Defence Committee

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

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Dr Julian Lewis (Chair), Mr James Gray, Jim Shannon, Ruth Smeeth, Mr John Spellar, Bob Stewart, Phil Wilson

Questions 311–354

Witnesses: **Richard Atwood**, Director of Multilateral Affairs and Head of New York Office, International Crisis Group, and **Claudia Gazzini**, Senior Analyst, ICG, gave evidence.

Q311 Chair: I would like to welcome our panel to this session of our inquiry into UK military operations in Syria and Iraq. I would like both of our guests today to tell us for the record who they are and who they work for, and perhaps say a very brief word about the report that they have been responsible for compiling recently.

Claudia Gazzini: Hello. First of all, thank you for this opportunity to address you today. I am Claudia Gazzini. I am the senior analyst for Libya at the International Crisis Group. As such, I follow political, security and economic developments in Libya exclusively. I contributed to the International Crisis Group's report "Exploiting Disorder" by feeding into it the analysis on Libya.

Richard Atwood: My name is Richard Atwood. Thank you again for the invitation and the opportunity to present today. As Claudia said, we both work for an organisation called the International Crisis Group. It is a non-governmental organisation based in Brussels, but we have experts in about 40 different countries. We are dedicated to helping countries prevent and resolve deadly conflict, and to stopping people dying in wars. I am the director of our New York office and I represent us at the United Nations. I am one of the lead authors of the report that we are going to discuss, "Exploiting Disorder: al-Qaeda and the Islamic State." My co-author was the deputy Middle East and North Africa director, but, as Claudia says, the report really draws on the expertise that we have across the world. We tried to capture in the findings all that expertise and the long experience of many of our analysts.

Chair: I am going to invite Colonel Bob Stewart to ask a short question before I bring in Ruth Smeeth.

Q312 Bob Stewart: Very short. Who funds you?

Richard Atwood: Just over half of our budget comes from Governments. I can provide a list of Governments, but among the Governments that give us most funding are the Norwegians, the Dutch and the Canadians. Apart from that, we receive funding from foundations, including the Open Society Foundations and the Carnegie Foundation, and we receive some funding from private individuals. We have a budget of something between $18 million and $20 million a year. Again, we are funded about half by Governments and about half by other sources.

Q313 Ruth Smeeth: This question is more for Mr Atwood. We were recently in Iraq. One of the issues that was raised with us by the military was the difference between the military's approach and the political solution, and that the military were getting much further ahead of the politicians and how that would impact their fight against Daesh. I wonder what your view on that assertion would be. Is that actually a credible danger? What is that going to mean in terms of Mosul and Fallujah—whether they are going to get distracted in Fallujah or whether they will move forward to Mosul?

Richard Atwood: It is interesting that people use that expression in Iraq, because that is the expression we use in the report as well. We argue that military operations should be slowed to give a chance for the political strategy to catch up. We root the rise of Islamic State in the recent history of Iraq and Syria—particularly Iraq. We go back to the Iraq invasion and the policies adopted in the aftermath of that invasion that left many Sunnis marginalised. But as important as that, and relevant to your question, was the aftermath of the awakening—the tribal revolt against al-Qaeda in Iraq, the precursor to Islamic State—in which many Sunni tribesmen rose up against al-Qaeda with the expectation that they would receive a greater stake in the Iraqi state. That did not happen, as many of you know, during Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's second term. Instead, many of those involved in the awakening were excluded, or even targeted, and the marginalisation of Sunnis continued during Nouri al-Maliki's second term. That did two things. Not only did it deepen Sunni marginalisation in Iraq, but it undermined many Sunni leaders who had gambled on political participation. It widened the gap between many Sunnis in Iraq—particularly younger Sunnis—and their elites. It is that gap that Islamic State has been able to exploit, partly after regrouping in Syria.

What we argue in the report is that taking back territory is clearly important. Part of the allure of Islamic State, particularly for foreign fighters, rests on its ability to project success. That is clearly part of its imagery and part of its allure for people travelling to join up, so taking back territory is important. It is also important because of the way that Islamic State is behaving towards some people in the areas it controls, particularly, of course, the Yazidis.

It is important on a number of fronts, but taking back territory should be done in a way that lays conditions for something sustainable afterwards, particularly addressing the two dynamics that I talked about: first, Sunni marginalisation, and second, dynamics within the Sunni community, which are almost as important. The territory needs to be taken back in a way that addresses Sunni marginalisation but also lays the foundation to reconnect Sunnis with their elites, or allows Sunnis to build a new political identity or political project that is an alternative to Islamic State.

What we have seen from information we have in areas that have been retaken from Islamic State—if you talk to US officials or officials in Baghdad they do not lay out the strategy

like this—is that when you look at its component parts from below, it essentially involves warning residents to leave areas, which is very much what happened in Ramadi, very heavy bombardment to weaken Islamic State's grip on those areas, and then a patchwork of different armed forces advancing: some Shia forces, some Sunni, some Iraqi counter-terrorism units and others, advancing to take back territory.

Most areas, Ramadi in particular but others as well, have been largely destroyed in the name of saving them. Areas that are not destroyed are very heavily mined. I think the idea is that these areas will then receive reconstruction aid, and through this reconstruction aid, Sunni leaders that abandoned those areas will regain their legitimacy. We question whether that strategy is going to work.

