Defence Committee

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

Tuesday 22 March 2016

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 22 March 2016.

Watch the meeting

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

Questions 261-310

Witnesses: **Dr Lina Khatib**, Senior Research Associate, Arab Reform Initiative, **Dr Neil Quilliam**, Acting Head, Middle East and North Africa Programme, Chatham House, and **Colonel (Retd) Hamish de Bretton-Gordon OBE**, gave evidence.

Chair: Before we begin today's session, as a mark of respect to the victims of the Brussels atrocities, I would like to ask everyone here today to stand for a moment's silence.

The Committee observed a moment's silence.

Q261 Chair: Welcome to this session of our inquiry into British military action in relation to Syria and Iraq. I would like our three panellists to introduce themselves for the record and to make a brief statement about their background and qualifications.

Dr Khatib: I am Lina Khatib. I am currently senior research associate with the Arab Reform Initiative, which is a think-tank based in Paris. I work mainly on international relations in the Middle East as well as in the Syrian conflict, from both an armed groups perspective and a political perspective.

Colonel de Bretton-Gordon: Good morning ladies and gentlemen. I am Hamish de Bretton-Gordon. I was a soldier for 23 years, which included tours in both Gulf wars, Iraq, Afghanistan, Bosnia and Kosovo. I left five years ago. Also during that time I commanded the UK's Joint Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear Regiment, and the NATO equivalent. In the five years since I left, I have worked extensively in northern Iraq with the Kurdistan regional Government on chemical issues, and in the last four years I have worked with the media in Syria and Iraq and with UOSSM, a medical charity which runs 32 hospitals and clinics across Syria. I have been in Syria a number of times over the last two or three years with UOSSM and the media, and in Iraq recently.

Dr Quilliam: Good morning. I am Neil Quilliam. I am acting head of the Middle East North Africa programme at Chatham House. I am currently directing a three-year Syria

project at Chatham House, and we are 18 months into it. A very long time ago, I wrote a PhD on Syria, but it looked very different back then.

Q262 Chair: I suspect that if you write a follow-up in the future, it will look very different again, even compared with now.

We want to try to get some sort of handle on the situation, which is why we are so grateful to you all for giving up your time and sharing your expertise. The first question will be asked by John Spellar.

Q263 Mr Spellar: Has the cessation of hostilities been effective in your view?

Colonel de Bretton-Gordon: I haven't been in Syria since October last year, but last night I got on to our hospitals across Syria—we cover from Aleppo to Idlib, to Hama, to Ghouta and to Daraa. Basically, the line coming from them is that the ceasefire is pretty much holding, which is much to the surprise of all of us. They tell me there is fighting going on in Aleppo, predominantly between Nusra and the Free Syrian Army and there are still some air attacks. They recorded 12 barrel bombs in Ghouta, which is a suburb of Damascus, over the last few weeks since the ceasefire began. They say there are 47 dead. When one looks back three weeks, that is probably a 10th of what we were seeing. I think generally from our hospitals in Syria, predominantly in northern Syria, it seems to be holding and an awful lot fewer casualties are being taken on the ground now than two and a half weeks ago.

Q264 Chair: Any further estimates or comments?

Dr Khatib: There is no denying that, by many estimates, the scale of hostilities seems to have lessened by 90% since the cessation of hostilities began. We have to look at the same time at what the regime, the opposition and the other groups present on the ground in Syria are doing while the cessation is in place.

When it comes to the regime, from what I know—I haven't been to Syria—from people who have been recently, the regime seems to be using this moment to take a bit of a breather and reorganise its troops on the ground. The opposition seem to be doing something pretty similar and trying to use this time off from fighting the regime to concentrate on fighting Daesh, especially in areas like Daraa in the south and some areas in the north like Aleppo.

At the same time, the Russians seem to be using this time to increase their supplies to the regime, but the moderate opposition are not taking the same advantage because they are not receiving any more aid during this time. That is something we must think about. This moment of calm may be benefiting the regime and the opposition, but not in the same way or at the same level. Meanwhile, as we know, Nusra, Daesh and the other groups continue to operate as before.

Q265 Chair: Anything to add, Neil?

Dr Quilliam: Nothing substantive. Both those points are very valid. I just think that the point Lina makes about "pause" is really important. The word "surprise" just seems to pop up in Syria all the time at the moment, particularly with Russian action. While we are seeing the cessation of hostilities, which is clearly diminishing the number of attacks, and

the hostilities and the conflict, we should not be surprised if there is a sudden uptick—so, not to be caught out.

Colonel de Bretton-Gordon: Perhaps I could just add one thing to that, coming from Lina's point. What is tremendously disappointing from a humanitarian perspective is that in this pause, when we would hope to get large amounts of, in our case, medical aid and supplies into our hospitals, that door has not opened. I accept that some areas such as Ghouta are really difficult for the UN to get to. However, one would certainly have thought that some areas in northern Syria, such as Idlib, Bab al-Hawa and parts of Aleppo, would be relatively straightforward. I think that is disappointing at this stage.

Q266 Chair: Have you any idea what is preventing that from taking place?

Colonel de Bretton-Gordon: I am being told that the regime is still not allowing access through regime areas to UN convoys and other NGOs. The aid is there—I have seen it for myself in places such as Reyhanli and Kilis—but it is about enabling that to get to those areas and bolster them. A really good point that both my colleagues have made is that in this era of pause, when people are rebuilding and bolstering for whatever happens next, it is the civilians who, from a humanitarian perspective, are the future of Syria and we the international community are perhaps not putting our weight behind providing them with the wherewithal to have the hope—which the ceasefire has really given them—that there is something beyond the ceasefire and some sort of future.

Q267 Chair: Before I call Madeleine, what is the situation in both countries with regard to Turkey and the Kurds?

Colonel de Bretton-Gordon: The only ones I could really accurately talk about are the Iraqi Kurds, whom I know very well. As you will be aware, the Turks have a very different relationship with the Iraqi Kurds—a very close one—and with the PKK and the YPG. As far as the Syrian Kurds are concerned—I know that the Government are providing a lot of aid to them and I am aware of what we are doing militarily—it is a very different picture. The Iraqi Kurds—the Peshmerga—are doing a tremendous job, although I know that in Iraqi Kurdistan there are 1.4 million IDPs and refugees that they are really struggling to provide the necessary level of aid and support to. Although I keep on going about the humanitarian piece, perhaps as an ex-soldier it is something that I can give a perspective on that maybe some others can't. I can only comment on the Iraqi Kurds at this stage, I am afraid.

Dr Khatib: When it comes to Turkey and its own Kurds, Turkey primarily continues to view the Syrian conflict from the framework of its "Kurdish problem", as it sees it. It is now saying that there are links between the PKK and the Kurds who are Syrian. That is one of the reasons why Turkey has opposed the idea of including Syrian Kurds in the opposition delegation that is now negotiating at the UN talks, for example. That, for me, is a problem, because Turkey seems to be rather hard line in the way that it views the Kurdish issue and its actions in cracking down on the Kurds are simply making the situation worse.

Q268 Mrs Moon: Turkey has faced a number of attacks on its civilian population. Given the attack that we have just had today, I think it is worth bearing in mind that Turkey has also received attacks that it has identified as coming from the PKK and from Daesh. It is difficult

to say that Turkey is hard line when large numbers of its civilians being killed. What is your comment on that?

Dr Khatib: There's no denying that the PKK seems to have engaged in attacks in Turkey, but we have to go back to why the Kurds there are feeling so resentful towards the central Government. Many years ago, there was a process of rapprochement between the Turkish Government and the PKK, but that seems to have gone now. From the very beginning of the Syrian conflict, Turkey—the Turkish Government—seems to have looked at this conflict as an opportunity to crack down on the Kurds. Not too long ago, we saw Turkey raze whole towns—Kurdish towns—on its border with Syria. This alienation of the Kurdish population in Turkey is contributing to the Kurds' resentment and it is part of the reason why they are engaging in these terrorist attacks in places such as Ankara. The attacks are a manifestation of the breakdown in the relationship between the Turkish Government and the PKK. The way forward is not further crackdowns by Turkey—that is why I described that as a hard-line approach—but some form of national dialogue with the Turkish Kurds.

Q269 Mrs Moon: I do think, Chairman, that we need to be careful about the generic use of the word "Kurds", given that we know that there is not a problem between the Turkish Government and the Kurds in northern Iraq and Kurdistan.

Dr Khatib: Just to clarify, we are only talking about the PKK-affiliated Kurds in Turkey.

Q270 Mrs Moon: Given our problems with terrorism, we are very aware of the importance of dialogue. What do you think the impact of the announcement of the Russian withdrawal has been? Has it had any real impact?

