

Defence Committee

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

Wednesday 04 May 2016

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

Questions 355-380

Witnesses: **Patrick Cockburn**, The Independent, **Tim Marshall**, The What and The Why, and **Anthony Loyd**, The Times, gave evidence.

Chair: Order. It is my pleasure to introduce this session of our inquiry into UK military operations in Syria and Iraq. We have three panellists representing a wide range of views, all from a media background, and I would be grateful if you would introduce yourselves and say a sentence or two about your background and your connection with the events that we are going to be discussing.

Anthony Loyd: I am foreign correspondent for *The Times*, for which I have worked for 23 years, reporting on numerous conflicts around the world. I started reporting in Syria in early 2012. I did about 15 trips to rebel-held areas. I have reported extensively from Iraq since the US invasion in 2003 and was last there five weeks ago.

Tim Marshall: I am former diplomatic editor at Sky News. I have been to Iraq and Syria perhaps 10, 12 times. I am currently writing books and doing analysis.

Patrick Cockburn: I work for *The Independent*. I first went to Iraq in 1977. I have been going back frequently ever since. Syria I visited frequently before and during the current conflict. I have written a book, called “Chaos and Caliphate: Jihadis and the West in the struggle for the Middle East”, which is just coming out. Before that I wrote a book called “The Rise of Islamic State”.

Chair: Thank you all very much indeed.

Q355 Mr Spellar: What would you say has been the impact of the UK role in the international coalition, and in particular the extension of UK air strikes to Syria?

Patrick Cockburn: I do not think a great deal, partly because British participation is militarily limited—somewhat more extensive in Iraq. I think it is worth bearing in mind in

whatever one is saying about Syria, what happens in Syria is very largely determined by what happened in Iraq, and vice versa.

The air strikes have had an effect. Islamic State cannot hold fixed positions against a hostile air power overhead with partners on the ground. We saw this at Kobani when Islamic State was trying to take it from the Syrian Kurds. They probably lost 2,200 dead and the whole of Kobani is smashed to pieces. It seemed to me when I was there about 70% of it is gone. Ramadi—same thing: much of the city has also gone. But I don't think it's enough—anywhere near enough—to do more than weaken Islamic State.

What happened, for instance in Syrian cities is, let's say you've got a five-storey building and four storeys have civilians; the first floor has Islamic State fighters. Unless you are going to bring down the whole building you are not going to eliminate them. So Islamic State continues; it still has a powerful military force. It still has finances. These have been weakened but they are still there, and its enemies still remain divided, with different goals. So air power can achieve a certain amount—British air power, American air power—but there are also limitations to it.

Chair: Could I, in your answers, ask you to differentiate where relevant between Iraq and Syria, because there are clear differences in the air effort being made in the two countries?

Tim Marshall: I think it is a limited effect militarily, but important politically. The overall effect is the sum of its parts. For the UK not to be playing that role diminishes the sum and means that somebody else has to take on the burden, so politically it is quite important. Also, we should not underestimate British expertise and the missions that have flown. There are hundreds, and they don't always end in kinetic activity, as I believe it is called. We should not underestimate the importance of the British both militarily, on a slight basis, and politically, on a very large basis, but that does cross the border. I always felt it was odd that a plane had to stop at what, militarily, was an artificial border, and the world was about to cave in, apparently, when you voted last year, and it hasn't.

Anthony Loyd: The air strikes were about credibility, and the problems that would have been created had the UK not participated in air strikes would have been far greater in terms of political credibility and the UK's role as a credible ally within the coalition. The minimal nature of UK air strikes has not had a huge impact on the battlefield. There are various angles to it. The presence of British special forces in Iraq has had a greater coupling effect because they can call in other people's aircraft. Overall, the effect of air power on Islamic State has been very significant over the past few months, and they have lost up to 40% of the territory they originally held.

Chair: In which country?

Anthony Loyd: Overall, particularly in Iraq. I don't know what the percentage is in Syria, but in Syria the trend is the same. They have been losing ground. That is not a solution; it is a trend.

Q356 Chair: Patrick, before you come in, I want to take up something that you said earlier. You said something about air power in support of forces on the ground. Now, there are forces on the ground—they are quite clearly identifiable—in Iraq, and there is a big air effort, including by the British, in support of those forces on the ground. It is harder to identify

forces on the ground in Syria. Do you or any of your colleagues have any evidence that the strikes that the United Kingdom has been making in Syria have been in support of identifiable formations or forces on the ground, as opposed to strikes against individuals or against static storage facilities, for example?

Patrick Cockburn: I don't know how far they have been. The most important force on the ground fighting Islamic State in alliance, so to speak, with the US-led coalition and with Britain is part of the Syrian Kurds. There have only been 232 air strikes by non-US coalition forces, which is pretty minimal compared with the Americans. I think there were a few in support of the Kurds, but otherwise not.

Anthony was making a point about losing 40%, but one must always bear in mind when we see maps in newspapers and on television showing a 40% loss or gain, or something, that a large portion of these countries are desert or semi-desert. It doesn't really make much difference if you lose a percentage here or there; it is really population centres that count. The military pressure on Islamic State is partly the Kurds, partly the Syrian army. People were denying that the Syrian army and the Russians were fighting Islamic State, but to my mind that is propaganda because you can see it at Palmyra, which was recaptured not so long ago, and in a less well-known place called Kuweires, an airbase east of Aleppo that Islamic State had been besieging for a year. In both cases, the Syrian army was able to take those places with air support from the Russians. Of course, Russian and Syrian air power has a rather different purpose, which is to separate the civilians from the fighters. That is a classic counter-insurgency tactic in which you basically bomb everything.

Anthony Loyd: I have no evidence of British air strikes in Syria in support of specific groups. I hear what Patrick said about areas in desert, but there is no doubt about it: significant and large population centres that were held by ISIS are no longer in ISIS control.