Mosul is a city that is much more complicated than Ramadi, because of its geostrategic significance and the fact that many of the forces that would take it have their own interests that they will be looking to protect. I do not think Mosul operations are going to happen any time soon in any case, but what we argue in the report is that taking back territory without winning over the population is not a victory. Taking back territory needs to be done in a way that also wins over the population.

Q314 Chair: Sorry. Can I just come in on that question? I do not quite understand how you can possibly win over a population before you have taken the territory. Are you simply saying that taking back territory and then failing to win over the population is obviously to be avoided? You surely cannot do much with the population until you have got them out from under the control of IS?

Richard Atwood: Islamic State has been different in different places. Dynamics are very local in different places, and Islamic State has profited from dynamics within the Sunni community, which is very similar to what the Taliban does and to what al-Shabaab does in Somalia. It picks on local disputes or problems and backs the weaker side in them. It looks at generational struggles and backs younger leaders against older leaders. It has looked to reinstate the interests of classes whose interests or livelihoods were damaged after the Iraq invasion. It quite clearly behaves terribly, and it uses enormous amounts of brutality and force to control territory, but in addition to that it has weaved together—

Q315 Chair: Sorry. I'm just trying to get to the point. I'm not hostile to your line; I'm just trying to understand it. Are you saying that there are things that need to be done before you physically try to take back the territory, and if so, what are they?

Richard Atwood: Yes. I would say more outreach and more building. I think there are things on a national level that can be done, such as further pressure to guarantee Sunnis greater representation in the national-level Government, but I also think there are things, and again, you would have to take apart different areas, because it is different in different areas, but more efforts to win over the population—

Q316 Chair: So you are saying that we need to send some sort of signal to the captive populations that are currently under IS or Daesh control before trying to retake the territories? Is that your thesis?

Richard Atwood: I would say that is part of it, as is having a clear plan to avoid reprisals afterwards and a clear plan for what comes next, in terms of governance and security. We

haven't seen this. Again, we are not against military operations. We recognise that is a central part of the strategy. What we haven't seen is, exactly as you say, the political strategy keeping up with the military strategy.

Q317 Ruth Smeeth: Tied into that, following on from a point that you touched on, are landmines. In Ramadi, we are talking of a military use of mines. They are going to take, on a good projection, nine months to remove. There are political challenges around that when the population is displaced. You open a fridge in a house and you are blown up. So the process is going to take months and months. Specifically, what do you think they should be doing that they are not doing now? When you have got those tangible things on the ground, outreach is a word, not a reality. I don't disagree with you at all. I just don't know what tangible things they are not doing that, given the climate, would be so easy to ensure, except at a regional level.

Richard Atwood: Certainly, at regional level, absolutely, and certainly at national level. I think it depends. Different parts of the country are different. I am not our Iraq expert. For more specific answers I would go back to our Iraq expert and send something in writing to you. It is unlikely that something like the awakening will happen again, because of the way that the awakening was portrayed, but the principle has to be the same: community by community gradually winning over populations that are in Islamic State's control.

Q318 Ruth Smeeth: Okay. Can I move on to Daesh itself? There are reports that they have lost three of their senior military leaders and, therefore, that has undermined their potential military strength. What are your views on that and have you heard anything more concrete?

Richard Atwood: No, we haven't. There has been a very heavy campaign of killing Islamic State commanders. The degree to which that has an impact on their military capability, we don't know yet. Usually with movements, particularly a well-organised movement like Islamic State, killing leaders matters and it can have an impact but they usually have a bench. I imagine that there are many people now within Islamic State who have been fighting for more than a decade. I imagine it is possible to replace those leaders but we don't have good information about the impact of that on its military capability.

Q319 Ruth Smeeth: Do you think we are winning?

Richard Atwood: I think it depends what you mean by winning. Territory has been won back from Islamic State and that's important. Its forward motion and projection of success to some degree has been punctured. That is definitely true.

If you look at the underlying conditions in Iraq and Syria that have allowed it to rise, particularly this question of Sunni marginalisation locally, and the deeper sense of Sunni victimisation across the region, there is no indication that that is getting better. There are specific conditions in Iraq and the wider regional conditions that Islamic State is a part of. In the report we try to root the rise of Islamic State and al-Qaeda's resurgence, which is the other part of the story, in the wider geopolitical context that has allowed both to emerge, as well as the local conditions.

If you look at the wider geopolitical context, you have escalating rivalries between some regional powers. In the report we identify as particularly dangerous the Saudi Arabia-Iran rivalry, but of course you have the rivalry between the Turks and Kurdish armed groups

and to some degree intra-Sunni rivalries as well between Sunni powers. We don't see major improvements on those wider regional fronts. In fact, some of them may be worsening.

When you look at the local conditions, taking back territory is important, as I said. It needs to be done in a way that creates conditions for something lasting afterwards. We should not be lured into thinking that taking back territory necessarily means that the wider conditions that have allowed Islamic State to rise are getting better.