Colonel de Bretton-Gordon: From UOSSM's perspective, over the five weeks preceding the ceasefire, our hospitals were bombed and directly targeted on many occasions. Our main hospital is a place called Bab al-Hawa, which is over the border from Reyhanli in northern Syria. I have been to that place many times and it is an amazing 120-bed hospital at which we do virtually everything except heart transplants, and it accounts for 30% of procedures in northern Syria. It was bombed four times by the Russians in that period. Only two weeks ago, we showed the Syria APPG the picture of what it looks like at the moment—pretty much flattened, but still working. There is absolutely no way that it could be anything else but a hospital; it is off a road, there is a bridge near it and it has "hospital" written all over it, but it was attacked by Russian jets four times.

With the removal of the Russians and their jets, none of our hospitals has been attacked since the ceasefire. As for the wider perspective of what impact the Russians have had, Mr Putin does not quite follow the democratic decision-making process that the rest of us follow. From a military perspective, I think he has got engaged in a very interesting way in Syria, firstly with the removal of chemical weapons from Ghouta in 2013, and, more recently, since he put his jets in there from the end of last year, with the impact that that has had. I am sure that particularly with the publication of the Chilcot inquiry due soon, and in the light of some of our other adventures with which I have been involved, the ability to make those quick military decisions is something that we would consider.

Whether it is right or wrong, the Russians have certainly had an impact, and in my opinion they have been absolutely key to bringing about the ceasefire. It is also very evident that

Putin has had direct control over Assad to make him do things that hitherto he was not doing. I go back to the bombing of our hospitals and clinics in the area, which was directly attributable to Assad; I myself have seen his jets doing it. Hitherto, all calls for no-fly zones and other measures have been prevented at the UN Security Council and elsewhere. However, I am sure that if Putin decides to back those sort of things, they will happen, and that is the main impact. Is it a positive or not? We have seen the cessation of direct targeting of our hospitals since his jets have gone and we have seen that he is able to control Assad as well. Yes, Russian involvement has had a huge impact and it would be very interesting to see Putin's engagement further on, if he can be—I do not know what the right word is—encouraged to support the extension of the ceasefire in some sort of future for Syria.

Q271 Richard Benyon: Why do you think the Russians targeted that hospital?

Colonel de Bretton-Gordon: That is a very, very good question. The explanation is that those hospitals were harbouring Nusra fighters, or FSA, or fighters who Russia were sworn to attack, be it Daesh or some of the other al-Qaeda-based areas. All I can say from my experience, and knowing the people at those hospitals, is that that is absolutely not the case. All my visits to Syria have been under the umbrella of the Free Syrian Army in north-west Syria, and they are absolutely as far as you could be from some of these terrorist groups. I do not know the answer to your question. It is incongruous. Every rule in the land—the Geneva convention, et cetera—outlaws bombing hospitals, but when we look back, other red lines have been crossed in Syria, and people have taken the view that what goes on in Syria is rather different from what goes on elsewhere.

Richard Benyon: It is still a war crime.

Colonel de Bretton-Gordon: Entirely. Absolutely.

Dr Khatib: May I add one thing on the Russian withdrawal? We have to remember that Russia has not completely left; it has just lessened the extent of its involvement. The Russian air defence system is intact, and they still have their command headquarters in Latakia. I see this primarily as a political move: President Putin is sending the message that Russia is the one in charge in Syria now and it calls the shots. This is obviously happening to coincide with the talks run by the UN. It is more of a political statement.

Q272 Mrs Moon: Do you see that as a message to Assad as well as to the West?

Dr Khatib: Yes. It is a message for both; absolutely. The Russians have told me in private—someone from the Government—that the Syrian regime of Assad might have collapsed in around three months had Russia not stepped in to support it last autumn. So Russia is sending a strong message to Assad that he has to toe the line, otherwise he will not be able to make it on his own.

Q273 Mr Gray: I want to come back to Richard Benyon's question a moment ago. Perhaps I was not listening correctly; I may have missed something. We do not know why Putin bombed the hospital, but given that he is mainly interested in messaging and all that, what possible message can we imagine that he might be trying to deliver by bombing hospitals? Surely, if anything, it would be to Putin's dishonour. Why would he want to do it? What possible reason could he have for doing it? I am trying to get inside his head.

Colonel de Bretton-Gordon: My first impressions when the Russians first got involved—you will no doubt remember their jet that was shot down over northern Syria last year—were that they were not militarily terribly effective. This is the first time that they have done what we call precision strike. One of the key things about precision strike—using intelligent weapons to pinpoint targets; you will have heard of the Brimstone and others—is that it rather relies on very good intelligence and people on the ground to triangulate it. One of our big challenges is that we do not necessarily have people on the ground to do it.

Mr Gray: We will come back to that in a moment.

Colonel de Bretton-Gordon: My initial answer when I am asked why the Russians are bombing hospitals is that they are just missing the targets—they are hitting the wrong targets. You could argue that in some towns and villages, such as Idlib and Ghouta, there are fighters they are trying to target, but Bab al-Hawa, our main hospital in such an isolated area, was hit four times, and that must have been deliberate.

Q274 Mr Gray: But why? What possible advantage could there be for Putin?

Colonel de Bretton-Gordon: One of the things that has struck me about Syria in the last three years is the low morale of the civilian population; it is why we see 4 million refugees in the region and 11 million displaced people within Syria. Their morale and their hope is at rock bottom. I admit that a lot of the people I know and see in Syria are doctors and medical professionals, who under the regime were doing exactly the same sort of thing, but the drop in morale in the past three years has been fundamental. Until the ceasefire, there was absolutely no hope, and that created the massive outflow of refugees. Some commentators believe that this is something that Putin is trying to do to create this refugee situation. I could not comment on that directly, but breaking the morale of people in Syria is what it is doing.

Q275 Mrs Moon: We have had evidence that it is not just your hospital, but that a number of hospitals have been deliberately targeted by Russian fighters.

Colonel de Bretton-Gordon: Absolutely, yes.

Chair: In relation to Russia having left or not left militarily, it might be worth referring to a report in *The Times* on 18 March that reports Mr Putin speaking to military leaders in the Kremlin and saying, "If there's a need, Russia literally within several hours can increase its presence in the region to the size required for the unfolding situation and use the whole arsenal of possibilities we have at our disposal". I think we have it there from Russia's own leadership that they could be back in Syria within hours. So it is clearly not a permanent change in the situation.

Mrs Moon: We should also bear in mind that the Russian jet that was shot down by Turkey was circling a refugee camp that had been bombed—the day before, I think—by Russian fighters, so they have a record of attacking civilian targets deliberately.

Q276 Chair: Moving on, it is clear that there is a coalition and that it is putting forward military initiatives, but are these outpacing the political plan for some sort of settlement and, if so, where does that leave the possibilities of a political settlement?

Dr Khatib: I think, certainly in the case of Russia, that it wants to set the political scene through military action. So it is a deliberate strategy of increasing the military presence to try to weaken the Syrian opposition, primarily militarily on the ground, with a view to using that to weaken them politically, especially as the High Negotiations Committee that is representing the Syrian opposition has representation from political leaders and military leaders from the key groups on the ground, such as Ahrar ash-Sham and Jaysh al-Islam. If Russia can weaken those groups or break them militarily, that automatically would hurt the credibility of their representatives within the HNC, which ultimately would allow Russia to try to impose its own "vision" for ending the conflict.

When it comes to the Syrian opposition on the other hand, I would say that they remain under-supported in terms of the military aid given to them by external forces—not just the West, but even regional forces such as the Gulf countries. They are not in a position that would allow them to turn things to their advantage on the ground in Syria as things stand and, therefore, if the situation continues as is, we are likely to see the moderate opposition get weaker militarily on the ground. Even now, if Russia has stopped most of its attacks, this is only a pause, as I said. When things resume, and I expect that they will—the fighting—the Syrian opposition will be even more disadvantaged than before. That means that Russia has been rather clever in using all these military tactics in order to push for a political solution that suits it.

Chair: Are there any other comments?

Colonel de Bretton-Gordon: My experience of the Free Syrian Army—admittedly it is few months out of date—is that, as Lina has said, they appear to be not very well supported. I will not go into detail, but I was fairly cagey about my background when in Syria, but I was very struck. I was looked after by the general command in 13 Division and, in discussing what they were doing and what their modus operandi was, from the sophisticated Western military perspective from which I came, it was very unsophisticated. It struck me—and I mentioned this to a number of people in the vicinity of Westminster—that the Free Syrian Army could really do with a bit of sound advice of the sort that young British officers and soldiers give on the basics of how to conduct warfare. I just felt that the Free Syrian Army were all as brave as lions, but they had no idea of the concept of integrating, say, tanks and aircraft, or whatever. If they did, they would be very much more successful.