Chair: Tim, do you have anything to add?

Tim Marshall: I will go with Anthony.

Q357 Mr Spellar: Other colleagues will follow up on some other strands, but from your perception is there more that the UK should be doing? If so, what?

Patrick Cockburn: We talk about this in military terms, but this is a very complicated guerrilla political war. Most of the things that we should be doing are political and in trying to understand what is happening there. If one is thinking of how to weaken and eliminate Islamic State, the most important thing is to ensure that it is encircled, which it almost is now. Most of the Turkish border has been taken by the Syrian Kurds and other forces. There is still quite a small gap between the Euphrates river and Aleppo.

Politically, Britain should do everything it can—if necessary, militarily—to ensure that that gap is closed, because that is the route the terrorists take if they are going to come here or to Europe. It is very important to close the gap. It always has been. When one looks at this whole crisis, it is insoluble and too complicated, but to my mind that sometimes prevents people from thinking of concrete solutions to concrete problems like that.

Tim Marshall: I think they should increase support to the Kurds. They are the ones who will be the ground forces for the Raqqa operation. The Russians partially retaking Palmyra has made that whole thing come closer. Raqqa will fall at some point, and I think the UK should be supporting the Kurds. The UK should also be doing a lot of homework about Jabhat al-Nusra. Once ISIS is defeated, they will spring up elsewhere as ISIS mark 2, but Jabhat al-Nusra is much deeper inside the opposition movement, and I hope that the people who look at these things are up to speed with Jabhat al-Nusra, because it is a longer term threat to Syria than ISIS.

Anthony Loyd: Jabhat will be a far longer-term entity in Syria, I agree. There are a number of things that the UK can do in the absence of an opportunity for an overall solution. First, it can bolster its existing support to the rescue workers inside Syria. It already supports and helps to train and to some extent equip the white helmets—the guys who grub around in the rubble of barrel-bombed buildings trying to pull people out. It can certainly offer some more places to Syrian refugees—that would be one start. It can look at revising its special forces deployments to Iraq, which so far are very limited. Also, it should be aware that the political solution and the military activity are quite out of step.

Q358 Chair: I will come to Madeleine in a second, but I want to ask you for your immediate reaction to the story that was in the media yesterday. The headline from *The Times* was: “Assad has been secretly collaborating with ISIS, defectors’ papers reveal”. Patrick, you gave us an example of the fact that Assad has now retaken Palmyra and another town. It is suggested in these leaked handwritten notes that in fact there was some sort of collusion between Assad and ISIS on that manoeuvre. Do you believe that that has any basis?

Patrick Cockburn: I saw these documents, and I am very dubious about it. First of all, some of the documents that were released—they have been released in different places—have selective quotes. For instance, one says that artillery have not been moved from Palmyra to other areas, omitting the bit that says they have been moved to a place called Qalamoun, which is near the Government’s positions. Then there are arguments that there is trade between the two. Iraq and Syria is one of the great smuggling areas of the world. If you are in Rojava, the Syrian Kurdish area, you go to the local market and you find that a lot of the stuff has come from Beirut because Islamic State charges \$300 a truck coming through. They are very short of money. So there is trade—illicit trade—but it does not actually mean political combination.

Then you can produce an argument that says, “Is it in Assad’s interests that he is fighting Islamic State?” Well, to some extent, yes, because that means that the rest of the world is hostile to Islamic State if that is the alternative to him. But he did not create that situation. It is like politics anywhere. He is taking advantage of opportunities. Basically I think he is using these documents to prove partisan political points. I just do not think the evidence is there. If you look at where the fighting is—east of Aleppo and around Palmyra—it is perfectly obvious that Assad and the Syrian army are fighting Islamic State.

Q359 Chair: Tim, this material is supposed to have come from the same people who supplied Sky News—your former bosses—with some very valuable intelligence. What do you make of it all?

Tim Marshall: I am agnostic and remain to be convinced. It is widely believed throughout the middle east that that is the case and I do not rule it out.

Q360 Chair: That what is the case?

Tim Marshall: Sorry—that the Government has always colluded with various Islamist organisations, including Jabhat al-Nusra, in order to have a self-fulfilling prophecy. They said that this would happen. They said that the Islamists would come to the fore. It is in their interests to promulgate that and, allegedly, they did. As I said, I am agnostic because I think it is plausible. I have not seen the evidence and, for example, the artillery pieces were used as evidence. When they removed them from Palmyra as the Syrians were advancing, it was presented as evidence that they had been told to move their artillery out of Palmyra.

To me, that just sounds like common sense. They were making a strategic withdrawal. They knew they were massed in formations and did not want to get hit so, of course, they ran away—that is another word for withdrawal, as the Army knows. I do not see it as proof of collusion. I only see that potentially, but equally likely, they simply withdrew tactically.

Anthony Loyd: There was certainly some fierce fighting around Palmyra and a bulk of the Assad regime’s military prowess was supplied by Hezbollah and Russian special forces teams, some of whom were killed—Russians—in Palmyra. I am not saying that that is evidence against any deal but if there was a deal, there was also some very fierce fighting. As for the overall picture, both things are true.

Assad is in a fierce fight with Islamic State. The Assad regime has a long-term, evidentially-proven relationship with jihadi organisations that are based in Syria. That goes as far back as 2003 and before. We saw that most recently a couple of years ago with the release by the regime of numerous Islamist prisoners from jails so that they could return to the ranks of the revolution and change the shape of the revolution in a way that suited the regime.

Mrs Moon: That was one of the questions I was going to ask.

Chair: I am sorry.