Q320 Mr Gray: To continue with that line for a second. Surely preparing for what comes afterwards and reaching out to local communities is a perfectly obvious part of any military conflict in the history of the world. There is nothing new about that. It would be odd and surprising if we didn't, don't you agree? Given that what we are seeking is a way of advising the Government or taking forward the argument about how to defeat and degrade Daesh, I am not certain that preparing ourselves for what comes afterwards necessarily provides much of an answer, does it?

Richard Atwood: At least there should be an articulation of what comes next.

Q321 Mr Gray: Of course, obviously, yes. That of course is the case, but that does not begin to answer how we get to that point.

Richard Atwood: No, but I think the principle still holds that the way that you take territory has an important implication for what comes next. The way you take territory should not worsen that. There is something we argue in the report. We can look at Iraq specifically, but more broadly, the rise of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, the extending reach or increasing potency of some al-Qaeda affiliates, and the ability of Islamic State to put down roots in other places, are very much linked to the wider upheaval in the Middle East.

Q322 Mr Gray: Let's move on to that. Let's imagine the day came Daesh were viewed to have been "degraded and defeated" in the Prime Minister's expression in Iraq and Syria. Leaving aside what happens on the ground in Iraq and Syria afterwards, which is a separate question, just imagine they had been defeated. What happens then? Do they go to Libya—perhaps we should ask Ms Gazzini—do they set up camp elsewhere, or do they disappear?

Richard Atwood: Claudia can come in on Libya. First of all, I think the defeat of Islamic State is still some way off.

Q323 Mr Gray: I know, but I am talking about when it happens.

Richard Atwood: What it would look like—Islamic State has been ousted from Ramadi, but it is still in areas surrounding Ramadi.

Q324 Mr Gray: Yes, I know all that and I am not talking about that. I am leading you on to a philosophical question, quite honestly. I am imagining a situation—it may be many years away and there may be much blood shed between now and then—where Daesh has been defeated in Iraq and Syria. That is where my question starts. What then happens? Does Daesh then re-establish itself in Libya, Kenya, Tunisia or Brussels or is it defeated?

Richard Atwood: Again, we think the defeat is some way off. You would have to qualify what defeat actually meant.

Mr Gray: Sure, of course, we accept that.

Richard Atwood: All that notwithstanding, the identity of the movement would change, clearly. It is mostly a product of recent Iraqi history. Its leadership is not only but predominantly Iraqi. Much of it belongs to the former loyalists of the former regime. Were it to lose territory in Iraq and Syria, some of the people won't go away. What it would look like or how it would morph into something else is very difficult to predict.

Q325 Mr Gray: That is what I'm asking you to try to do. You are the academics coming here to try to do that. That is precisely what I want you to answer.

Richard Atwood: Is it Hydra-headed, is that the question? It is in some ways, but its core is definitely Iraq and Syria. It would morph into something else because the conditions that have allowed it to rise are not changing. What the identity of the movement would look like is very difficult to say.

Q326 Mr Gray: All right, let's phrase it in a different way. Nazism in Germany and Communism in Russia were both defeated as ideologies when they lost their territory. We took Berlin and Nazism was finished. Communism was finished because it lost much of the Soviet bloc. Is Daesh like Nazism or Communism and will therefore be defeated when they lose their territory? Or is it more like the IRA, the Taliban or al-Qaeda who will survive even if they don't have any territory at all?

Richard Atwood: Losing territory is important but it is more like the latter, quite clearly.

Q327 Mr Gray: So it's not a Caliphate. Caliphate is land, isn't it? Caliphate is an empire.

Richard Atwood: As I said at the beginning, losing its territory is important for its ability to project success. I would be surprised if losing its territory, which again is some way off, led to the entire demise of the movement. It would weaken it.

Q328 Mr Gray: I really want to focus on this. It is very easy to say it would weaken it and it's a long way off and it's very difficult. We know all that. This is an absolutely central question. If Daesh depends on them being a Caliphate—that is, territory, land, empire—if you can then find the military means of removing that land, taking it away from them, to what degree does that destroy the ideology?

The IRA didn't have the land, but they had the ideology. There are lots of terrorist organisations around the world that have no land, but are highly successful terrorist organisations. What I am trying to get at is to what degree would the military defeat of Daesh in Iraq and Syria lead to an end of the troubles, or would it merely spread the troubles elsewhere in the world?

Claudia Gazzini: First, it's important to highlight that we are already seeing engrained in Islamic State propaganda the idea that they will be attacked and therefore they will suffer defeat. They already have, within their own propaganda mechanism, the justification for suffering military defeat, so that is one important factor.

Secondly, what we have seen over this past year is that they really operate in the region in an opportunistic way. It is not so much playing out a preconceived strategy but sending out feelers, sending out people, across the region and seeing where they can set up base. The expansion that they have had in Libya—that is considerable in the sense that they do control a territory of about 200 km along the Libyan coast from Sirte, 200 km east of that—is largely the product of opportunism. Nobody would have thought, two years ago, that they would have managed that, because actually the jihadist strongholds in Libya are elsewhere; they are not Sirte, they are Derna and Benghazi. Libya has had a handful of supporters of tanzim al-dawla (*Islamic State*) already in the Gaddafi-era prisons. There were about 12, 15, that were released during the war but they were from Benghazi, so how is it that Islamic State became stronger in Sirte and not in its traditional strongholds? Because a series of local factors, local crises and animosities have opened doors for them in that specific place.