Rather than just giving them lots of weapons when, again, they are as brave as lions but don't necessarily know how to look after them and use them, we should give them some advice. I did chat to the general a couple of times and said, "Have you ever thought about perhaps co-ordinating your tanks with your artillery and perhaps getting some aircraft to bomb the enemy just before you attack them?" He said to me, "How ridiculous, Hamish; that's not the way you conduct warfare." It was almost First World War-ish.

Again, I have seen only a very limited part of the Free Syrian Army, and I don't know whether we are going to discuss the coalition military plan shortly, particularly what is currently happening in Iraq, but it strikes me that that is moving at a pace. I'm not sure whether it is moving at the political pace and I am not entirely sure how much leverage we in the UK are putting into it, but, through my work and relations with the Peshmerga, I know that they are putting up the sternest fight. We are relying on their boots on the ground to prevail, particularly in northern Iraq, which I hope they will.

As for whether we are giving them sufficient support to enable them to do that and, just as importantly if not more so, whether we are giving them the comprehensive strategy—the follow-up of massive amounts of humanitarian aid to build a future, which we didn't do in 2003 and in some other conflicts—I'm not entirely sure about all that. I would be very keen to develop that point later.

Dr Quilliam: I have nothing to add to that, other than that I would perhaps like to return to that point later.

Q277 Chair: Let's move on to the vexed question of moderates in Syria. Are there enough moderates among the Syrian anti-Assad forces to ensure that any alternative to the current regime would not be an Islamist extremist Government? In other words, if Russia hadn't intervened and the Assad Government had fallen, as it was suggested earlier might have happened, what would the complexion of any ensuing Government have been? Would it have been Islamist? If so, how extreme do you think it would have been? What is the relative strength of moderates versus extremists in the anti-Assad opposition?

Dr Khatib: I have done a lot of work on exactly this, so this is going to be a bit of a long answer, but bear with me. The answer is not simple. It is not about numbers. It is not that there are so many thousand moderates who would take over were Assad to fall, and "Maybe we need a few thousand more." Forget about all that. We have to understand the situation as follows.

As I said, there are currently many divisions belonging to the Free Syrian Army that are what we consider moderate. These are people we can definitely work with, such as Division 13, which was unfortunately attacked by Nusra recently, but there are other groups as well. They do exist, but if those groups and others like them continue to not receive the kind of military support they need—such as the co-ordination that Hamish just talked about, which is very important—and meanwhile the regime forces continue to receive support from countries such as Russia and Iran, the moderates will be pushed towards extinction and we will then have fewer moderates than we have today.

Crucially, that will push some of the membership of the moderate groups towards embracing Islamist groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS, not because the individuals believe in the ideologies of those extremist groups, but because survival on the ground means they have to choose either to die or to join those groups. To think that they will choose to go back and fight with the regime against ISIS is simply not going to happen. If the Syrian rebels that are moderate are not adequately supported, they are going to disintegrate and their members are going to join Islamist groups.

The Assad strategy will then have prevailed, and that strategy is to try to eliminate the moderates as much as possible, only leaving on the ground the regime and Islamist-jihadist groups, so that Assad can later appeal to the international community on the basis of his regime being the only alternative. That is part of the reason why Russia, in its campaign, stated that it is targeting groups like Daesh and al-Nusra, but the reality is that over 80% of Russia's airstrikes were against the moderate opposition. So we are seeing a very systematic attempt to weaken the Syrian moderates.

The other issue that is running parallel to this is that the political process at the moment in Geneva has, in a way, pushed groups on the ground in Syria of all colours to choose their

position—are they with the process, or are they outside it? Groups such as Jaysh al-Islam decided that they are going to be pragmatic and join the political process. Those are the same groups that used to be antagonistic towards the Free Syrian Army; now they are co-operating and working together.

This has pushed groups that had been considered Islamist—I don't necessarily want to call them extremists, but they are certainly not labelled moderate seculars—to co-operate with the Free Syrian Army. The same applies to Ahrar al-Sham, which has not embraced the political process wholesale. Its top leadership has, and many of its members have as well, but some elements of Ahrar al-Sham are rejecting the political process. In a way, that means that the political process has acted as a sieve, sifting the pragmatists—if I can call them that—from the hard-liners.

Jabhat al-Nusra, at the same time, has been alarmed by this process and has therefore attacked groups like Division 13 and the Free Syrian Army more generally. It fears that people are rallying around this new alternative that is now, for the first time, bringing together the moderate Syrian opposition on the ground with the political Syrian opposition and creating a more harmonious opposition body that has a strong military component. That is not in the interests of groups like Nusra.

That is what we have to work with. It is the evolutionary process that is pushing groups to either choose pragmatism or be hard-line. Therefore, there is no fixed number that I can give. It all depends on whether the political process will succeed or not—by succeed, I mean that we should not let the process fail, because that will hurt the credibility of the groups that are represented in it, which are likely to switch sides if they see that it is leading nowhere.

Q278 Chair: We have taken evidence from people with widely differing views. At one end of the spectrum, we have our former UK ambassador to Syria, Peter Ford, who asserts vehemently that the vast majority of opposition groups are, in fact, Islamist of one shade or another. At the other end, last week in Washington we took evidence from Charles Lister, who has published a schedule of groups—some of them with quite Islamist names—that he says he would certainly count as moderate. He explained in the course of his evidence that just because a group employs Islamic labelling, it does not necessarily mean that in reality the group would impose an Islamist state. You mentioned Division 13, which I have not heard of before today—I don't know about other Committee members. I might ask you to expand on that.

If I understand you correctly, you are saying that there are still some secular moderate fighting groups and there are other groups that would be broadly regarded as Islamist, but some are pragmatic and would enter into a settlement, whereas others are what we would call refuseniks and would just fight all-out to the bitter end. You divide even Ahrar al-Sham into a mixture of those two positions. If you are not able to do it now, would you be able to write to us after this meeting—I know you have said you cannot give numbers—with a list of those groups you regard as moderate-secular and those you regard as Islamist but willing to sign up to a pluralistic settlement?

Dr Khatib: It is difficult to categorise groups even like that, but what you have said pretty much summarises what I said accurately. But I would caution against labelling groups as such, because at the level of individual membership there are variations. One thing I will

flag up is that the conflict has become more and more localised as it has continued, meaning that people are more likely to join groups in their immediate surrounding rather than travel to another area of Syria to join a particular group.

So that is why I am saying, let's be a bit cautious about labelling groups as secular or Islamist moderate, because at the level of individual membership almost all the groups are very, very mixed, and the local dynamics determine who joins what. It is not ideology, it is just local dynamics.

Q279 Chair: I am conscious of bringing in other Members, and I will come to Richard next, but could I just ask all you to answer my rather hypothetical question? I appreciate that you may decide it is too hypothetical. If, magically, Assad fell next week, would the correlation of forces result in the emergence of a secular state or an Islamist state? Would you like to go first, Lina? Then I will bring in the others, because they have obviously been on the sidelines so far on this answer.

Dr Khatib: If the regime were to fall next week, at the moment the only credible opposition body is the HNC. Why do I say it is credible? Think about it: the cessation of hostilities has been followed on the ground by the vast majority of opposition groups. This means that the HNC does have influence on the ground in Syria. The HNC is composed of mostly, I would say, Islamist-leaning members. However, the Riyadh communiqué that they issued in December declares that they will adhere to a civil state in Syria, not an Islamist state.

So if the Assad regime were to go, this would actually give the HNC more credibility, and they would be able to kind of do that, but that does not mean that the threat from Nusra and from groups like ISIS will disappear. Obviously, they will try to undermine whatever fragile transitional Government happens in Syria. But that would be my leaning.

Colonel de Bretton-Gordon: I don't want to state the obvious, but most people—certainly all the people I know in Syria and Syrians out of Syria—see Assad as the main problem. The figure we see in the press is 250,000 dead in Syria. I think if you're in Syria, people talk more like half a million dead, and of those probably 90% are the responsibility of the regime.

I think you shouldn't underestimate the feeling of abandonment that the moderate Syrians felt after the so-called red line issue and the Ghouta issue in August 2013. That was the day the leader of the Arab spring in Hama defected to Daesh. I think that is something that we all bear responsibility for—for not coming to their rescue.