Q361 Mrs Moon: I will cross that one off my list of things to ask you about. Could you differentiate between the future potential capability in Iraq and Syria? I am wondering about the ability and the will for ground forces and air power to combine to defeat Daesh in both countries. Is it enough? We cannot do it with air power alone, but I wonder whether the ground forces are willing and actually able.

Tim Marshall: There are strong indications that the Iraqi army has now reconstituted itself and is being trained. It has not performed well in Tikrit or in Ramadi and Fallujah. That does not bode well for the operation on Mosul. Nevertheless, in the long term they will be successful, but it will take a lot of American armed power and the Kurds coming from the north. That is Mosul. Raqqa, I think, has a better chance of falling sooner, but again, it would not happen without the support of the UK, the USA and the coalition. It would be impossible without that. As you know, it is politically impossible to get public support for proper ground operations by the UK, other than special forces. I do not really see the two countries as separate military areas; they are entirely connected. If you squeeze Raqqa,

people will go to Mosul. If you squeeze Mosul, people will go to Raqqa. They are part of a whole.

Patrick Cockburn: The Iraqi Army is still pretty limited. They retook Ramadi, but that was basically their special forces—pretty limited units. I was up and down that front recently, and one of the things that strikes me about all military formations is that there aren't many of them. The Iraqi Army used to be famous for ghost battalions—soldiers that don't exist, where the money goes to the officers and the Defence Ministry. That is certainly still happening.

Iraq has a National Security Council, and some months ago the Army defence people came and wanted more money for salaries—Iraq is short of money because the oil price is down. They were told, “Not another dinar unless you tell us exactly how many soldiers you've got.” They were back a week later with 36,000 fewer soldiers who had suddenly disappeared. That is illustrative of the general situation. Kurds are a bit the same. There are not that number of them on the frontline.

A consequence appears to be a genuine victory in Ramadi—the Islamic State loses and the Iraqi Army wins—but actually most of Ramadi is in ruins. Sinjar, with the Kurds, is the same thing. These are primarily places where the military action is from the air, and the consequence is that the place is devastated. This really is not a victory in any full sense. The Islamic State is reverting to guerrilla tactics. They are not fighting to the last man in these places. The extent to which these victories are going to lead to the collapse of the Islamic State has been exaggerated.

Tim Marshall: I think you should also prepare yourselves for how bad Mosul will probably be. The word Stalingrad is bounded around far too much by the media and elsewhere, but Mosul really has the potential to be quite catastrophic, given how the fight will go from both the defenders and the attackers. Mosul, I believe, will be pretty bloody awful.

Anthony Loyd: One of the problems is that military victory on the ground is usually only possible in either Syria or Iraq when there is a specific confluence of circumstances such as air power and forward observers, and either a concentration of a semi-coherent group like the Iraqi Army or an ethnic disparity between something like a Kurdish area in Syria, whereby it is far easier to drive out Daesh/Islamic State, who are by and large Sunni Arabs. Where those circumstances do not meet, it is far more difficult.

I agree that Raqqa is far more likely to go long before Mosul. The Syrian Kurds are without doubt the most effective ground force against ISIS in the region. Their effectiveness outside Kurdish areas will be quite limited. In Mosul, I cannot see anything happening quickly because the forces gathered around Mosul are so disparate. You have the Iraqi Army, which is very different from the special forces and has not performed well. Then you have the Kurdish peshmerga, within which you have the KDP, the PUK and other groupings that answer to slightly different commanders. Then you have a whole host of popular mobilisation units and Shi'a groups, some of which are Iranian-backed and some of which are not.

There are all sorts of different foreign interests in and around Mosul and a huge population. No one is talking about what happens after the day Mosul is recaptured or,

indeed, how the Kurdistan Regional Government could support an influx of hundreds of thousands more refugees when it cannot even pay its own Government workers their salaries at the moment.

Patrick Cockburn: May I add a tiny rider to what Anthony was saying? The political situation is so complicated. From the Kurdish point of view, in both Iraq and Syria, although they are the main ground forces against IS, backed by US and British air power, they wonder what is going to happen supposing they defeat Islamic State. At the moment, everybody loves them because they are fighting Islamic State, but if Islamic State goes down, they are vulnerable to what the Turks do and to resurgent powers in Damascus and Baghdad, so it is not necessarily in their interest to take Mosul or for this war to end any time soon.

Q362 Mrs Moon: Tim, would you like to comment on that? One thing that I have been wondering about is this. You have all cited the Kurds as the fiercest and best organised fighters, but what are the long-term consequences of backing those Kurdish movements?

Tim Marshall: Well, the genie is out of the bottle.

Mrs Moon: Absolutely.

Tim Marshall: Kurdistan nationalism is back—well, it never went away, but it is now back on their front burner and they will want a reward after this. I doubt they will get it. They are dysfunctional themselves, between Rojava and Iraq and the two entities within Iraq. Long term, I'm thinking a federal Syria and a federal—I think there's already a federal Iraq. It might not be politically acceptable, but at some point when we play our minimal political role with the Kurds and tell them what we would agree to afterwards—everyone is going to have a stake in this—I think we should reward them somehow, but I doubt it will be with a state, so managing expectations might be useful. There is the potential, once ISIS is beaten and even once Syria can be partially put back together in a federal state, for the fighting still to continue because the Kurds will not get what they want from this. They stood on the sidelines for a long time and said, "You guys get on with it." Only when they were forced did they move, and they are not moving for a unitary Syria; they are moving for a unitary Kurdistan in some form. Again, we would have to make our decisions about how far we would support that.

Q363 Phil Wilson: You have all pointed out the difficulties in taking Mosul. Is it important, in the fight against ISIS, to actually take Mosul?

Tim Marshall: I think it's crucial.