To answer your question, what is going to happen to this movement if it were to be defeated? I agree with Richard that we have no assurance that there will be an overwhelming military defeat any time soon. What will happen is, they will continue to seek openings for opportunities to consolidate elsewhere in the region. Whether this will be Libya or not, it is premature—

Q329 Mr Gray: I am afraid to say I am going to be rather rude now, uncharacteristically. You really are telling us things that pretty much anyone will know: they are opportunistic, they are finding things here and there, if they haven't got the land, they will of course appear every now and again. You are absolutely avoiding the central philosophical question.

The central philosophical question, which has been put to us by a number of other witnesses very powerfully, is that they depend on having a Caliphate and that is land, that is a territory, that is a state, that is rubbish collectors, that is tax collection, that is structure, government and organisation. That is what Daesh is. If you can therefore destroy that Caliphate—of course there will be people opportunistically letting off bombs here and there, there will be people trying to set themselves up in Sirte and people trying to do things in northern Kenya no doubt—but not only would they be in the same position as very large numbers of other, similar organisations, but they would not actually be Daesh as we know them. The reason that question is so important is that considering what to do about them in Iraq and Syria is dependent on it. If we think and believe that destroying them in Mosul and Raqqa, albeit with huge destruction of buildings and people, will win the war, my God, let's do it. If, on the other hand, all we are going to do is spread it elsewhere in the world, let's not. That is why it is so important.

Claudia Gazzini: I understand your concern. I understand the philosophical dilemma behind it. However, what we see from Libya, for example, is that there are no direct financial ties between the mother Islamic State central region—Syria and Iraq—and Libya. They are equally able to extract taxes and obtain funds through their local businesses in the control of their little local territory there, so they are not being funded from the outside. In the high-ranking officers of this Islamic State affiliate in Libya we are seeing local commanders, so it is not entirely dependent for its survival on what happens in the motherland. What it is dependent on for its survival in this peripheral area is an ongoing state of crisis in the peripheral areas, so as long as there is an ongoing political

and security crisis in Libya we can see Islamic State existing and remaining even if the motherland is defeated.

Richard Atwood: You want us to take a definitive position and all we can say is what it has done in Iraq and Syria is important to its identity and it is important to its allure—it is absolutely important. Will taking back that territory mean the end of Islamic State? Probably not, but it will change its identity and it will certainly weaken it. You want us to take a definitive position. Should that be the focus? Yes it should be the focus, but it should be done in a way that leads to its defeat rather than its re-emergence.

Q330 Chair: We have to move on a bit as we have quite a lot to get through and limited time. Isn't there still a problem? Whereas, for example, what we might call al-Qaeda's unique selling point was its ability to mount spectacular simultaneous operations, once it found more and more of these being stopped by Western intelligence agencies and security services, its star began to wane, which left a vacuum for ISIL-Daesh, and its unique selling point, as James has rightly been emphasising, is the fact that it has actually succeeded in taking hold of territory, but thereby given up the invisibility that we normally regard as a great asset for terrorist groups. Surely the question is: even if they were to be defeated and their territory taken away from them, that would not solve the problem of militant Islam in the Muslim world, would it?

Richard Atwood: No, but again it is important, if it can be done in a way that is sustainable, to take back territory from Islamic State, but that will not solve the problem of militant Islam in the Islamic world, absolutely.

Q331 Chair: Right. Now we want to move on to tap into your expertise and to look at places other than Iraq and Syria. Will you give us a quick pen portrait of which groups you regard as the main Daesh affiliates in other countries—just a sentence or two about each—and tell us whether there is a variation between how closely tied in they are to Daesh? In certain countries, there are militant Islamic groups such as Boko Haram, which probably opportunistically declared its affiliation but was up and running fairly autonomously in the first place, but are there others more closely entwined with ISIL-Daesh and taking direction from it? Will you give us a quick portrait of some of the other countries in the Muslim world that now have significant Daesh affiliates, describing those affiliates according to the criteria that I have just set out?

Claudia Gazzini: I will address Libya, but leave it to Richard to give a quick portrait of the others.

Chair: Would you like to start with Libya? We need to hear from you as well.

Claudia Gazzini: Sure. In Libya, you have two things happening. First, there are local Islamist groups that have in an opportunistic way joined or affiliated with Islamic State, and this is mainly in three areas: in Sirte, where they have territorial control; and in Benghazi and in Derna, where they do not. There is no single strategy of these groups in Libya, because they are very different from one another locally. How they exist and who is part of the groups very much depend on the local conflict that is taking place. For example, in Benghazi these Daesh affiliates have an alliance of convenience with moderate Islamists, so there is a flow of fighters in their ranks between moderate Islamists and Daeshis, and a certain extent of co-ordination. In the other city, Derna, there are al-

Qaeda affiliate groups that are fighting against Daesh, so that is containing their expansion in Derna.

Q332 Chair: Why are they fighting each other? This smacks of People's Front of Judea and People's Judean Front, doesn't it? You would not have thought that there was a lot to choose between them.

