might come out on top in a power struggle if Assad fell, is why it is so important to try and reach an agreement before Assad falls? Would that be a fair summary of what you are saying?

Michael Eisenstadt: What kind of agreement do you have in mind?

Q254 Chair: When you are talking about these negotiations—that they have all signed up to form an inclusive Government.

Michael Eisenstadt: More than agreement you need a kind of leadership, and I think this is one of the problems, in that a great deal of these groups are very fractured. Please correct me if I am wrong, but this is the curse of the Syrian opposition, by and large—factionalisation.

Q255 Chair: I was just trying to be clear. What are you saying that we need to try to achieve if we want Assad to go? If you are expressing concern, as you are, that in a shoot-out, as it were, between the hard-line Islamists and the more moderate groups, as you would define them, the hard-line Islamists might come out on top, what is it that you wish to achieve to prevent that dreadful outcome?

Michael Eisenstadt: Capable leaders with effective ability to govern in the areas that they have liberated, and for the people who we think share our vision to have more guns and more military capability than the others.

Chair: We are up against it, but I will try to squeeze in one or two quick questions.

Q256 Ruth Smeeth: This is a very quick one. I hate to turn this thing on its head but, given the size of the population, should we be surprised that only 75,000 people—as opposed to being amazed that it is as many as 75,000 people—are standing to fight against what is a death cult on one side and a horrible dictatorship on the other?

Charles Lister: Probably upwards of half a million people have been killed in the conflict so far, and a significant number of those have been opposition fighters. There are many more than 75,000, which is the number I would talk about as being potentially willing to abide by the kind of expectations that we would want for a future Syria. There are other groups who are further along the line of Islamic belief that would put that number up to over 100,000, and that is well before you get to al-Qaeda and ISIS. By and large, no. I think it is quite remarkable that so many people have kept up the fight, despite the sarin gas attacks in Damascus, the repeated barrel bombing and, as far as they are concerned, the abandonment, by and large, of their cause by the Western world. The stubbornness and determination to defeat a brutal, brutal dictatorship, which is complicit in almost every single war crime you can think of, is quite impressive. We need to try to stick by that kind of determination.

No one can deny, myself included, that Islamists have become more powerful over time. A lot of that can be explained by psychological reasons, rather than necessarily the growth of al-Qaeda; it is natural that many groups end up going in that direction. There is a large number of distinctly moderate groups on the ground who need our support. The previous session specifically referenced Aleppo, and Aleppo city right now is defended solely by moderate opposition groups. A small number of Islamists are north of the city and south. If we are talking about the city itself, those are the guys who need our help. If we are talking about Idlib to the west, we are seeing, for the first time in five years, an uprising against al-Qaeda—the kind of uprising that I am talking about right now—in peaceful protest. These are the kinds of people who need our help. We ignore them at our peril, because that trajectory of Islamisation will continue and, before too long, it will be too late.

Q257 Mr Gray: Tell us in a nutshell, if you can in the time available, what Turkey's role is in all this, or what it should be, perhaps linking to this the notion of some form of Kurdistan, as it were, after a post-Assad Syria?

Charles Lister: Turkey's role in Syria has been problematic. It has chopped and changed its strategy from time to time. It is certainly accused of backing some of the wrong parties to the conflict over time, too. Certainly in the last month or so, what has arisen is Turkey's quite legitimate national security concerns with regards to a Kurdish insurgency in the south-east of Turkey, which I understand may possibly have killed hundreds of their own soldiers in the last few months, albeit minimally reported.

The Kurdish YPG, which has been our favoured partner in the north-east of Syria, is indisputably the Syrian wing of the PKK. Whatever other interpretation you might read, the YPG was established by Abdullah Öcalan's brother—Abdullah Öcalan was a founding member, and is today the leader, of the PKK—and five famed PKK commanders. The PKK is seen, rightly or wrongly, as an existential threat to the Turkish state. Turkey has watched the Syrian wing of this existential threat receiving assistance, training and political backing from the West for the last 18 or 20 months, and it has created a very significant threat. Half of YPG casualties in the last 18 months were Turkish, so these are not all Syrians who are fighting for our cause against ISIS in Syria. In that respect, I fear that Turkey is being pushed into a corner whereby we could see, and have seen, lashing out. Turkey shot down a Russian fighter jet because it felt like it was being pushed into a corner by the Russians. But this Kurdish issue is incredibly important.

I fear, as a Syria analyst, that we may be watching a new political—not an ethnic—conflict now breaking out in northern Syria that could well outlast the conflict between the opposition and the regime. I cannot understate the hostility between the opposition and the Kurdish YPG, but I must underline that it is a political hostility, not an ethnic one. Vast numbers of Kurds and Christians, and even some Alawites, are fighting for the opposition in northern Syria, and I think that is often ignored. Most of the armed groups in Aleppo—opposition groups who are backed by the CIA—who are currently fighting the YPG have Kurds in their senior command. So it is important that this is not seen as an ethnic conflict; it is a political one about what is right for Syria's political future.

Q258 Mrs Moon: I am very concerned that we are failing to give a coherent narrative to both our own populations and the people whom we are ostensibly working to support and assist. Someone once said that we should be clear about what we can do—it must be clarified what it will achieve—why it is needed and why now, why it will be helpful and who it will help. Are we failing to do that? In addition, Nixon said that when a great power fails to live up to its commitments, the greatness falls away. Are we at that point where we are falling behind Russia in demonstrating our willingness to meet our commitments?

Chair: We save the easy ones for the end, as you can see.