Patrick Cockburn: One of the things that the Islamic State has is that it is a state. Its ideology is, "We have a state. Other people have talked about a caliphate or doing something or other; we have established a real Islamic state." It is a big ideological blow if that state goes down. They are different from other types of organisation, like al-Qaeda, which had different ideas.

Secondly, it is important in terms of security. I am thinking of the terrorist attacks in Brussels and Paris and, potentially, here. What makes them different from terrorist attacks we have seen in the past is that they have the resources of what is de facto an organised

state behind them. If a cell is eliminated, they can put in a new one; they have money, expertise and so forth.

For both those reasons, I think it is very important to eliminate Islamic State, and the most important element in that is Mosul. That is what really put them on the world stage—when they captured Mosul in 2014.

Q364 Phil Wilson: The capacity of the troops on the ground to take Mosul might be limited. Does that mean the West has to do more to help take it?

Patrick Cockburn: The Americans are pushing for a quick attack on Mosul, but they are also finding that they are being drawn in more and more. An Iraqi division was moved up, east of Mosul, but when it came to fighting, it suddenly wasn't to be found and the Americans lost one or two people. The British official attitude, as I understand it, is much more cautious. Islamic State has been fighting for Ramadi, but it hasn't been fighting as it did at Kobane, to the last man. I think in Mosul they will fight everywhere and they will see the city levelled before they give up.

Tim Marshall: Yes. The blow to them is equally political, military and psychological—we shouldn't underestimate the psychological blow. I think that's where the currency came in. They introduced a currency because if they were a state, they could have a currency. When you lose that sort of psychological idea, that you are a state—I will briefly add that I know Hamish de Bretton-Gordon quite well. He used to command NATO's CBRN Brigade. He is utterly convinced that there will be mass use of chemical weapons in the fight for Mosul. I don't know that, but Hamish de Bretton-Gordon believes that.

Anthony Lloyd: You can't just surround Islamic State and leave them alone. They are in perpetual metastasis. They take on generations of children. They are training them the whole time. You can't just leave that alone. It grows and expands. Mosul is the seat of the caliphate; Mosul must be retaken. There is a sort of Armageddon scenario for Mosul, but in the Middle East it often works in a different way. Surround Mosul, give dissatisfied local tribes a lot of money and they sort out their own problems. It may well be that there are not that many Islamic State in Mosul. I don't know. I am sure no one does. You might find that if there was enough incentive, which there is certainly not at the moment, people within Mosul might be more inclined, given the right backing, to take up arms themselves against Islamic State. There is not that incentive at the moment, and I should think people in Mosul are very worried about what happens to them and their future after Islamic State.

Chair: Madeleine, you had a quick follow-up.

Q365 Mrs Moon: I do. When we were in Iraq, one of the things that we talked about quite a lot was the peppering of towns that had been recaptured with improvised explosive devices and the inability of communities to return because, basically, everything was booby-trapped. On the military and political impact of retaking towns, I appreciate the damage that that can do psychologically to IS, but is it mitigated if the local people cannot return? We cannot rebuild those communities if they cannot move back into their communities. What is the impact of that on a belief in the state—a belief in the Syrian state or a belief in the Iraqi state?

Patrick Cockburn: I don't think anyone expects much from the Iraqi state. These are very sectarian societies outside Ramadi. Amnesty reported yesterday or the day before on 1,000

young men held in a warehouse without enough space to lie down or anything else. Local people are truly terrified of the Iraqi Army and security forces. The problem is that none of these cities are really being recaptured. Most of them are in ruins afterwards. The situation remains completely insecure even up in Syrian-Kurdish-held areas, where Anthony and I have both travelled and which are meant to be safer than others. This is comparative, but they are still very dangerous places.

Tim Marshall: I completely understand your concern. You asked earlier what we could do to help. We have expertise and we could help the Iraqis. As Patrick says, they may not make it a priority and this is a decades-long thing, so the sooner you start the better.

Anthony Lloyd: It is easier to remove IEDs than it is to rebuild buildings. Part of the problem is that when people can return home the buildings have been flattened. They have been flattened either by IS or in fighting or by air strikes. Going back to an earlier question, which fits into what you have just asked, the UK could give far better help if the actual system of resupplying logistics was more straightforward. As I am sure we are all aware, the United Kingdom gave the Kurds .50 calibre machine guns a year and a half or two years ago, but they have not had ammunition for months and months, despite repeated, official high-level requests, because the chain of resupply goes through Baghdad. As soon as it goes through Baghdad, you have a very complex prism and no oversight of what happens. It is the same as with IED-removal equipment.

Q366 Douglas Chapman: When Parliament took the decision to enter into air strikes, we were told at the time about the 70,000 moderates—

Tim Marshall: I am sorry; the 70,000?

Douglas Chapman: The 70,000 moderates available on the ground. What is your current assessment of the situation with regard to the Syrian moderate opposition forces? Was the 70,000 a mirage?

Anthony Lloyd: It is absolutely impossible to tell. The 70,000—if it was a true figure—did not refer to a cohesive force. It was a rather optimistic tally of different groups. I challenge anybody, even the most seasoned observer, to look at the Salafi groups on the ground, among the largely Islamist rebel movement, and work out which of them in post-conflict Syria might be good to minorities and have favourable relations with the West, which would be bad to minorities and have an aggressive relationship with the West, who would be with al-Qaeda, or against al-Qaeda, and so on. It is very difficult to work out. Suffice it to say that the majority of the rebel movement is Islamist, whatever that means—Islamist.

Tim Marshall: I made myself very unpopular in 2012 by arguing this. Even in 2011, I said, “It’s been taken over.” The young students who were the democrats that came out, have been completely shoved to one side. The opposition is Islamist.

Anthony Lloyd: Now, that is different from saying that the majority of the non-armed opposition to Assad are Islamist. But the majority of the armed opposition are Islamist.