Claudia Gazzini: It is a bit like the Nusra-Daesh conflict in Syria. In part, this is a reflection of these tensions in Syria—Libyan fighters who went to Syria and then came back—but another reason why al-Qaeda affiliate groups are fighting Daesh in Derna is the absence of another common enemy. In Benghazi, you have army forces fighting against Islamic State affiliates, al-Qaeda affiliates, moderate Islamists and revolutionary forces in general, which has led all those four different groups—essentially very different—to join ranks. In Derna, there are no attacks by so-called army forces against the other, more moderate Islamists, so this has opened a space for al-Qaeda affiliates and others to fight and engage against Islamic State.

Q333 Chair: So it would just take a few infidel boots on the grounds and they will forget their differences and combine against the invader, presumably.

Claudia Gazzini: There is that risk, but it is not just a matter of infidel boots—that would be simplifying the problem. At the moment, Libya is a country that is still internally very divided, although we do have this UN-backed proto-Government—the Presidential Council—that has arrived in Tripoli. Consensus on that Government is weak throughout the country and there is no united military strategy across the country—no united military force that is backing this Government yet—so there is a risk that foreign military support in the name of counter-terrorism at this stage could not only rally various people against it but undermine a very shaky political reality.

Q334 Chair: Let's assume that in Iraq Daesh gets really heavily pushed back, if not defeated, in territorial terms, and that a combination of Assad's forces and others has a similar effect in Syria, so that the high command, as it were, of Daesh decides, "Right, we're going to decamp to Libya." What sort of reception would they get? Would they be able to carry on as before or would they find themselves just one faction among many?

Claudia Gazzini: Well, the answer to that depends very much on what happens in Libya in the upcoming months or year. My fear is that there is currently a great push to accelerate a political solution for Libya, leaving out groups that are still in opposition to this UN-backed Presidential Council. There is momentum to push and accelerate a military strategy in Libya without having a solid base for it in the country. If that were to take place, we could see a resurgence of fighting between various local groups that are still in opposition to one another.

There are three contending military strategies and military coalitions in Libya at the moment, so if that were to be the scenario, that would open space for the arrival of more Islamic State affiliates or the consolidation of the authority of the Islamic State affiliates that already exist in Libya. For a counter-terrorism strategy to work in Libya, you really need to invest resources and give room and time for Libyan political actors and security actors to bridge alliances and form a united front between them. Otherwise, you will just

be bringing in weapons and technical know-how and giving it to local groups that could still be fighting against each other.

Q335 Chair: Thank you. Before I bring in Phil Wilson, would you just do a very brief survey, Richard? Which do regard as the most dangerous of Daesh's affiliates in other countries, and which do you regard as the ones most closely under their control?

Richard Atwood: I think that, as Claudia said, Libya is the one with the closest ties. In Sinai, you have a mostly Bedouin group, Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, that has declared affiliation to the Islamic State. There appear to be some ties and some exchanging of expertise.

Bob Stewart: Did you say Sinai?

Richard Atwood: That's right. That group brought down the Russian plane late last year.

In Yemen, you have small groups that have declared affiliation to Islamic State. They have been conducting high-profile attacks against the holy sites of the Zaidis—the Houthis. Again, they are looking to try to exploit or deepen the sectarian divisions that Islamic State has profited from in Iraq. In Yemen, these small groups have to contend with a much more powerful al-Qaeda affiliate, which is certainly the predominant jihadist group in Yemen. In parts of eastern Afghanistan, groups—either Taliban splinters, Pakistani Taliban commanders, central Asian militants or some other local groups—and locals have joined Islamic State. It appears to be putting down roots there and, again, there appear to be some ties.

The other big one is Boko Haram, which has declared allegiance. We see Boko Haram as a movement that is very much rooted in the political economy of northern Nigeria and the structural violence there. It has morphed into a regional menace. We do not see that its declaration of affiliation to Islamic State has changed its identity very much. Perhaps its online promotion is a little more polished and some of the statements of its leader, Abubakar Shekau, have changed a little, but the overall identity of the movement doesn't seem to have changed very much.

As Claudia said, Libya is clearly the biggest one, and perhaps then Sinai. With Afghanistan, it depends very much on the direction of the overall conflict and on the direction the Taliban take. All these things are very much rooted in how these movements that have either joined Islamic State or are recruiting in its name interact with the local context. It is very difficult to answer the question without thinking about the wider context that they are trying to exploit.

Chair: That was a very full, concise survey. Thank you very much.

Q336 Phil Wilson: To go back to Libya, what impact do you think the unity Cabinet has had in Libya so far? What do you think it needs to do to take root in Libya to try and rectify things? Will it be a slow process, and are they going to be successful?

Claudia Gazzini: Well, certainly the arrival in Tripoli of seven members of this nine-man body called the Presidential Council is a positive sign. They were welcomed by the residents there. However, that should not make us think that the political transition is easy. As I said, it is still very contested inside Libya.

As you know, there has been no formal approval of the Libyan political agreement and of this Presidential Council and their Cabinet. There has been no formal approval by the Tobruk-based Parliament and we still see opposition from within that Parliament's ranks to this UN-backed process and these new UN-backed politicians. There has also been no formal approval of the agreement and the Presidential Council by the Tripoli-based Government and former Congress. So you still see the Presidential Council being contested by Libya's two major political institutions.