Going on from that, another area to consider is that a great deal of the intelligentsia of Syria have left and are not in Syria. Certainly the ones I know, and again it is very much on the medical side, would be desperate to get back to Syria. So, in your hypothetical situation, if Assad falls next week, as Lina said, with the HNC onside; and if those intelligentsia—many of them residing in this country—were encouraged to become engaged; and if there were a peace process to make sure that al-Qaeda, al-Nasr, al-Sharam and the others do not come and destabilise, as some of the Sunni militias and others did post-Iraq; then, if the thing that everybody agrees with—the defeat of Daesh—happens, it could be backed with a comprehensive plan. Remember, of course, that Syria was a secular country prior to this.

I have spent most of my life in Iraq and places like that; I had never been to Syria before the war. If I am in northern Iraq and I need to get from Erbil to Sulaymaniyah but I can't go via Daquq, I know about three or four ways to go. When I am in Syria, in Idlib, and I have to get to Aleppo, I know one way. Institutionally, certainly militarily, we do not understand Syria. But previous to this, there was a secular element to it. Without Assad, from what Lina said, which I absolutely agree with, and with security on the ground and all the rest of it, I think there is hope.

Q280 Chair: Thank you. Neil, anything to add?

Dr Quilliam: Just a few points—I wish I could disagree with my colleagues, but I cannot. I would have liked to give an alternative point of view.

I just have a few things to pick up on. First, I find the term "moderate" difficult. You have said that it is a vexing term, and it really is. Where do any of us sit on a particular spectrum? We should recognise that Assad and his regime are the extremists—that should be there straight away.

This point about the sense of betrayal, of abandonment, among ordinary Syrians is profound, particularly following 2013. The sense that the red line was drawn and never enforced has completely undermined any faith in the international community. That leaves very few options for the moderates on where they will turn—they will turn to groups that can offer them some security, or some hope for the future.

I have a list of those groups that you were asking about. Charles Lister has got that great book, which some of us have read, with all those details. It is produced by the Institute for the Study of War, in the US, which follows the groups very closely. But I think Lina's note of caution is critical. The fights and struggles are so localised. When it tells me that one of those groups has 6,000 fighters, there is no way of verifying what that means. I could sit here now, tot this up and maybe come to the 70,000 figure, if you want it, or to a 40,000 figure, but it is essentially meaningless in that sense, because there are 1,000 fighting groups on the ground and their complexion changes on a daily basis.

Q281 Chair: Are you even there in percentage terms? We know pretty well that all these organisations that are fighting are pretty much 100% fighting Assad. What sort of percentage of them, first, are currently fighting ISIL/Daesh and, secondly, would fight ISIL/Daesh if they were not preoccupied with fighting Assad? Is that a fair question? Can you give us any sort of indication—half of them, three quarters of them?

Dr Quilliam: Fighting Daesh? Lina, you have looked at this more closely.

Dr Khatib: Basically, most groups are fighting Daesh if Daesh happens to be in their areas, let us put it that way. For example, the Southern Front, which is mainly in the Daraa area, was primarily fighting the regime until last year, when the regime basically facilitated the access of Daesh to their area and they shifted, so now they primarily fight Daesh in that area, simply because it is there. But this particular group is not likely to travel now and fight in Aleppo, for example.

If things change, if the regime is no longer to be fought, what does that mean? The only way that this can happen is if there is a political transition in Syria and an effort to unify the Syrian Army. If the Syrian Army is unified once more and we no longer have a Free

Syrian Army and a regular army, because there is a new transitional Government, that is the only way in which you will get these fighters to leave their local areas and fight Daesh elsewhere.

If you have that scenario, you will also automatically weaken Daesh and Nusra, because my estimates show—I know this will sound controversial to many—that around 60% of Nusra members are likely to leave Nusra if you present them with this other alternative, which is a unified Syrian Army under a transitional Government umbrella. That is, as I said, because a lot of people are joining these Islamist groups out of necessity, not out of ideological conviction. They are looking for a third way, so if you present them with a third way, they will take it.

ISIS is not the same in terms of the level, but there are again quite a few individuals who are Syrian and are also with ISIS for survival reasons. So, again, ISIS itself is likely to be weakened. Therefore, I think the only way in which we can meaningfully fight ISIS and the remains of Nusra is to create this third alternative.

Q282 Richard Benyon: Thank you. This is very useful. Many of us in the West, who are desperately looking for some hope in this bleak civil war, clutch at narratives that might offer hope, but too often it is a vain hope. One of the narratives is that we are wrong about Assad or we have to hold our nose and support him. There is a man called the Reverend Andrew Ashdown, who, presumably, is a very brave man indeed, because he is a Christian clergyman who has spent a lot of time in Syria. He went and spoke in my local church a couple of weeks ago. I wasn't there, but he basically said that Assad is very misunderstood in the West, that he is the only hope of resurrecting a secular, pluralist and multi-faith Syria, and that he has been wrongly blamed for chemical attacks, other atrocities and the murder of hundreds of thousands of people. He said that it was actually other groups who were trying to discredit Assad in the face of the West. Now, I do not hold that opinion, but that is the narrative that people can clutch at. What do you say to those who feel that we somehow have to follow that route, hold our nose and accommodate Assad?

Dr Quilliam: I don't think the regime is secular. I think the regime is extremist. No Syrian opposition could work with Assad. We need to recognise that. I cannot remember the figures off the top of my head, but those killed by Daesh are far fewer than those killed by the regime. To depict Assad as somehow a victim of other groups operating, or that he is there at the behest of his father's seniors, is just pure fantasy. He has been prosecuting this war now for five years. We heard questions about why Russian fighter jets would bomb hospitals. We know that the Assad regime has been clearing civilian areas and brutalising society for the past five years. It has been hitting civilians in order to create terror but, at the same time, to offer security, ironically.

The one thing, having written my PhD on Syria a long time ago, that is common to this regime and its forebear—his father—is that the Assads have proven to be very effective at waiting for politics to turn and to change. Assad senior made a very interesting and difficult decision in 1990 by committing 15,000 troops to the US-led coalition that moved in to evacuate Kuwait. This was anathema to the regime years before. The regime is very good at waiting for the circumstances on the ground to shift and change. We saw that with the assassination of Hariri. We saw the Syrians withdraw their troops from Lebanon in a short space afterwards, but they still hung in there and continued to play that game. Part of the narrative—and this is one that the Russians have been pushing too—is that if you take

out the opposition, exactly as Lina said, your choice is this secular regime or ISIS, which is the bogeyman of the West. Assad is very cleverly presenting us with a binary choice.

Colonel de Bretton-Gordon: I have said what I have said about Assad already. I think that he is the issue to most people. They hold him responsible. I won't go on, but the area that I do know very well is the chemical weapons piece. I have been into Syria, collected evidence and investigated. There are a lot of conspiracy theories that it was various other groups, or that it was Turkey—we are talking about the main chemical attack in Ghouta. I have seen the evidence. I have collected evidence in Syria from the chlorine barrel bombs attacks in Kafr Zita, Tal Hermez and Sarmin, and I have no doubt at all in my mind that the regime is responsible for the chlorine barrel bombs attacks and the sarin attack that killed 1,500 in Ghouta. Daesh are now using chemical weapons extensively as well, but the regime are responsible, without a shadow of a doubt in my mind, for that. So on the conspiracy theory side, I cannot agree with anything that the good reverend has said, I am afraid.

Dr Khatib: I just want to add to this. Assuming that the Assad regime succeeds in eliminating the moderate opposition as we know it, the individuals themselves, as I said, will either join groups like Daesh out of necessity or transform into gangs. They are not going to just sit at home. So we are going to have instability of the kind witnessed in Iraq for many years if that happens.

The other issue is that, as the Iraq situation shows, the only meaningful way to fight Daesh is if you have buy-in from the local population. If Assad prevails and he alienates people even more by eliminating the opposition and empowering Daesh, where is he going to get the locals needed in order to fight Daesh? This is not going to happen.

So the only meaningful way for any regime or Government in Syria to fight extremism is to engage the local population, especially the Sunni population. If this population has been pushed to embrace Daesh or it is still resentful against the regime, you are not going to succeed. Assad's army now has been reduced to only a fifth of its former capacity, so even if this army wanted to take these other areas that ISIS now occupies, it does not have the capacity to do so. And even if Russia stepped in and sent troops, we all know that foreign troops are not able to hold areas long-term. The only long-term way is to have engagement from the local population. So what Assad is doing—the strategy he has been using—may only work in the short term, but it carries the seeds for long-term instability of a more complex kind.

Q283 Richard Benyon: Coming back to the question of chemical weapons, could the UK be doing more to protect non-combatants and allies in defence against chemical weapons wherever they come from, whether Daesh or regime forces?