Tim Marshall: I haven’t been there for two years, and these guys have been there more than I have and more recently, but when I went, I never met a moderate armed group—and I met a lot of armed groups.

Patrick Cockburn: I always find it a test of those who do believe in the 70,000 armed, secular non-Islamist gunmen that the people who say they exist never say that from territory held by the moderate 70,000. If there are 70,000, they must be an important factor on the map; they must hold territory. But the reports of their existence tend to come from Beirut, Gaziantep in Turkey or Istanbul; nobody actually goes there. In some cases they come from academics who haven't been in Syria for five years. So one should be very dubious about this.

Very recently, for instance, the Americans were saying that the moderate forces should move away from al-Nusra within Aleppo, so that al-Nusra could be attacked. But they cannot do that because, as my colleagues have just said, the armed opposition is dominated by extreme Islamists. They know that if they move away and al-Nusra and the other extreme factions disappear, they will be easy meat for the Syrian army.

Q367 Douglas Chapman: Are you saying that if there are sufficient forces to unseat Assad, there is an equally aggressive force waiting to replace him?

Patrick Cockburn: I am sorry?

Douglas Chapman: Is there an equally aggressive Islamic force waiting to replace Assad?

Patrick Cockburn: Yes, but Assad isn't going to go. It is a strange aspect of this—I am not saying whether it is a good or a bad thing—that since 2012 people have been announcing that he is about to go. The opposition is always pushing this idea. There are 14 Syrian provincial capitals. He held 14; he has lost two. The population of Syria should be about 22 million or 23 million at the moment, because there are 5 million or 6 million refugees plus 16 million or 17 million others. About 10 million of those are in Government-held areas, 2 million are in IS-held areas, 2 million are Kurds and 2 million are non-IS opposition. That is essentially the balance of power. I don't think there is any chance that Assad will go.

Tim Marshall: Chairman, I am sorry—I know we are running out of time—but this was the very point I wanted to make. It was in the list of questions, so may I throw this in?

Chair: I was hoping you would.

Tim Marshall: I wrote this in May 2011: “Reading some reports you'd be forgiven for thinking that the Syrian people were rising up as one determined to overthrow a regime which is on its last legs. There are three main flaws in this analysis.” It goes on to explain why: the demographics, the Kurds, the Druze, the Christians, the Alawites, the co-opted Sunnis who weren't part of this. When you added them all up, you realised that it was not going to fall. Now, excuse me, but if idiot journalists can work that out, the political class should be able to work it out. Journalists count, “One, two, trend.” We had had Egypt and Libya—two leaders had gone. I think the political class looked at that, grandstanded left, right and centre and demanded that Assad should go. That put his back against the wall and gave him nowhere to go.

I think it was a mistake for us to call “Go, go, go” all the time. We have been repeating that mistake for five or six years and we have now got ourselves into the position of saying, “Well, he should go—sort of—a bit—but not necessarily right now,” as if it is a policy. Forgive me for the extended rant, but it was a political mistake that the political

class needs to think much harder about when this happens again. Do you really want to push this person into a corner? Be sure before you push.

Q368 Chair: I don't think it is a question of it happening again because that statement was restated from the Dispatch Box only yesterday.

Tim Marshall: No, I mean with the next emergency in country x.

Q369 Chair: I see what you mean. Do not worry about the time, by the way. We have another 15 to 20 minutes, if that is all right with you. I will come to Anthony and then I want to bring in Phil because I think he wants to follow up on some of these very points.

Anthony Lloyd: I come to this from a slightly different angle. There is a middle way with Assad. It is neither to make his removal a precondition, as has previously mistakenly been done, but it is certainly not to accept his long-term position of power in Syria, for a number of very good reasons. First, you will never have peace or an end to the war in Syria with Assad, the leader of a minority group, in power. You only have extreme Islamism and Islamist groups in Syria because of Assad's behaviour. To my mind, he is the primary cancer in this. The secondary cancer may be extremely dramatic, threatening and all the rest of it, but it has come about because of the behaviour of that particular regime.

It is nonsensical to say, "Right, the terms for any transitional government should be that Assad goes," but neither should he be accepted long term. If you swing your support behind the acceptance of Assad in the long term, a number of things will happen. First, you will get a dramatic rise in Western recruits not only to Islamic State, but to other jihadist movements furious with the West over its changed stance. When the motivation thrown to so many recruits to join IS is the hypocrisy of the West and its double standards, imagine what the implications would be if we were to accept Assad.

You would also crumble the coalition if you threw your weight or acceptance behind Assad. The United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Saudi Arabia just would not accept it, and neither would Turkey. You would have a wave of more refugees as well. More importantly, morally it would be obscene but practically it would be absurd; it just would not work. Look at the demographics in Syria—a vast majority is Sunni populace. Assad's Alawite community is very much the minority. You can look at the examples of Anbar in Iraq in the past or Helmand in Afghanistan and all the rest of it. Assad will not be able to take Syria or reinstate peace in Syria as it stands either as an entity himself, because he attracts so much hostility for what he has done, or, practically, with the forces he has.

As to Assad's removal and long-term strength, I would say that the one thing that Russian intervention has proved is that Assad's survival is almost entirely dependent on Russian intervention. Now, there is a positive and a negative to that.

Patrick Cockburn: Sorry—could I make one point that is often missed? The biggest ally of Assad is not Russia; it is Iran. The whole Shi'a in this band of Iran, Iraq, Syria—if we call the Alawites, as they do, Shi'a—and Lebanon think of this as an existential struggle. They are never going to let the other side win. It is often said that the Russians are the crucial thing. That really is not the case. It is Iran and the Shi'a axis in that broad band of territory north of Saudi Arabia and south of Turkey that is decisive.