I think it is essential, for the Presidential Council to be able to rule and extend its authority over the country, to actually get some form of formal backing—vote—by these institutions. They need to bring these institutions on board, but it is a matter not only of institutions, but of support across the country. They certainly are supported by people in Tripoli, Misrata and western Libya, but they do not enjoy so much support in the east of the country for various reasons. In the east, there are people who support the local military commander, Khalifa Haftar, who is opposed to this project. They also resent the fact that the Presidential Council has arrived in Tripoli without a formal vote of endorsement from the Parliament, so there is tension across the country.

Most important, this future Government does not have a coherent security strategy, in the sense that its arrival in Tripoli has been possible thanks to the last-minute co-option of local armed groups in Tripoli. These are few and controversial in and of themselves, so we still see armed groups opposed to it outside Tripoli, in the periphery. This Government seem to be relying on local military actors across the country—in Misrata and Tripoli, on some commanders in Benghazi and some commanders in the Ajdabiya area—but there is still no structural unity between these forces. One of the problems of the whole political process backed by the UN over the past year and a half is that it has been entirely political and there has been no parallel track for military arrangements and security arrangements—so, a security dialogue track. This is where we find ourselves, with political leaders coming into Tripoli without a solid security backing behind them.

Then of course, the third challenge that this Government face is the economic challenge, because the country is coming out of a deep economic crisis. The projected deficit for 2016 is $25 billion. At the moment, the country is only exporting 300,000 barrels of oil a day compared with 1.6 million in the past. The good sign is that Siraj, the PM-designate, has been able to make agreements with the central bank of Tripoli and the National Oil Corporation in Tripoli, so there is an institutional backing for this Prime Minister-designate, but as I said, the security forces across the country are still very much divided. Simply having the backing of Libya's oil institution is no guarantee that oil will be flowing, because local groups across the country still have the possibility to starve off the country and the state.

These are the three big challenges that the Government is facing and that could undermine its authority: political recognition and backing inside the country, the lack of military arrangements, and economic crisis.

Q337 Phil Wilson: In both Syria and Iraq there are large numbers of armed non-state actors. Events in Libya have highlighted the importance of the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration of such irregular forces. How could this happen in Syria? What role could the UK play in pursuing that?

Claudia Gazzini: In Libya a lot of time has to pass before we even start talking about DDR. Disarmament and demobilisation is possible when you already have some kind of purpose and unity of forces that accept disarmament and demobilisation. We are really not there yet; we are still at the point of having to figure out who is backing the Government and who is not backing the Government, and what compromises you need to make in order to win military support. DDR will of course be an essential part of Libya's reconstruction and has to be the focus of the international community's attention, including the UK, but for the next year or so the focus is on getting armed groups to talk to each other, to agree on a common plan and to help the Presidential Council and the future Government in formulating a philosophical security strategy.

This goes back to counter-terrorism measures because, at the moment, there is tension in Libya between those who think that the security apparatus should be based on army forces in conversation with the so-called revolutionary forces—the armed groups, some of whom are Islamist leaning and some of whom were part of the local resistance forces called the Shura Councils, such as in Benghazi and in Derna. One line of thought is that that is the way to stabilise Libya—by co-ordinating and co-opting these armed groups and bringing them into the army. On the other hand, you still have sections of the army who believe that that is not the way to go—that you do not want to co-opt these armed groups, revolutionary fighters or Islamist-leaning fighters because that is against the country's national security interests, and that actually the security strategy should be to invest only and exclusively in Gaddafi-era army forces and exclude completely the local revolutionary forces. Of course, this line of action is supported by elements close to the east-based General Haftar and reflects somewhat the national security vision that is current in Egypt—no compromise with moderate Islamists and reinforcing the state authority and security apparatus, in which local armed groups and Islamist-leaning factions close to the Muslim Brotherhood have no role at all. In Libya, this is the hot debate that the new authorities have to resolve.

Q338 Chair: You use the phrase "moderate Islamist," and I had a quick look at your report as well. You seem very much to set up organisations such as the Muslim Brotherhood, which presumably you regard as moderate Islamist, as an alternative to militant Islamists. That is a bit like saying "extreme extremists" and "moderate extremists." Isn't it true to say that moderate Islamism is often a gateway to militant Islamism?

Richard Atwood: I think it has been different in different parts of the world. Your question was on Syria as well, and I can come back to that in a moment. We argue in the report that, overall, in the Middle East—it may be different in south Asia, and it doesn't hold everywhere—the Muslim Brotherhood has tended to be more a firewall against extremism than a conveyer belt towards it. You can find exceptions, and you can find examples the other way, but overall that is the case. Certainly the fortunes of the Islamic State and al-Qaeda have tended to wax as those of the Muslim Brotherhood have waned, I think overall. The Muslim Brotherhood may be changing because of the enormous repression it is suffering in Egypt and because of the limited political space it has to operate in other places, but overall certainly Egypt's policies towards the Muslim Brotherhood have opened space for more radical groups; I think that's clear.