Colonel de Bretton-Gordon: Without going into too much detail on a subject that I probably know a little bit too much about, I think one of the things about chemical weapons is that the psychological impact is far worse than the physiological impact. That is why I think they are being used extensively by both the regime and Daesh in both Syria and Iraq.

Less than 0.5% of casualties in the First World War were attributed to chemical weapons, but it is synonymous with chemical weapons. The figure is similar in Syria and Iraq. I was

in our main hospital in Bab al-Hawa in, I think, October 2014. We had got about 30 doctors from across Syria and I was teaching them how to set up their hospitals to deal with chemical casualties and also to teach the civilians to avoid becoming casualties because they have no protective equipment. Five ambulances arrived from a barrel bomb attack in Aleppo in the afternoon, with 27 children in them. Most were in a shocking state and sadly most of them died. I said to the 32 doctors I was with, "Look, please go and deal with these casualties. We will pick this up tomorrow" and they said, "No, Hamish, our teams here will deal with it. That is what they are there for." I said, "I just don't understand," and they said, "We can hide from bombs and bullets, but we can't hide from gas." That was the sort of hopelessness.

Of course, the Middle East is synonymous with chemical weapons. The Iran-Iraq war—it was the 28th anniversary of Halabja only last week where many thousands of people were killed by chemical weapons. That is why it has such an impact, and Daesh are now making their own chemical weapons in Raqqa and Mosul and using them very effectively against the Peshmerga, and against civilians in Taza, near Tikrit, only last week as well.

What more can we do? A lot of it is education: trying to take the fear out of it. I was near Tikrit with the Iraqi army in April last year and in the assault into Tikrit they came across hundreds of improvised explosive chlorine devices, which were slowing them down—again, they had no protective equipment. I was trying to explain to them that, actually, it was much better that Daesh planted improvised explosive devices with chlorine, because in effect they were blowing up the chlorine—that is how you destroy it anyway—rather than shape charges to blow up vehicles. But that was not really understood; what had the impact was the fact that it was chemical weapons.

Similarly, Daesh is now making what we call dusty mustard, which is a home-made mustard agent—mustard is a blister agent that was used in the First World War, and at Halabja and elsewhere. It is horrific, but it incapacitates rather than kills. Daesh are now making this duty mustard out of all the precursors that they can get hold of from the oil industry. They are putting it into rockets, mortars and 122 mm shells and are firing it at the Peshmerga. It is having an impact because again, the Peshmerga do not have protective capability per se, and that is slowing them down. One thing I am helping with is trying to say, "Well, actually, it is just not that bad." This might sound completely counterintuitive but if somebody is firing an 88 mm mortar that is full of dusty mustard, it is going to have a lot less impact than 3 kg of high explosive would, so it is an educative thing, I think.

The real concern, looking at the attacks we have seen recently—particularly in Brussels today—is whether the cleanskins, sleepers and jihadis that we know across Europe have the capability to replicate something like this outside Iraq and Syria. I think that would have a huge psychological impact, unless we make sure that we are fully aware of it and plan for it, so that people understand that the chemical weapons that are being used are not as bad physiologically as they are psychologically—I probably have not answered your question very well.

Q284 Richard Benyon: No, that was a very full answer, thank you. Very briefly, on a wider issue, should a transitional body be agreed, which countries will have the most influential roles in engaging with that body and any future Syrian Government, particularly in the context of what you are saying about the West's lack of intervention and a lack of trust that must exist among many moderates, if I may use that word, about our role?

Colonel de Bretton-Gordon: Perhaps I will answer briefly and let the experts come in, who probably have a more realistic view than I do. Having been involved in the Gulf wars and elsewhere, I was very disappointed when we did not get more engaged in Syria—when you think Syria is but a three and a half hour flight from here and we have seen all the refugees coming across. Had we acted post-Ghouta, would we be in the same position as we are now? In my opinion, our position would not be as bad. We lost a lot of credibility. People lost a lot of hope, and we are where we are.

To me, the ceasefire is a really good thing and the UK still has a tremendous part to play in the Middle East. People still recognise our diplomatic capabilities and our military capabilities. Although we have never really been very closely aligned to Syria militarily, of course, in Iraq we very much are, and especially with the Peshmerga and the Kurds, who I think have a very important part to play in the future. Stand fast the Russians, the Iranians and all the rest of it, I hope that the UK will take a much more active and leading part in the future of Syria than it perhaps has hitherto.

Dr Quilliam: There is such a wide range of players that are going to be influential—Qatar, Turkey, Saudi Arabia—in holding part of the opposition to account. Russia and Iran—it is hard to see how they are not going to continue to influence how that transitional Government comes into being and what follows. Obviously, the US is going to play a role. Those are the key players. The UK has a role to play, and that's great, but I very much see it as a secondary role. You essentially have two blocs that the US would maybe sit somewhere in between, probably pulling that transitional Government in different directions and probably compromising what it can do.

Q285 Jim Shannon: I just want to return to the point about the reverend who gave an opinion about secular Syria, and to back that up, because it is important. You have a very strong opinion on that, Dr Quilliam, and I just feel that it is important to have this on the record. No matter what happens, 600,000 Christian Syrians have left Syria because of the threat of Daesh, which gave them a "convert or die" ultimatum, so they felt that they had to leave and that they could no longer stay there.

Yet in Syria as it was before, they had an opportunity to express themselves and freedom of religious belief. I say with great respect to you that that is the evidence from people who have left—they have told us that. This afternoon in Westminster Hall, there will be a debate on the persecution of Christians and other religious minorities under Daesh. Let us be quite clear: Daesh have threatened the very freedom and religious liberties of Christians, and the gentleman you referred to is an example of that. Every one of those 600,000 Syrian Christians who left Syria because of Daesh are clear: they could live in Syria as it was before, but in this one they cannot.

Dr Quilliam: Syria had been a secular state for a long period of time, there is no doubt about that. When I say that President Assad is not secular, what I mean is that he has instrumentalised sectarianism to further his goal. That does not mean that the state structures were not secular—within the context of the region they were very secular, for a set of reasons, primarily because he wanted to ensure that the majority Sunni population were not pulling the levers of power. So minority groups had privileged access to the state structures, and that helped the state manage its internal affairs fairly well. I am not saying that the state as it is is extreme; it is secular, but the policies through which Assad has instrumentalised sectarianism, particularly since the conflict, mean that he is also

responsible. Daesh is responsible, of course, for making threats and carrying them through, but he also shares responsibility. He has heightened tensions and played on the fears of minority groups and other sectarian groups. He has used that to great effect for his own purpose.

Q286 Jim Shannon: The 600,000 Christians fled Syria primarily because they were threatened with "convert or die". Let us be quite clear about where the threat comes from. It does not come from President Assad, it comes from Daesh.

Dr Quilliam: But let us remember how many other Syrians have left the country as well. There are 1.4 million in Lebanon, 1.6 million in Syria, 2 million in Turkey, and however many million displaced. This is a consequence of the regime's actions. We should not really be comparing numbers and saying that the regime has scared away or threatened more than Daesh. It is the sum total that we should be concerned with, but the regime has killed far more Syrians than Daesh has.

Dr Khatib: Can I just add one point? What you are saying is very true—Daesh has little tolerance, not just for Christians but even for Sunni Muslims who do not abide by its own ideology. But the issue is, how did Daesh come about in the first place? Neil is talking about the instrumentalisation of sectarianism, and Daesh is partly the product of the regime's strategy, because at the very beginning of the conflict it was Assad who let out of jail al-Qaeda operatives who went on to form Daesh. The reason why he let them out of prison, famously out of Sednaya, was that he wanted to show the world that he was not oppressing an uprising but fighting extremists who were risking destabilising the country. I do not think that even back then, Assad thought that this would lead to the creation of this entity that is Daesh, but that is what happened.

The regime's activities throughout the last five years have enabled Daesh to a degree, because first of all there are some links between certain members of the Syrian intelligence community and Daesh in certain areas of Syria, which Daesh has used as a tool whenever it has advanced in areas where moderates exist among the opposition. Second of all, as I said, Daesh is useful for the regime, because Assad can use it to do exactly what you are saying, which is to say to the world, "Look what Daesh is doing to the Christians. I am the one who saves Syria's minorities." This actually plays right into the hands of Assad, so Assad has actually been indirectly using the Christians to bolster his own position. He is only using them as a tool, and this is exactly what he wants us to think—that the Christians are fleeing Daesh because he is their only saviour. But the reality, as I said, is much more complex than that.

Chair: We must move on. James Gray.

