Defence Committee

Oral evidence: UK military operations in Syria and Iraq, HC 106

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Written evidence from witnesses:

- Ministry of Defence (UMO0006)

Watch the meeting

Members present: Dr Julian Lewis (Chair), Richard Benyon, Douglas Chapman, Johnny Mercer, Mrs Madeleine Moon, Ruth Smeeth, Phil Wilson

Questions 381-447

Witnesses: **Rt Hon Michael Fallon MP**, Secretary of State for Defence, **Lieutenant General Mark Carleton-Smith CBE**, Deputy Chief of Defence Staff (Military Strategy and Operations) and **Dominic Wilson**, director of Operational Policy, Ministry of Defence, gave evidence.

Q381 Chair: Welcome to this inquiry on British military policy on Iraq and Syria. Welcome back, Secretary of State—we saw you only two days ago on the subject of Russia. Would your two colleagues mind introducing themselves for the record?

Lieutenant General Carleton-Smith: Good morning. My name is Mark Carleton-Smith. I have been a serving officer in the British Army for the last 30 years and I am now the director of operations in the Ministry of Defence, a post I have held for the last four weeks.

Chair: Congratulations.

Dominic Wilson: Good morning. I am Dominic Wilson, Director of Operational Policy at the Ministry of Defence.

Chair: Thank you very much for coming here today. I am afraid our numbers are slightly depleted because of a breakdown on Tube services, but I hope that we will be augmented later on.

Q382 Johnny Mercer: Good morning. Secretary of State, could you start by outlining what the UK's national interest is in the Middle East and North Africa?

Michael Fallon: The Middle East, and North Africa to some extent, are fundamental to this country's security, stability and prosperity. We rely on a series of partnerships in the

region to help us manage threats from the region—crime, terrorism and now the challenge of migration—but we also need to ensure that the energy supplies that we rely on are secure and that our trade routes are secure, and that is why we maintain a credible and persistent defence presence in the region. This is a region that is extremely important to both our security and our economy.

Q383 Johnny Mercer: Thank you. We have done a lot of travelling around trying to understand what is the West's collective strategy in dealing with the challenges that come out of that part of the world at the moment. We certainly found in Washington that there was a real struggle to understand what is the holistic, bringing-everyone-with-you strategy that we are engaged in at the moment in that part of the world. Can you outline what that might be and whether the whole of Government is working towards that?

Michael Fallon: The strategy is to help to stabilise the Middle East where there is instability. The war in Syria has been raging for some five years now, and the instability in Iraq goes back much further than that. It is to help stabilise the Middle East, which is one of the key regions of the world, and, more recently, to counter the global terrorist threat that Daesh presents, which we all have an interest in. That is the basis on which we have assembled this extraordinary coalition of more than 60 countries involved in one way or another in combating Daesh and in helping to support the legitimate Governments of Iraq and elsewhere.

Q384 Johnny Mercer: We have heard from some, such as General Sir Simon Mayall and others, that there doesn't seem to be an all-embracing strategy that everybody has bought into and wants to see. What is the end state? What are we looking at? What is the vision that we are selling not only for the UK population to get behind, in terms of supporting military operations and so on, but for the theatre—the area where this is taking place? What is the end state? What might it look like? What might success be conditioned as?

Michael Fallon: Yes. First, General Sir Simon Mayall was a key adviser to us and to me in this work. He made a huge contribution in his period in office. In answer to your earlier question, we work at this across Government. This is not simply the Ministry of Defence but the Foreign Office, DFID and the Home Office where security is concerned. We work across Government. You see that captured in the most recent strategic defence and security review. The end state is a situation in the Middle East where these countries are stable again and we can rely on the trade routes, the energy supplies and the partnerships we need to keep this country safe, and in which elected and legitimate Governments are able to provide a future for their people that does not involve them emigrating.

Q385 Johnny Mercer: That is the end state—that is very clear—but how do we get there? What is the thinking around operations against so-called Daesh? How are we actually going after this threat? How are we actually stabilising these countries? People buy into the fact that this is what we are trying to do, but how are we doing this? How does what we are doing fit into that larger strategy with the United States?