On DDR in Syria, again I don't want to sound too bleak, but the cessation of hostilities is struggling at the moment; there has been fighting again. The next round of peace talks are

very fragile, I think. There are actors within the country that are not interested in the political track as it is currently constructed. I think it should be protected and continued, but it is fragile. If a political settlement can be forged that is attractive enough to Syrian Sunnis and Syrian opposition movements to pull them away from Jabhat al-Nusra, the al-Qaeda affiliate, attractive enough that many of them do not join more radical groups, I think the priority will not be DDR; the priority will be security guarantees. Hard security guarantees to prevent reprisals in areas that different groups control would be the first priority, and DDR would be a much longer-term priority. Of course then the UK can support it, but if there is some sort of political settlement the first priority has to be security guarantees.

Q339 Mr Spellar: If we have the end of military operations in Syria—taking that a bit further and taking your caveats into account—what would you envisage as the role of the UN in those circumstances? Should peacekeepers be deployed and who should comprise such a force? For example, would you expect or anticipate UK troops being part of such a peacekeeping force?

Richard Atwood: Well, of course, the UN is playing the role in shepherding the political process. There will clearly need to be some sort of force, as I talked about, with security guarantees. Traditionally, UN peacekeepers would struggle in an environment like that. There will still be operations against the Islamic State; there will probably still be remnants of an al-Qaeda affiliate. Those are very difficult conditions for classic UN peacekeeping. It is difficult to see where UN peacekeepers have operated in a context like that.

Again, this is projection, but I would imagine forces with a UN mandate, but perhaps not under a UN flag. The difficulty of having some regional forces there will be that there are challenges to that of course. From what I understand, the UK has committed further to UN peacekeeping, and this is extremely important. Peacekeeping itself is undergoing reforms to think through the sort of contexts in which peacekeepers might be deployed and whether they can deploy in places like Syria or Libya. At the moment, with the way UN peacekeeping is currently constructed, it would be difficult to deploy UN peacekeepers in that sort of context, where strong counter-terrorism operations are continuing.

Q340 Mr Spellar: But whether it was a traditional UN peacekeeping force—I take your points on that—or a coalition of the willing operating under a UN mandate, do you have any thoughts as to who would comprise such an operation and where command and control would lie?

Richard Atwood: No. We would have to come back to you on that. Syria, as you will know, is part a Syrian war, part a regional proxy war and part a cold war stand-off between Russia and the US. Balancing all the different regional interests, getting capable troops that do not have regional interests to protect or that do—it's difficult to say. There are some pretty big dilemmas in relation to the troops that are going to deploy.

Q341 Mr Spellar: I understand that, but I also take your point that in such contested space, there will need to be some form of armed authority that would be able to maintain that peace against various groups that would seek to subvert it. We should surely be thinking quite seriously about who that might be in the event that we do get to a period of stability and peace.

Richard Atwood: I agree.

Q342 Bob Stewart: Mr Atwood, could I ask what you think is the British national interest in the Levant, sitting as you do in New York and Ms Gazzini in Brussels? Looking at it from outside, what do you think is our national interest in being there, apart from trying to keep it stable?

Richard Atwood: Ms Gazzini is partly in Libya as well. Do you want to talk about Libya, and I'll come back to the issue of the Levant?

Q343 Bob Stewart: I'm really thinking of the Levant at the moment, but I am happy to have a view on Libya, too.

Richard Atwood: You will probably think this sounds glib, but the way the world, the international community, regional powers and others respond to the Islamic State should not make worse some of the geopolitical drivers that have created space for it. I identify again the Saudi Arabian-Iranian rivalry as particularly dangerous. Much of the Arab world is going through upheaval, which is potentially generational, and it will take a long time to resolve itself. I talked about the regional rivalries. The sectarianism has long roots but has recently been sparked partly by the reversal of sectarian fortunes in Iraq and the enormous violence that Sunnis have suffered at the hands of Baghdad and Damascus.

The sectarianism is deepening and many of the countries that did not experience revolutions in 2011 will have to reform at some point to meet the aspirations of growing youth populations and much of their society. At the moment, we don't see much inclination in those countries to reform, so there are some deeper trends in escalating competition between regional powers, in rising sectarianism and in states that are reluctant to reform, as well as, of course, states whose structures have collapsed in the war zones in Libya, Iraq, Syria and, to a degree, Yemen. Looking at ways of at least not making those trends worse in the way we respond to the Islamic State is certainly in the UK's interests.

Helping the region to the degree possible through the difficult period it is going through is extremely important, but there are some big dilemmas. Do you back state structures that are failing and part of the reason why people are turning towards other forms of protection and representation, whether sectarian or ethnic? There are some dilemmas, but certainly the region needs humanitarian support. That is extremely important for those who are displaced. More should be done to help partners in the region open space for diverse voices and political space for opposition movements and others, without the pretext of groups like Islamic State or al-Qaeda clamping down on opposition movements. That does not mean a sudden lunge towards democratisation; it means governing in a way that meets to a degree the aspirations of citizens, particularly in growing populations. All those are in the UK's interests.

Q344 Bob Stewart: So I think, in short, your answer is: helping to keep the region happy and stop it being a threat to our national self-interest. Is that right? Frankly, the Arab spring has become a dog's breakfast and is now the Arab winter of huge discontent. We had some sort of pleasure in the Arab spring. I didn't personally because I thought I could see from the start there would be a problem, but many people in this country thought the Arab spring was a good thing. Actually, it has turned round and bitten us, hasn't it?