Q370 Chair: The Prime Minister, in his evidence to the Liaison Committee, asked himself rhetorically, “Is there a third way between a Daesh-style state and President Assad, the butcher remaining in charge of this country? My answer would be that there has to be a third way—we have to find a third way.” But it seems to me that you are saying that this is what the theorists call a zero-sum game. You appear either to be with one pole of the globe or at the other. If you align with any faction in this, you are automatically making enemies of the other faction. Is that what you are telling us?

Patrick Cockburn: I think that is true but I think it is the wrong approach. The approach should be to reduce the level of violence of the war. Both Islamic State and Assad—the extremes—benefit from a war because on each side, people think, “We have no alternative but the other.” If you work in the Education Ministry in Baghdad, you may not like Assad very much, but you would much prefer him to the other side, who would certainly throw you out of your job, may murder you and will probably turn you into a refugee. We need to bring down the level of violence through international pressure and through cutting off the supply of money and weapons, and then you can begin to have real politics. The people around Assad would no longer feel so threatened by the Islamic State that they have to stick by Assad. We would get away from what in Northern Ireland we used to call “the politics of the last atrocity,” with everybody so terrified that they stick to the most militant members of their own faction. That is the way to go; otherwise the situation is as it has been described. There isn’t a third way within the conflict, and thinking there is simply prolongs that conflict.

Q371 Chair: Are there any further comments before I bring in Phil?

Tim Marshall: I surprise myself by disagreeing with Patrick. I think there is a third way; I think it is the only way that you have to seek, because otherwise there is total surrender by one and total victory of the other, and that is simply impossible. I don’t know what the third way is, but I just know that is the correct path to follow. That is going to require some huge compromises, politically, with Russia, and that even could bring in sanctions on Ukraine—I think that would be part of the price. There are big, big compromises to make, and we shouldn’t be frightened of making them.

Anthony Loyd: Victory by any faction outright is impossible and not desirable. There will be a third way.

Chair: There is a wide range of views there.

Q372 Phil Wilson: I was going to ask about Assad and Russia. You have covered a lot of that ground, but perhaps we could have some sort of definitive answer to these questions. Do you think Russia’s action has ensured that Assad is going to remain in power? Should we accept that as the new norm and just accept him as being the leader?

Tim Marshall: The evil genius of what Putin has done is to ensure Assad cannot lose. Once Assad cannot lose, eventually the other side—I believe it will filter down—will think, “That means we can’t win.” That is the route towards the third way. I absolutely think he has guaranteed that they can’t lose—through air power. Their ground forces rely on that air power, and the Kurdish ground forces rely on our air power.

Anthony Loyd: Yes, but there is a positive to Assad's medium-term survival thanks to Russia. He is entirely dependent on Russia and, to take issue with what Patrick said earlier, there has been no shortage of Hezbollah and Iranian special forces and other Shi'a groups from across the world coming to support the regime, but they were on the back foot last autumn. Despite those Shi'a ground forces coming in, they were losing ground in Latakia, and it was looking like there could be a real tilt away from the regime in regime heartland areas. It wasn't until Russian air strikes came in that the tables were turned. The only positive I see out of that is that, provided you keep dialogue with Russia, or provided America does, Assad now knows that his survival, in the long term, is rather dependent on Russia, and if you can persuade Russia that its long-term interests in a stable Syria are not best vested in Assad, there is some potential positive outcome.

Patrick Cockburn: Could one get rid of Assad but keep the regime? Would that make any difference? Is there an alternative to the regime? All this talk that there ought to be a third way but nobody knows what it is, means that you very rapidly get into wishful thinking. One has to take things as they are. As I have said, they need to reduce the level of violence, and we are beginning to have that because of, essentially, the US and Russia. We are beginning to have ceasefires, with tremendous spurts of violence in between. If it goes that way, you can begin to get back into a situation where—as Anthony was saying, the armed opposition is dominated by extreme Salafi jihadists, such as Islamic State and so forth—we have a lesser degree of violence and real politics begins to happen again. People often think that one side or the other is about to collapse. You read stuff in the newspapers about people clinging on but, in my experience, in Iraq and Syria everybody has their constituency. They may be pressed back, but they will always find a way of staying in business.

Tim Marshall: The average length of a civil war is 13 years.

Patrick Cockburn: As I said, the Shi'a in the rest of the region aren't going to let Assad fall, because they think they will be next. I think the way forward is, yes, a degree of co-operation with Russia; try and reduce the level of violence; begin, at a certain stage, to try and get the refugees back. A great chunk of the population, as we all know, is in Turkey, Lebanon or Jordan, or heading for Europe. I think that is the way to go: not to see, can we get rid of Assad or defeat the other side, at the moment—it just really isn't practical politics—but to see what real measures can be taken to mitigate violence and to remedy the consequences of that violence.

Q373 Richard Benyon: Just as a comment on the 70,000, I have never been of the opinion that there are people in khaki formed up as part of that figure; but 70,000 is 0.32% of the pre-civil war population. Surely it is conceivable that there are 70,000 people out there who, given the right circumstances—although at the moment they just have an AK47 under their bed, protecting their house—might be convinced to work with us to seize and hold ground. Is that too ridiculous a concept—in 30 seconds?

Tim Marshall: Actually it is 85,000—it's 0.342%. How are you going to prove either? Okay, let's make it 60,000. I just do not see how it is possible to extrapolate from a 23 million population, not being on the ground, not doing opinion polls or phoning people up, to know how many people with weapons are moderate or not. I don't know. You are better off asking the Prime Minister how he came up with 70,000.

Patrick Cockburn: There is a misconception about this: 70,000 guys with guns are not an army—or they will be very easy to destroy by any properly organised well trained armed force. Almost every young man in Iraq has a gun. You could say that lots of them have moderate political opinions, but that is not an army. They do not really count, and I think the same is true of Syria.