Michael Fallon: So far as the campaign against Daesh is concerned, Daesh was probably at its peak in the summer of 2014—just before I arrived at the Ministry of Defence. We are now well into this campaign to counter Daesh in Iraq, where considerable progress has been made in pushing Daesh back west along the Eurphrates and north up the Tigris, and in liberating towns, cities and territory that it formerly held. In Syria, the situation is obviously more complicated, but Daesh has come under some pressure from the Kurdish

forces and the moderate Syrian opposition. Overall, the coalition that we have mobilised—you are right to refer to the United States' leadership—in which we and other countries are supporting the United States, is making progress.

The military strategy against Daesh is only part of a much wider strategy, which includes communications work in dealing with the way in which Daesh has been able to promote its ideology—which is led by the communications team in the Foreign Office—work against Daesh's finances and work across the security agencies and Departments to stem the flow of foreign fighters. This is a multiple effort right across the range.

Q386 Richard Benyon: The Prime Minister used the phrase "generational struggle". It's going to take a long time, and therefore a whole lot of different Government Departments are involved. A criticism that some of us have heard from somebody from a military background who is working in the Cabinet Office is that, on this issue, civil servants never seem to have—to use a military expression—a "NAAFI break"—which is an occasion in the Army when you sit and talk to people from other organisations to understand what they do. He said he finds civil servants in the Cabinet Office who do not know about the 77 Brigade or do not understand what is happening in DCLG on counter-radicalisation or do not understand what is happening in your Department. Can you reassure us that, if that is the case, it is being addressed?

Michael Fallon: It might have been the case many years ago, but since 2010 we have had the National Security Council and the national security secretariat, precisely based in the Cabinet Office, with that key co-ordinating function. That is well reflected in the most recent SDSR. I have worked in other Whitehall Departments, but since coming to the Ministry of Defence I have been pleasantly surprised at the degree of inter-Departmental co-ordination. You have seen that not just in the Middle East but in the work on Ebola in Sierra Leone, for example, where the MOD had to work alongside DFID. We do that in our work on stabilisation, peacekeeping and operations. In Iraq we are working closely with DFID on the stabilisation effort that is going to be needed as cities and towns are successively liberated.

Q387 Mrs Moon: If I can briefly take it back to the Middle East and North Africa, what have we learned from the Libya campaign of 2011, particularly in relation to the impact on neighbouring states? I am aware that, in relation to Syria, there has been huge destabilisation in Jordan and Turkey. Iraq led to destabilisation in Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, and from Libya there has been destabilisation in Algeria, Tunisia and Egypt. When we make decisions, what are we doing to make sure we are not deflecting the conflict and its impact into neighbouring states where there may not have been any problems?

Michael Fallon: There have been issues in many of those states, in North Africa in particular and indeed further south in Central, East and West Africa. I am not sure that military intervention in one state has necessarily increased instability in another, but I think you are absolutely right to ask each time what lessons we have learned. Though I was not involved in it at the time, the principal lesson I would draw from the Libyan campaign, which applies today to Iraq and Syria, is that military progress has to be matched by political progress. To some extent you can combat the terrorism and push the insurgency back and defeat it militarily, but that is not going to be lasting unless you get a political settlement that genuinely has the trust and support of the local people where that insurgency was.

Q388 Mrs Moon: Secretary of State, I absolutely agree with you about the importance of having a civilian and political settlement that builds a new and viable state, but I have to say, the impact of the Libyan conflict on Algeria in particular has been great. Many people fled south into Niger and Mali, too, and added to the conflict in those states. I must say that I disagree with you in terms of the impact there.

Michael Fallon: You are right. Libya has been unstable for a very long time. We have been working extremely hard to bring about a political settlement in Libya. We thought we might have had one by now; we thought we would have one last autumn. We now have a Prime Minister in Tripoli in charge of a Government of national accord. We are beginning to see some of the institutions of the state that he is going to need fall into place around him. I was able to speak to the new Defence Minister for the first time on Monday afternoon. We will be ready to help. We need to do that because in the end, whatever the insurgency is, the only way it is going to be defeated is by a political settlement that everybody in Libya can buy into.