Michael Eisenstadt: Russia, with just 35 combat aircraft and a few thousand people on the ground not for offensive purposes, except maybe for some fire support—so with minimal resources—showed what you can do with the judicious application of military power coupled with diplomacy. This was in a way the mantra of this whole Administration, of smart diplomacy and coupling the two. I understand the current President's desire not to be drawn back into this region, with talk of “quagmire” and the like, but the bottom line is

not either going in all the way to solve the region's problems, or doing nothing. We have vital interests that are being affected. As I said before, and as I often say, if you do not visit this part of the region it will visit you, because the Middle East is moving west. We thought a few decades ago that we could extend European and Western security frameworks to the region. Well, the region is now extending its insecurity to the West.

We really need to be engaged and involved there, and you are right—in our country, we have a President who has only been dragged in incrementally, kicking and very reluctantly to a greater level of engagement than he would have liked, so he is not going to provide a vision for getting involved. To be honest with you, given my read of regional dynamics—that you have this kind of regional conflict system where you have a series of regional brush fires that are feeding each other—it is really hard to spell out. Americans like conflicts to be discrete, well defined, and with clear-cut endings and a victory parade, but you cannot promise any of this for these kinds of conflict.

This is a long-term engagement with uncertain outcomes, but we have vital interests that require that we be engaged. It is a hard sell to make unless you do it in a way that involves, as I said, a light-footprint approach—a heavier footprint than this Administration is taking, but still a light-footprint approach. That would enable you to husband your resources, so that you do not have headlines every day about soldiers getting killed, and—this is the hardest part—to build up local capacity, as the people in the previous panel said.

That is not easy, because we have just gone through this in Afghanistan and Iraq, with little to show for it. Actually, I have been writing about this. Part of the problem—the local politics part of it—is the way we go about it. We need to rethink the way we go about security systems and the like. There are other ways that we need to try. You always have choice, but I believe that we need to be committed to engaging in this region, otherwise we will continue to see the growth of radicalism and it will spread into our societies, as we are already seeing.

Chair: Before I give the very last word of the whole session to Charles, Phil, in 30 seconds, wishes to make one more point.

Q259 Phil Wilson: The Cold War lasted for 50 years. This war against Daesh and international terrorism is going to last. We have to get into a mindset that this is going to be a generational conflict. What more do you think the alliance could be doing, and Britain in particular, over the next few years to ensure that we see off Daesh? I don't mean just in Syria, because if we sort it out in Syria and Iraq, it is going to end up somewhere else. What—in 30 seconds—do we need to be doing, as far as global governance is concerned, to ensure that it does not eventually go elsewhere?

Michael Eisenstadt: I will say two things and will not just focus on Britain per se. A lot of our European allies have not met their NATO spending commitment—is it 2% that they are supposed to meet? So a lot of our allies are not meeting their commitments there. A lot of our allies could be very useful—as Margaret Thatcher told Ronald Reagan, “Don't go wobbly”, and sometimes we need to hear it from our friends. I suspect that they have been hearing it and just ignoring it, but we need to hear more often, “We need you in the game and we need to deal with this problem together, because we are in it together, whether we want to be or not.” That is all I would say.

Q260 Chair: Charles, before we create a diplomatic incident by being late for lunch with the ambassador, can I just thank you both and leave the floor to you to bring the session to a close?

Charles Lister: I will try to be as fast as I possibly can, despite the expansiveness of the questions.

The short answer is yes, we are falling behind Russia. Russia has exploited a vacuum resulting from our lack of strategic thinking about how to tackle this problem. Certainly since ISIL took Mosul and declared its caliphate, our strategy has appeared to be constantly reactive. There certainly is a recognition—although this is whispered—that this is going to be, as Mr Wilson said, a generational struggle. It absolutely is; it will probably be longer than 50 years, but it might not only be against ISIS. It might be against al-Qaeda and another thing that comes after it.

But fundamentally speaking, the biggest shortfall I see is that our strategy has been overly western-centric. This issue has its root in the Islamic world, and principally at the moment in the Middle East and north Africa. The Middle East and north Africa therefore have the solution. People on the ground in those countries have the solution, but whether it be meetings in the White House between executives of Google and Twitter about how to defeat ISIL's narrative, or whether it be about our own, often misjudged, interpretations regarding opposition troops on the ground or ISIS itself, we need to accept and root our strategy more in what the region feels, because fundamentally speaking, as Michael said—and as many commentators have recently said—if we do not get this right, the problem will only continue to grow. That problem will not be growing necessarily in London or in Washington; it will be growing like a wildfire in the Middle East. So fundamentally speaking, we have to accept that the alternative lies in the region and that we cannot dictate what that alternative is going to be.

In that respect, turning perhaps more to a UK or European frame of reference, the more security-oriented approach towards tackling returning foreign fighters or potential radicalisation cases in Europe—it is seen as a security-oriented approach, at least—only feeds a jihadist narrative. Their entire narrative is, “We are the victims. We are always being looked at as suspicious.” If we tackle those suspicious people solely through a security-oriented approach, we are literally gifting our enemies the kind of societal perceptions that they want to develop. Certainly after the Paris attack, France has gone very much in that direction.

You can read ISIS propaganda celebrating the fact that societies are divided and that Muslims are not allowed to appear here covered or there doing something else. We need to encourage an open debate. In universities in the UK, there have been a number of incidents lately whereby potential examples of a healthy debate have been suppressed, whether by student groups or the universities themselves. That also needs to be something that we acknowledge. A healthy debate, including with controversial people, is precisely the way to undermine this ideology, and not suppressing that.

Chair: Thank you both very much indeed. The session has ended. We are very grateful to the members of both panels for a mass of interesting argument and information.