Anthony Loyd: People fight very locally in Syria. You fight against the regime in your town, your village, your valley. It is just about conceivable that you might find enough angry, probably Islamist, young men or groups who have been thrown out of their area by Islamic State who, given the right motivation, might want to go back and fight Islamic State to go back into that area. Whether that means they would be in any way friendly to the West, friendly to Israel, whether they would be long-term potential allies in the region, or share the same foreign policy goals, is rather another issue; but most rebel groups are more intent on fighting Assad than they are fighting Islamic State, and that is geographic. Islamic State hold the specific top corner of Syria.

Q374 Richard Benyon: May I ask you about Aleppo, because it is obviously very much in the news at the moment? In December 2012, you wrote an article, Anthony, in *The Times*, which, it has been argued, changed Government policy. It is depressingly similar, then, to what is going on now. You talked about shells exploding in streets, “chopping up a group of four men...in a way so grotesque that I cannot describe it here”. You wrote: “Cries of ‘we are hungry’ and ‘give us bread’ stalked my journeys down Aleppo’s central streets”. If that was happening then, what’s happening now? Is this a policy of weaponising the migrant crisis? Is this bestial regime going to sink in it? Is there anything lower it can do, in terms of what it can inflict on the population of this city?

Anthony Loyd: It is very difficult to describe, even from having covered, I don’t know, 15, 20 conflicts in the world, something exactly as extreme as is happening in Aleppo. It was a good deal worse when I was last there than when I wrote that article in 2012. Admittedly I haven’t been back for a year and a half, but the last time I went I went to a school—a girls’ school—that had been bombed on sports day in Aleppo; and one bomb had hurled a girl against the wall and blasted, in black, her outline there, so there was just—at the end of the school corridor there was the outline of a girl of about nine or 10 years old, just blasted, her silhouette, into the school corridor. That sort of stuff happens the whole time. It is a terrible vision. It is very difficult to actually explain to people here, because it is so extreme; but, to answer your question, I don’t know. But I don’t think—that depravity: of course there’s a rage on the other side.

Q375 Richard Benyon: But we have C-130s sitting at Akrotiri that now have the ability to drop humanitarian aid in an area about the size of this room, whereas when I served, it was about three football pitches if you were lucky. Now, we can do it really accurately. We can land it on a street or a bit of rough ground, so the White Helmets or some other organisation can come in. Is it conceivable that we could negotiate with the Russians and the regime to create protections around Hamish de Bretton-Gordon’s hospital, which he told us had been bombed four times?

Tim Marshall: He is calling for exactly that. He is calling for the C-130s, and I think he’s right.

Q376 Richard Benyon: But do you think they would be at risk? Do you think you could negotiate with the regime to get an assurance they would not be shot at or down?

Anthony Loyd: I think it would be extremely difficult. I think it would be extremely difficult to get an assurance that they would not be shot down by some of the people you were trying to drop aid to. Don't underestimate the anger that people feel with the West that they might not have felt at the start of the war. These people feel totally abandoned—very angry.

Patrick Cockburn: Keep it in mind that we are intervening in a civil war, with two sides who detest each other, and both have very real constituencies. The number of people killed in Aleppo over the last couple of weeks—this is slightly off the top of my head, but it's reasonably accurate, I think—was 132 killed by Government barrel bombs and shelling and 84 killed by rebel shelling in Government-held areas. All this is horrible, but it doesn't mean that it isn't a civil war, which we should be very careful about not getting plugged into because of very genuine and understandable humanitarian concerns. Most people who die in the Syrian civil war don't die because of bombing or shelling—that is not typical; they die in battles on the war front. So I think that any sort of—

Q377 Richard Benyon: Is that true? What about barrel bombs? Is it true that most people die through kinetic—

Patrick Cockburn: They die as fighters on both sides. I think the Syrian army and paramilitaries have lost about 85,000 dead, and the other side more.

Q378 Richard Benyon: We heard yesterday about 45 children—

Ruth Smeeth: Forty-nine.

Richard Benyon: —Forty-nine children who were killed by Russian/regime air attacks.

Anthony Loyd: I think the civilian death toll is higher than the combatant death toll. It is very difficult to tell, because the accurate figures stopped being counted, I think, about a year ago, but—

Patrick Cockburn: I have a slightly different opinion, but in relation to Aleppo, the idea that one could suddenly intervene and start dropping humanitarian supplies—all these things bring enormous difficulties with them. I think we should be very careful before plugging into this war. I think the only way is to try and generally reduce the level of violence—as we have all said, nobody is going to win this war—it's going to go on and on and on otherwise.

Q379 Richard Benyon: I am very conscious of the time and I feel the Chairman breathing down my neck, but I just want to say this. There are those—some are on this Committee—who believe that the best chance of creating some form of secular, open, more tolerant society in Syria means that we have to be much more understanding of Assad's position; you have talked about him having his back against the wall. If we do go down that route, are we not ignoring the fact that many minorities, including Christians, have been massacred as freely by his regime as his Islamist enemies?

Patrick Cockburn: No; it's not really so. The minorities generally are terrified of the Islamists and the other side; that is the backbone of the regime. The Islamic army, which controls eastern Ghouta, east of Damascus, produced last year a video saying what they thought of the Druze, a small but significant minority. They said they are not Islamists and it's perfectly okay to kill them and to take them as slaves. Imagine what you feel if you're a Druze: you may not like Assad, but it's better than what you're being offered on the other side.

Tim Marshall: I think you should have an understanding of their position without supporting it. There are all sorts of whispers you can make to them. For example, I believe Russia and Iran are not signatories to the Hague convention, so you could whisper to them, "No one's coming after you." That is the sort of compromise I am talking about, but you absolutely need to understand that the Druze, the Christians, the Alawites and the other minorities fear an Islamist takeover of the country, and, as I said, baby steps all the way. We are allowed to disagree.