Q389 Douglas Chapman: Quite a few witnesses have alluded to the fact that, although we are conducting operations in Syria and Iraq at the moment, the impact has been negligible. They have had a very small impact. From your perspective, what has the impact of the role of the UK been in the international coalition, especially since the extension of air strikes into Syria?

Michael Fallon: I will give you my answer, and then I will ask General Carleton-Smith to add from the more technical military perspective. We have made a huge contribution—I don't agree with your assertion—to the overall coalition effort. We are one of the very few countries that has been providing the intelligence. Surveillance aircraft have been flying almost nightly. We have been flying strike missions daily six days a week for nearly two years. We have made a huge contribution on the ground, too, in training a very large number of the Iraqi forces and the Peshmerga forces. The progress that the Iraqi forces and the Kurdish forces are making on both river valleys would not have been possible without that training and the close air support that the coalition provides. I am proud of the role that the RAF has played in that. Perhaps General Carleton-Smith might be allowed to add to that, in terms of the UK's impact.

Lieutenant General Carleton-Smith: We have always described Daesh and its proto-caliphate as having three dimensions. The principal one is the physical manifestation of the caliphate itself and the geography associated with that. The second is its wider virtual footprint and its subsequent connection with an affiliate network.

With respect to both degrading and containing, and setting the conditions for the subsequent defeat of Daesh in its core heartlands in the caliphate itself, the trick was to grow, regenerate and train the Iraqi security forces in the first instance so that they could stabilise the security of the capital, secure the heartlands of the Sunni population across the central belt—predominantly Anbar province and the Euphrates river valley—and then concentrate their tactical forces at some subsequent juncture to secure Mosul, which was effectively Iraq's second city and which acts as one of the twin capitals of the caliphate. The geography suggests that the forward and rather irresistible momentum that characterised Daesh's advances in 2014 and early 2015 has been halted.

Q390 Douglas Chapman: At the briefing we had earlier in the week on Monday or Tuesday, you suggested that the training of security forces and so on that had taken place in

Iraq hadn't materialised in terms of its effectiveness in the longer term. Certainly, during our visit to Baghdad, we were moving between green zones and safe zones. It is a country not at ease with itself in any sense. We have already put a lot of resource into training and making sure the Iraqi forces are in a position to protect their own state. What confidence have you got that we are not just going to maintain that cycle at that level and that we will not have to go back consistently and go through the same process again and again? That is probably what is going through people's heads—not in this Committee but in the wider world.

Lieutenant General Carleton-Smith: I don't think we have reached critical momentum yet and delivered a critical tactical mass for the Iraqi security forces. When they effectively dissolved in autumn 2014, they purported to have in the region of 180,000 to 200,000 on their books, which seemingly evaporated overnight. It takes a reasonable amount of time to regenerate a capability, to recruit from a base into a security apparatus that has got skill sets, the moral component to fight a tactically dangerous and resilient enemy, and the equipment to undertake sustained operations. We are only now into the second full year of this commitment, and certainly the coalition commanders in the theatre would expect this to be a minimum commitment of something in the region of three to five years.

Q391 Douglas Chapman: In terms of the coalition as a whole, again we have heard from the Secretary of State that the progress is slow but deliberate. You have been acting as part of a coalition and perhaps parts of the coalition are not moving as quickly as you would have wished. What is your assessment of the current coalition and military operation in Syria? Is there anything within that, as a key component of the coalition itself, that you would want to accelerate or see change? Obviously, slow and deliberate progress is perhaps good at this stage, but it is using up valuable resources and so on from our country. How do you ensure that we are part of that coalition in a much more determined way to see if we can see any light at the end of the tunnel and reach the end of the tunnel a bit quicker than you expect?

Michael Fallon: There is real momentum to the campaign now in Iraq. General Carleton-Smith may want to say a bit about Syria in a moment, but there is real momentum to the campaign in Iraq. Clearly, progress has been made: I think it took eight months to liberate Ramadi, it took eight weeks to liberate Hīt and probably just a week or so to liberate al-Rutbah, so there is a real sense of momentum of the Iraqi and Kurdish forces now advancing. That needs to be sustained.