Q287 Mr Gray: Without stretching credibility or asking for too great a leap in imagination, can I ask you to cast your minds forward to a time when the civil war in Syria is effectively finished—it might happen, you never know—and when Daesh has moved on elsewhere? There will then be a huge problem, which is vast numbers of heavily armed groups of every possibly kind, description and type. Is there a role that the West and in particular the UK can play in disarming, pacifying and re-establishing security? What will then happen? Duncan, you referred—sorry, Hamish. I knew it was Scottish. You referred a moment ago to the role that we can play post-civil war. What can we do?

Colonel de Bretton-Gordon: It has to be part of a comprehensive strategy. Hopefully what you are saying will come to fruition, but unless it is a comprehensive strategy in military, political, diplomatic and humanitarian terms, we are just going to repeat some of the mistakes that we have made elsewhere. When it comes to creating that peaceful coexistence within Syria, we need somebody to do it. I think there is a role for the UN. For the West or NATO to get involved—I would hope that those countries will be involved, and I hope the UK would lead and support UN-type action. Militarily, to bring about that sort of de-escalation—collecting weapons and everything else—I think the United Nations has a role to play, and I hope that the UK would front up and do the sort of things that we do incredibly well.

Q288 Mr Gray: Sure. Nina, a moment ago you said something about gangs. You said that they were not in Daesh or the anti-Assad forces. Are these people gangsters, hoodlums and roughnecks? Are they capable of pacification, or are we going to see a wild west for the next 50 years in Syria?

Dr Khatib: I mentioned that because it is what has happened in Iraq to a degree. As the UK, we can play a very important role in DDR.

Q289 Mr Gray: What is DDR?

Dr Khatib: It is demobilisation, disarmament and reintegration.

Mr Gray: I thought you meant Deutsche Democratic Republic.

Dr Khatib: We should start now with understanding the dynamics that would answer your question at the beginning, when you asked, "Can you give us a list of these groups?" As I said, the conflict has become very localised. The more research and fieldwork I do, the more convinced I am that unless we understand how variations operate in different areas in Syria, we are not going to be able to have meaningful disarmament and reintegration of the fighters, because the dynamics that lead different people to join different groups vary by area. It is not a one-size-fits-all model. If we do not do that, we may end up with the gangster type, which I hinted can happen as a consequence. This is something that we can apply through looking at previous DDR processes, perhaps in Africa and certain conflict countries. We have to work with Syrians on the ground to understand the local variations.

Colonel de Bretton-Gordon: One of the big issues, and the thing that concerns me whenever I go to Syria, is not necessarily Daesh or anything else, but the bandits. As you have described, there are a huge number of bandits—people who are trying to scrape a living in Syria because they have got no food, aid, water and so on. When I have been in Syria, sadly some of our hostages have been killed by Daesh, but they are people who have been lifted by the bandits and moved on for a few thousand dollars. By the time they get to Raqqa the ransoms are up to hundreds of millions of dollars. Sadly, some of our NATO allies have been paying those kidnap ransoms, which is why we are in the position we are in.

These bandits are doing that because they have no other option. As part of the comprehensive strategy, the humanitarian bit—the aid bit—is so important, because when peace breaks out, which is when the ceasefire hopefully becomes something more meaningful, we have to give these people hope and a chance for a future. We do not want

to get rid of the Iraqi army, as we did in 2003. I agree that the Syrian army, properly led and directed, has a part to play, but we need massive amounts of support to roll in to help these people. The big campaign for Mosul, which is absolutely critical to defeat Daesh in Iraq, is just about to happen or is happening at the moment. I really hope that their thousands of trucks and tonnes of food aid, and reconstruction and control, are ready to roll into Mosul afterwards, particularly so we do not disfranchise the Sunnis again. I am not sure that is the case.

Q290 Mr Gray: Picking up on a detail which is not central to the question we are discussing, when you say that the assault on Mosul is just about to happen or is happening, do you have any evidence that that is the case? We were in Iraq a couple of weeks ago, and all our evidence was that it simply will not happen in anything like the foreseeable future.

Colonel de Bretton-Gordon: Again, you have been to Iraq more recently than I, so you probably know better. All the preparation for the battlefield, as one would term it from a military perspective, is ongoing at the moment, and that is obviously a key strategic aspiration. You could talk to lots of people who would give you lots of different ideas. Yours is probably more valid than mine.

Q291 Mr Gray: That is only one side. Let us stick with the sunlit uplands of when the civil war is ended and we are tidying up. What has then happened to Daesh? Does it then leave Syria, as it has left elsewhere before? In other words, are we allowing ourselves to focus our attentions on the civil war in Syria and on effective collapse in Iraq, when actually we should be focusing on defeating Daesh wherever it may be? It may well be in Kenya, Uganda or Brussels. Are we in danger of conflating two huge problems: the civil war and disturbances in Syria, which will be with us for a long time to come, and the war against Daesh, which might, at least theoretically, be a separate thing?

Dr Khatib: I think Daesh is the symptom of a problem that has evolved into becoming its own problem. I would always start with addressing Daesh in Syria and Iraq through the process that I described earlier, which is that the transitional government has to be our key goal. Only then can you unify the army, give the third way to the people on the ground and give them a viable alternative to Daesh. Then you can fight the remnants of Daesh and other extremists militarily, with the support of the international community. In an ideal world, this is what I hope would happen in Syria.

Once that happens, unfortunately—because as I said, Daesh has now become its own problem—this does not mean that Daesh will be defeated worldwide. Unfortunately, as we can see from Brussels—this was something that came up in my own field work on Daesh, which I have been doing for a number of years—and as my last interviews with Daesh last May showed, their new strategy is engaging in opportunistic attacks outside Syria and Iraq. This is first in order to showcase their power to their potential recruits, and secondly to compensate for any losses that they are incurring in Syria and Iraq. Thirdly, it is attempt at distracting the West, primarily, into focusing on domestic security, so that the West focuses less on Syria and Iraq militarily.

They are doing this because they have a generation-long project that they want to implement. Primarily in Syria, even more so than Iraq, they are counting on the continuation of the conflict, because then they can try to set deep roots in Syria and

establish their state. So, basically, if we defeat Daesh in Syria, we will still have this new al-Qaeda of cells around the world engaging in activities.

Q292 Mr Gray: Your thesis is quite an interesting one. It is not the one that I was vaguely tinkering with, namely that if we defeat Daesh in Iraq and Syria, that will do us no good because they will still exist in Libya and elsewhere around the world. Your thesis is that their aim remains establishing the caliphate in Iraq and Syria, and that these other things are diversionary tactics or symptoms that are not central to the Daesh agenda.

Dr Khatib: They are not; they are just tactics at the moment. But the risk is that, the more we leave it, the more we risk cultivating a viable new al-Qaeda internationally that will become the serious threat that—

Q293 Mr Gray: Do you think that view is widely spread among academics—that somehow it is the caliphate in Iraq and Syria that matters, and that the other outpourings of Daesh elsewhere in the world are symptoms rather than central? Even if that were true, I'm not sure how we'd know it.

Dr Khatib: I know it from talking to them. When I was doing my field work on Daesh and talking to them about Libya—the last conversation was last May—they said that there are definite links between Daesh in Syria and Daesh in Libya. Those links go all the way back to 2011, when the conflict became militarised and Libyan rebels went to Syria to train Syrian rebels. Now, it's the reverse wave: these people have come from Syria to train people in Libya. However, they do not have deep roots in Libya. The reason why they are succeeding to a degree in Sirte is because it is an area where the Qadhadhfa tribe exists. It is an area that was ignored in the transition in Libya. It is a bit similar to the de-Ba'athification process in Iraq that resulted in the old guard's grievances. A similar thing is happening in Libya. Their strength in Libya is primarily because of that, which means that to sort out Daesh in Libya, you need a political compromise for the country, and sadly we're not anywhere near that.

Q294 Mr Gray: Sure. I want to stick with the really simple point—it is extremely interesting; I hadn't heard this before—which is the notion that, somehow or other, Daesh elsewhere is not Daesh at all, really. It is a symptom, an offshoot or a spore flying in the wind, and central to the whole thing is simply Iraq, Syria and the caliphate. That would be almost encouraging, because it would mean that if we defeat Daesh finally—if we destroy Mosul and Raqqa, let's say, and if we destroy Daesh in Iraq and Syria—it will also disappear elsewhere. Is that a reasonable idea?

Dr Khatib: It will not disappear, but I think it's a matter of timing. If we manage to destroy Daesh in Syria and Iraq soon—let's put it this way—because Daesh remains a strictly hierarchical organisation rather than a franchise, then it will be weakened in general. But if we leave it, then it will become a franchise. Even if we then destroy it in Iraq and Syria, we will end up with these pockets like al-Qaeda, which are decentralised. It's a matter of timing.