I think it's worth trying to find ways of getting air drops in. I don't think that's taking sides; it's taking sides with civilians. And there is a way forward that you have to try. But again, part of that is understanding that not all of Syria was against Assad and significant amounts of the country—they don't like him, but nor do they like the alternative. So, within that there is some way that people like yourselves can push policies towards an endgame that is some way off yet.

Anthony Loyd: I want to just step in there and tell everyone they want to be very clear about what it—understanding Assad—involves, and to use words like "tolerance" and "guarantee for minority rights". Remember the Caesar photographs—the photographs that came out of the man who documented the torture victims on behalf of the regime. There were 11,000 people tortured to death—corpses—that he was tasked with photographing, and in a comparatively short period, from 2011 to 2013.

Amnesty International says that up to 65,000 people—or more—have been "disappeared" by the regime in a similar period of time. Human Rights Watch studied those photographs of Caesar, found them to be genuine and talked about crimes against humanity. The United Nations commission of inquiry, which looked at that report, said that the Government of Syria are responsible for acts that amount to extermination and crimes against humanity.

I understand people who want to "understand" Assad, but I am absolutely convinced that that regime is the primary cancer. It might have to exist in some way, shape or form in the middle-term future, but don't delude yourselves that somehow, by cosyng up to Assad, we might swing round our long-term interests here, because it won't work—*[Interruption.]* No, sorry, I'm addressing them, not you, Patrick. Please, I'm addressing them, not you. Thank you.

Chair: Patrick, what I want to do is to give each of our panellists the last word, but I am conscious that there are some colleagues who have not had a chance to ask a question yet. One or two are kindly offering to forgo that opportunity, which is appreciated. However, Bob and Ruth, would you very quickly like to put a final point—one after the other—and then we will have a final word from each panellist.

Bob Stewart: I think Anthony, Tim and Patrick have actually covered my question pretty well. Fundamentally, there are people in Syria who are frightened sick that Daesh will murder them and therefore they are siding with Assad. I think that's the answer I will probably get from all three of you, and that will be my question answered and Ruth can go on, then.

Chair: Perfect segue.

Q380 Ruth Smeeth: I am not going to ask my question, but I am going to ask something else. We were in Moscow last week and it became clear that we had no shared language or shared understanding of history, or any possible way forward for dialogue. Yesterday, when the Minister was talking about Aleppo and refugees, he still couldn't give us—everyone just kept talking about the need to bring Russia to the table, and Russia is responsible for this, but there is no real mechanism for initiating that debate and that discussion.

Relations are at a low—probably the lowest in my lifetime. What way do you think we should be engaging with the Russians, because you have all talked about it and I have no clear path for how we actually have those conversations?

Chair: Right. Who would like to go first?

Ruth Smeeth: It is an easy question for your last word.

Tim Marshall: There is a way. They have things they want; it's up to compromise. I agree with Anthony's passionate outburst about Assad and all the crimes, but I also think, "Just stop it somehow." And if that requires the compromises to get him out of that country and to Moscow—with quiet assurances, which I'm allowed to say and you're not—fine.

As for the Russians, they've got all sorts of things they want. It's a case of how much you're going to compromise with them—how much ground you're going to give them. Obviously, there's only so much you can give them. But they are a player. They have made themselves a player in this, so you've got to talk to them, because if you don't, it doesn't get settled. So, talk to them; find out what they want; reduce the violence; think about a federal Syria; find alternative leaders; and just muddle your way forward over the next—possibly—couple of years.

Anthony Loyd: You have to keep talking to Russia. As I was saying earlier, there is a positive side to the significance of the Russian relationship with Assad, in that Russia is the conduit and persuader. I also want to say that regardless of outside decisions on foreign policy, war is not something, when it is that long term and that intense, that can just be turned off like a tap by outside powers. It is about what goes on in the street, the village and the valley. The emotions in this conflict are far hotter than can be doused by some foreign policy decision.

Patrick Cockburn: There are decisive decisions that can be taken by the Russians and the Americans, but it is difficult. To a degree, all the participants in the Syrian war and, indeed, the Iraqi war are proxies of outside powers. They might not like what the outside powers tell them, but it is difficult for them to do without money, weapons, air support and so on. The US, the Russians and, to a small degree, ourselves have that influence. The Turks, the Saudis, the Qataris and the Iranians also have influence there.

There is always a danger—this comes up here; in a second I might try to explain what is happening in Syria—that explanation can look like justification. Of course I am not justifying Assad, but I cannot think of a way to get rid of Assad, so one has to take the situation as it is and try to see what can reduce the violence and improve the situation. One cannot just say, “It would be really good if there was another way of doing this,” if that other way is not there. That is an abdication of responsibility, to my mind. Are the Russians going to let this regime be displaced? Are the Iranians? No, they are not. That really is not going to happen. But can we mitigate what the regime does by talking to the Russians? Yes, I think we can. The Americans have been doing that with some success.

We have had ceasefires for the first time in five years in different areas. They are a bit like the old ceasefires I remember during the Lebanese civil war. Everyone mocks them and can see where they are not working, but in many areas fewer people are being killed than were being killed before. That is the way to go, but you cannot say to the Russians, “Assad is going to go, and by the way, we want you to pressure him to not drop bombs on civilian places, to have ceasefires and so forth.” There is a lack of realism there, such that one eventually becomes complicit in the ongoing tragedy.

Chair: Thank you all very much indeed. We would love to go on longer, but we cannot. If there is a possibility of our staff submitting a few extra questions to you for reply in writing, would that be acceptable? We are very grateful indeed. We have covered a huge range of views and topics.