Richard Atwood: Yes. The collapse of some of the revolutions into war—Iraq is slightly separate—has created chaos in much of the region. Absolutely. This has been chaos in which groups like Islamic State and al-Qaeda have been the main winners. They have clearly exploited that. I did not mention this, but it is obviously in the UK's interests to protect itself from attacks.

On Islamic State, its safe haven is important in Iraq and Syria, as we talked about, and pushing back on its safe haven is extremely important—

Q345 Bob Stewart: So smashing its safe haven is a good idea.

Richard Atwood: Not if you are going to worsen the conditions that allowed the Islamic State to arise in the first place and not if it is going to deepen Sunni marginalisation.

Q346 Bob Stewart: My next question is: do you think it was a good idea for the British to start precision bombing into Syria, as well as Iraq, in co-operation with allies?

Richard Atwood: You'd have to look at individual strikes, but overall—

Bob Stewart: Overall, I mean.

Richard Atwood: Overall, air strikes themselves are clearly not the solution.

Q347 Bob Stewart: We know that. Let me help you. They are not the solution, but do air strikes either keep these people bottled up underground or convince them to come out, so that they expose themselves? What I am thinking of is the people who live there and their protection. Have air strikes by the British and others helped the people to avoid some of the excesses of Daesh—burying people alive, throwing chaps off roofs in chairs or whatever? Are the excesses of Daesh stopped, so that we can await a political solution, by air strikes?

Richard Atwood: No. Are the excesses of the Islamic State stopped by air strikes? No, they are not. Air strikes are a tactic, and they need to be accompanied by other things. In some places, you may be able to—

Q348 Bob Stewart: Forgive me, but the question is: do they keep these guys worried about what is going to hit them from above, bottled up in bunkers or dispersed on the ground, so that they cannot hurt people? That is one of the reasons I supported the idea. Was I wrong?

Richard Atwood: Air strikes in some places can hinder movement, target convoys and do things to make life difficult for an armed movement—definitely. Are they going to stop the Islamic State operating in urban areas? Are they going to change the connections that the Islamic State has with the communities under its areas of control? Are they going to help to create conditions in which political settlement is more likely? No, they are not—not in themselves.

Q349 Bob Stewart: So your answer is: "In part yes, and in part no."

Richard Atwood: We argue that the bombing of Raqqa after the attacks in Paris, for example, had very little strategic value. In some cases, bombs can help. They can hinder groups' movements.

Q350 Bob Stewart: I don't want to labour the point, but I'm not talking strategic; I'm talking tactical. I'm talking about protecting people and whether bombing protects people. That is all I care about in this question. Are we helping the people who are living under this terror or not by using our military from the air, ostensibly to try to help them?

Richard Atwood: Again, you want me to give a yes/no answer, and I think it depends how it is done.

Q351 Chair: Put it this way: if you had been voting, you would have had to give a yes/no vote. Different members of the Committee voted different ways, as it happens.

Richard Atwood: I would have voted no, notwithstanding that air strikes in some places can help weaken movements if they are done the right way—absolutely. Personally, I would have voted no.

Chair: If there were not factors on both sides of the argument, we would all be voting the same way, wouldn't we? We only have a couple of minutes left. Bob, have you anything further?

Q352 Bob Stewart: No, I think that's a good answer. I might like to ask Ms Gazzini her opinion quickly.

Claudia Gazzini: About the bombing?

Bob Stewart: About whether it has protected people or not.

Claudia Gazzini: In the case of Libya, we have seen tactical strikes.

Bob Stewart: No, not Libya—Syria.

Claudia Gazzini: I cannot respond for Syria. I do not know enough.

Richard Atwood: Some of the same principles apply in Libya.

Claudia Gazzini: In Libya, we have seen tactical bombing—I do not believe by the UK, as far as I am aware.

Q353 Chair: And what is your assessment of that?

Claudia Gazzini: So far, they have been very specific and they have not created backlash among the population. We have seen a US-claimed airstrike in Ajdabiya and a US-claimed airstrike in the Sabratha area against farms manned by IS. They have not had any impact on the civilian population.

Q354 Phil Wilson: What can the UK, by itself or with its allies, do in the Middle East to help prevent conflict in the region in the future? What can the allies do to ensure this is not repeated?

Richard Atwood: The more you can do to push allies in the Gulf to open tracks of communication with Iran—I think this track is extremely important—and get regional powers talking again is, perhaps, one of the most useful things. Look at what Egypt is doing internally. Some of the repression that the Government in Egypt is perpetrating—not only on the Muslim Brotherhood but more broadly—is moving the country in the

wrong direction. That is another area. And then I think humanitarian support, quite clearly, is extremely important.

Chair: And the final word from Claudia.

Claudia Gazzini: In the case of Libya, the efforts of your country should be to support this UN bank authority, but not to push it or bully it into taking rash decisions. At the moment, we are seeing too much acceleration in the process—coming to Tripoli, convening a state council and meeting foreign donors. This is a very weak Government. It still needs time to build those alliances across the country to make this political solution a sustainable, durable political solution. Otherwise, you might be backing politicians who, by their own decision making, could flare up conflict again and could sow dissent across the country. That is not what you want in Libya at the moment.

Chair: On behalf of all members of the Committee, I thank both our witnesses for their clear and well-informed testimony.