Q295 Mr Gray: What do Hamish and Neil think?

Colonel de Bretton-Gordon: First, I am absolutely not an academic, so I don't have that deep understanding. In practical terms, to me the great weakness of Daesh is the fact that

they want to hold ground, which is unlike any other terrorist group we've come across in the recent past. I agree that they want to hold ground primarily in Syria, and that they've been squeezed hard in Iraq, which is why they've gone to some extreme measures.

Because they are fighting conventionally at the moment, however many fighters they have got—20,000 or 40,000—I agree with other military commentators that we can roll them up, for want of a better phrase, relatively easily and straightforwardly. If we do that and defeat Daesh in Iraq and Syria, their reason for being—their caliphate—starts diminishing, so the cleanskins, the sleepers and everybody else conducting attacks in Brussels, Paris and elsewhere will lose a lot of their reason for being. Now, we're not going to get rid of terrorism and we're not going to get rid of Daesh, but without that mothership, I believe they will weaken and diminish. That's why I personally believe, from a military and counter-terrorism perspective, Daesh are defeatable if we get on and do it wholeheartedly, determinedly and soon.

Q296 Mr Gray: You were about to say the same thing.

Dr Quilliam: I have problems with the idea that we can simply defeat and eradicate Daesh. I think we can probably defeat them militarily and spring off part of the international side of it, but the more local, Iraqi side of it—the former Ba'ath—can just melt away into the ether and wait. It is that longevity, that waiting game. If the West goes in, helps to rebuild, has a Marshall plan and supports local governing structures, that may help to mitigate the symptoms returning that will allow Daesh to return, but that's going to require a long-term investment and commitment. No Western Government is going to make that commitment.

Q297 Mr Gray: You agree with the thesis, none the less, that the problem is actually in Iraq and Syria.

Dr Quilliam: Yes.

Q298 Mr Gray: Let's imagine they were eradicated in one way or another—rebuilt and all that. Do you see the caliphate being created in sub-Saharan Africa?

Dr Quilliam: No. Syria and Iraq is the base.

Q299 Mr Gray: And always will be?

Dr Quilliam: Yes.

Chair: Thank you. This has been a very interesting exchange.

Q300 Mrs Moon: I want to be clear about what you are saying. Terrorism exists in other countries. What they are doing is buying into a franchise name, and perhaps some training opportunities, rather than it being an organisation that is so structured and organised that it is moving into other territories. It is using its name. The organisations exist in those other territories, and they are using the Daesh name and the Daesh training facilities, rather than the other way around. Is that right?

Colonel de Bretton-Gordon: To a certain degree. The disciples are going out—the jihadis—and thankfully in this country our very sophisticated security network has hitherto prevented them from having an impact. These cleanskins are undoubtedly, in a

way, being franchised. We always used to talk about al-Qaeda as a franchise, and I am not sure that is exactly the case, but they are being trained and radicalised somehow. In all the stuff they are doing, they are not being provided with the wherewithal to do their horrific events; they are getting it from within their own communities. There is very much that element to it, which again is why, with proper targeting and the sophisticated security capabilities that we certainly have available to us here in the UK and pretty much throughout the NATO countries, it is going to be a long, hard battle, but if we win the battle in Syria and Iraq, it is going to make it that much easier to do it elsewhere around the world. I don't see the caliphate springing up in sub-Saharan Africa or somewhere else, not at this moment.

Q301 Mrs Moon: I think that's the most important message, because we are hearing today from Donald Trump that the US should pull back, that they shouldn't invest in NATO, that they shouldn't invest in redevelopment and schools in other countries, et cetera. It is a simplistic, attractive message that we have to counter. You can't walk away from those problems, or they come to you. I thank you for saying that.

Colonel de Bretton-Gordon: I like the analogy that it is like playing football with only a goalkeeper. It might be effective if you have a brilliant goalkeeper, but if you use the whole team that is out there, you are far more likely to be successful.

Q302 Chair: Is it fair to point out that the extreme Islamist interpretation—the totalitarian ideology—has now been around for the better part of 100 years or so. The message that you are giving us is that it has flared up in the context of the Arab uprisings, which enabled the caliphate to become a focus and a base for it all, and that if you remove the caliphate, the ideas will still continue. You won't defeat the ideology, but the ideology will be capable of being suppressed and contained in the way that it was before the uprisings. Is that a reasonable summary?

Colonel de Bretton-Gordon: I think so.

Dr Khatib: Yes, the ideology has been useful for groups like Daesh. They use it as a tool. It will always be there, but it depends on whether someone is using it, what for and, most importantly, what conditions are pushing people to want to use it in the first place. That goes back to what you are talking about, which is the need for social inclusion and the need to address the social, political and economic dynamics that lead people to Daesh in the first place.

Dr Quilliam: I agree that there has to be an alternative. There has to be something else that is compelling, a different model of governance. Looking at Syria, that is very challenging.

Q303 Chair: What I have in mind—obviously comparison is always a bit dangerous—is that with the downfall of the communist ideology in Russia, although the ideology of Marxism is still out there and still has its attractions to certain groups, the loss of the central location where it was being put into practice had a massively suppressing effect. That is just a thought to conjure with.

We are coming towards the end. I have two more colleague who need to come in, and the first is Jim Shannon.

Q304 Jim Shannon: Hamish, you mentioned beyond the conflict and the peace process—hopefully, that is where we are going, but only time will tell just how successful that will be. Whatever that process, what should be role of the UN? Should peacekeepers be deployed, and if so, should some of the United Kingdom's own troops be involved?

Colonel de Bretton-Gordon: I agree entirely. We need a comprehensive plan, and the first bit is the military piece. If we defeat Daesh and the ceasefire continues in Syria, we need a military presence—in my opinion ideally that should be a United Nations presence—to maintain that peace and to start to establish law and order and to re-establish the role of government. I hope that Britain is involved because we are particularly good at such activity and we can certainly add to it. On the back of that, diplomacy, politics and the humanitarian piece will win the ultimate battle—the future. From my experience in Afghanistan and Iraq, I believe that they are not the same as Syria, and whatever the Chilcot report says, whenever it is published, it will give lessons from a very different era. In 2013, we did not get as engaged as I would have liked because we were harking back too much to Iraq 2003, but they were two very different situations.

The humanitarian piece is absolutely fundamental. It is a great disappointment to me that I was never in Syria before the war, because everyone tells me what a beautiful, marvellous country it was. Now, 70% of the country has been razed to the ground. There is very little electricity or food and water. In one of the towns, Islamic State are selling wheat at $400 dollars a tonne; Assad and the regime are selling it at $200 a tonne. I have met an enterprising American Syrian who is trying to get it in and give it away. That is having a profound effect. We cannot underestimate the dreadfulness of Syria. There are still bits of Damascus that could be anywhere in the world, but I understand that Aleppo—and I have not been there for two or three years—the second city of Syria, is completely flattened.

People do not have anywhere to live. It is simple things like accommodation. I have been through the refugee camps in north-west Syria, where a million people are living in abject poverty. They are getting as much food as people can squeeze across the border, but there is no running water, and children, who have no education, are growing up there. That is what we must turn round. Once we have got the military piece sorted out and we have got some sort of comprehensive peace on the ground, I hope that we start to build the local governance.

Politically, we will go forward to some sort of elections in the next 14 months or so, as long as they are free and fair. I have on my desk "Seven Pillars of Wisdom", which I am re-reading, and one of Lawrence's key things was not to over-engineer the solution. A local solution that is good enough is probably a lot better than a perfect solution that is dreamed up—that is probably the wrong word—that is worked together in London, New York, Paris and so on. We must accept compromises. Unless it is all wound together and backed up, those hundreds of thousands of Syrian doctors whom we want to go back to Syria, and who want to go back will only go if they can see something within the next year or two. We need to invest in that. I know that through DFID we have invested £1 billion in Syria in the past few years. I must say, however, that, for a lot of very good reasons, not a lot of that money has gone to Syria. It is providing a huge amount of support to all the refugees outside Syria, but I hope that we can then focus that money in Syria, because a £1billion would go a heck of long way towards creating that "new Syrian democratic country" that we hope to see. That will only be possible as a result of a comprehensive

plan, which I hope is led by the UN. Surely now that we have seen that Putin has not vetoed every UN Security Council and seems to have a really important vested interest, we can convince him to support it. By doing that, if Mr Trump does become President later this year, that is something that the Americans should be able to support as well.

Q305 Jim Shannon: One thing I learned from my Middle East visit was the alliances that different groups have—the unholy alliances. They are in bed, metaphorically speaking of course, with strange bedfellows. Israelis are in bed with certain groups. Sunnis and Druze and Shi'a are also intermingling, and so on. Some of the greatest co-operation has been between Iran and Russia. It would have been almost unbelievable 10 years ago, but today we find them in a spirit of co-operation militarily and physically on the ground in Syria. Also they have the port in the Mediterranean and the military base in Syria—probably the two strategic things that they are after. I am wondering what that means for the rest of the region—a co-operation between two of the unholiest of unholy people, Iran and Russia?

Colonel de Bretton-Gordon: I am sure that Neil and Lina will have a better explanation. Talking to people is better than not talking to them, and we have had a lot of challenges with the Iranians and the Russians. But one thing we all seem to agree on is the need to destroy and defeat Daesh. With the dreadfulness in Syria, we saw that Putin could impose on Assad to get rid of his chemical weapons—or at least most of them—in 2013, and there is a ceasefire now, which the Russians, the Iranians, ourselves and the Americans are all agreed on. Although it sounds axiomatic, there appears to be some common ground, and hopefully it is something we can build on.

I know that there have been some comments recently about how we should be negotiating and talking to Daesh. To me, that is to completely misunderstand the situation. When I was in Baghdad recently I was told by Iraqi army generals about when Daesh came into Ramadi last year. They sent some people in and said, "Look, in a week's time, we're coming to Ramadi. If there are any soldiers here, or fighting-age males, we are going to chop their heads off." They walked in a week later, without a fight, and to any males they found, they did exactly that. These are not people you can negotiate with, but actually the rest of the international coalition against Daesh is a positive thing, and maybe it will lead to other things as well. Life is never perfect and we do not necessarily choose our bedfellows, as it were, but I think T. E. Lawrence would look down and say, "That's the way it has got to be if we want to move forward."

Q306 Douglas Chapman: Your ordeal is almost over. This is the last question. You have referred to the UN quite a bit in answer to some of the questions—certainly the discussions we had with the UN recently in Iraq—and the five strands of activity that it is trying to deliver. It has certainly struggled to deliver on that first strand. We perhaps need to emphasise a lot more the confidence that you have in the West and the UN coming together with a plan for the future of the region.

What do you think the UK can do alone to reduce the likelihood of conflict in the region? What can we do as a wider coalition? Closer to home, we had a Budget last week, and I was just reading some of the detail today. We are seeing quite substantial cuts to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. What impact will that have on our ability to understand the region, not just in Iraq but through Syria, to help and assist, to come to the right conclusions and to deliver the right solutions?

Dr Khatib: The first thing is to widen the network of people from whom we get advice on Syria. One of my concerns is that sometimes the UK policy community can become complacent and talk to just a handful of people, which risks perpetuating some of the dominant discourses about Assad or about the way forward. We should widen the network of voices. Greater diversity of input from people with knowledge of what is happening on the ground is very important.

Beyond that, I still think that we are well respected among the Syrians. There are things we can do. Unfortunately, the UK seems to wait for the US to give it the green light about taking a big political role, which is something that bothers me. However, we can still play an important role in military co-ordination, supporting civil society in Syria and supporting local governance initiatives. This is much needed. Regardless of what the solution looks like, supporting local governance is important for holding the country together.

Colonel de Bretton-Gordon: I am no diplomat, and no academic either, but I have been really impressed in my last four years in the region by the high regard for UK diplomacy. That is where we have a marginal advantage over organisations with deeper pockets in military and humanitarian terms. We have a key role to play. We lost a lot of credibility in the Middle East post-Ghouta in 2013, and we need to rebuild that. From a military perspective, we are helping out in the region. I think we should do more. We have some great capabilities, particularly in specialist areas, be it air or special forces, which could make a significant difference.

I have just come back from Australia. The Australians have an effort similar to ours in Syria and Iraq. They are militarily a great deal smaller than ourselves, and they are a 15-hour flight from Damascus while we are only a three-hour flight. If it was pro rata, we should be doing a bit more. Diplomatically and militarily, we could play a greater role.

Dr Quilliam: I echo Lina's point about local governance. It is a bugbear of mine. I have a mini thesis which I will not go into now—one that is shared by many—that within the region we have a collapse of political authority, central authority, religious authority and authority even within the family. So an implosion is taking place. While it may be hard to fix things at the high levels, there is certainly space to provide support. DFID does a good job of this in and around some of the rebel-held areas in Syria, but also elsewhere around the region. It is lending support to local governance structures, bringing political authority to a much more local level.

Sometimes we have to suspend our expectations as to what local governance might be of itself. If we throw our minds back, in 2006 we saw elections in Gaza. We usually support democratic elections, but when you get a Hamas Government, that becomes uncomfortable. If we are supporting local governance structures, and elections to a local council, there will be times when the complexion of that council does not necessarily align with what we think it should be. We need to reconcile in our minds that we are not always going to get what we want, but if we strengthen local governance, the local population will be better served in terms of local services and representation. That means that organisations such as Daesh or whoever will find it much harder to dislodge the local population.

Cuts to the FCO were mentioned. I should put my hands up. I spent five years in the FCO working across the Middle East in a few capacities. I would always baulk at the idea at the idea of the budget being cut further. As you said, the diplomats are very strong. Their research analysts have a great capability, but I have seen that capacity diminishing over the past five to 10 years. That has a positive knock-on effort for people like Lina and me, because the Foreign Office will come to think tanks and say, "Can you look at this area? What do you think about this? Can you conduct research?" We are the beneficiaries of that, but I don't necessarily think that the reduction in capacity is a good thing for the Foreign Office itself.

Q307 Chair: Just to conclude, would you agree that it has been a fairly consistent tactic of organisations like al-Qaeda and later Daesh to try to suck non-Muslim forces into Muslim lands? That plays to their narrative, and that confrontation seems to have been quite consistent from Afghanistan onwards. If so, is there not a danger that once they are removed from the territory they hold and go underground—into the more traditional terrorist mode that Hamish said they have departed from so unusually, because of the wish to hold ground—it will not just be a question of pouring in lots of aid to a grateful population? Will there not be a risk of non-Muslim forces being targeted by underground terrorist techniques, such as we are all too familiar with from previous interventions? Lina, you are nodding.

Dr Khatib: I agree, because Iraq has shown that. How many Christians remain in Iraq today? Not many, compared with 10 years ago. That is because they are being deliberately targeted. I absolutely agree that any transitional Government that takes over in Syria must not just represent all communities—not on a sectarian basis, but just by being pluralistic and inclusive—but pay special attention to that particular issue, because if we lose the diversity of the Middle East, we lose the Middle East, basically.

Colonel de Bretton-Gordon: I have learned a bit from Putin over the last few months, and his incisive action. To defeat Daesh, we are going to need to put Western forces into Syria to do it in a timely fashion. However, in the long term, it must be Iraqi forces, Peshmerga forces and the Syrian army who provide the security on the ground. I agree that having western forces and non-Muslim forces for any longer than that incisive break-in battle would be counterproductive. We could take a leaf out of Putin's book—do the incisive bit, withdraw and allow the Muslim forces to hold the ground and the UN to provide the peacekeeping and peace-enabling perspective.

Dr Khatib: I may have understood your question differently. When you said non-Muslim, I thought you meant Syrian non-Muslim, meaning the Christians.

Q308 Chair: No, I meant Western.

Dr Khatib: Obviously, not all Syrians are Muslims, so when you said non-Muslim forces or targets, I took it as meaning the non-Muslim—

Q309 Chair: I was talking about the threat that would arise if Western agencies, both civilian and military, came in to try to do a Marshall plan-type operation.

Colonel de Bretton-Gordon: In the Iraq war of 1991, I was a young tank commander. We were in Saudi in September and back home by April, having conducted the battle. There was no longevity to it, which is why I have always thought that while we are looking so

closely at Chilcot, some of the lessons from 1991, and perhaps some of the lessons that Putin has put in front of us, might be more apposite for the future destruction of Daesh and the future of Syria than Iraq in 2003.

Q310 Chair: One of our other witnesses, Dr Afzal Ashraf, calls it boots with wings—or, as I sometimes call it, swoop in and swoop out—but then there is the danger of what you leave behind. A final word from you, Neil?

Dr Quilliam: Swoop in, swoop out, but there has to be a long-term commitment to the reconstruction of the country, and that needs to be demonstrated through not just the boots but lots of other means. That is the key thing. Without that long-term commitment, you leave Daesh and others waiting in the long grass, thinking, "We can hide out here. We can return and take our ground again."

Chair: A very good point on which to finish. This has been a slightly longer session, but that is a measure of the quality of what we were getting. Thank you all very much indeed.