The United States has made very clear to the coalition that this is the moment to step up, and they have asked all members of the coalition to look and see what more they can do. We are looking to see what further we can add to the particular fight and, for example, I am announcing today—perhaps the Committee will want to hear it first—that we are sending an additional Air Seeker aircraft into the theatre to improve the surveillance capability that we have. This is an aircraft that, as you know, collates and analyses intelligence, which helps us to better and more quickly identify and select targets in the campaign.

We are continuing to step up. We meet as the Defence Ministers in the coalition regularly and we are urging other countries in the coalition to do more. We have seen some very welcome announcements from other European countries that they are prepared to do more. General Carleton-Smith may want to add something about the effort in Syria.

Lieutenant General Carleton-Smith: There is a clear distinction between the coalition's contribution in support of the Iraqi Government and what it is able to manage in Syria, because clearly in Iraq we are supporting the sovereign entity and a unitary military command against a reasonably clearly identifiable military threat. Those relative advantages do not pertain in Syria, where we are marginally engaged, from the air only, across a much less homogenous battlefield, where the identification of the multifaceted parties, agencies and militias is much more difficult to determine. Therefore, with respect to harnessing a significant ground component that might maximise the tactical advantage that coalition air might provide, that clearly proves that much more difficult.

Q392 Douglas Chapman: Do you have any idea of the cost of the progress made since Parliament made the decision to move on to air strikes?

Michael Fallon: I don't think we have yet—

Douglas Chapman: Do you count the beans?

Michael Fallon: We do, very carefully, count the beans, and I am very happy to provide the Committee with an estimate of that. I do not think we have yet completely released figures for the cost in 2015-16. I think it would be best if I wrote to you.

Q393 Chair: General, I would like to follow on from what you just said. Unlike in Iraq, in Syria we are, to use your words, marginally engaged from the air only and that this is partly because of the question of who are we supporting on the ground. One of our terms of reference is to ask whether air strikes alone will be effective in degrading and defeating Daesh. From the purely military perspective, will you give your opinion as to whether air strikes on their own could defeat Daesh or simply degrade them to some extent?

Lieutenant General Carleton-Smith: My view is that air strikes on their own will not defeat Daesh, but they will both degrade them and constrain their ability to continue to develop. Materially, they are already having an effect. Of course, our contribution over Syria isn't exclusive to striking. We are also delivering substantial surveillance and reconnaissance, which are even more essential over Syria where it is far harder to make precise targeting decisions without having a footprint on the ground.

There are a number of particular target sets. The first is the ability of the caliphate to command and control itself; the second is to tackle its finances and reduce its liquidity; and the final piece is to destroy some of its critical infrastructure. I think in all three respects air power plays a vital role, but it is insufficient without co-ordination on the ground to subsequently defeat.

Q394 Chair: Exactly. That is what I expected to hear. We are saying that, if this organisation is to be defeated, it must be defeated by the use of air power in close support of forces on the ground that we feel able to support.

Can I run over some of the statistics—just to make sure I have got them right—that have been supplied in various tables? In Iraq, taking the figures from the beginning of December because that is the point at which we began air strikes in Syria as well, my understanding is that there have been over 760 air strikes in Iraq against 1,349 targets. Over the same period, from the beginning of December when we began in Syria, there have been 43 air strikes against 103 targets in Syria. Is that not pretty much what we

would expect when working closely in co-operation with active fighting forces on the ground in one theatre, Iraq, but that the same cannot be said of the other theatre, Syria?

Just to complete the set of statistics, my understanding is that our estimated number of enemy combatants killed—I appreciate it can only be an estimate—for that period from the beginning of December to the end of April in Iraq was 518, a sizeable number, but in Syria it was only 22 made up of zero in December, six in January, 16 in February, zero in March and zero in April. Would you comment on whether that is precisely what we would expect, given the different circumstances of having fighting forces on the ground in one theatre that we are closely supporting with air strikes, but not having the same helpful situation in Syria?

Michael Fallon: Let me start by saying it is extremely misleading to look at statistics in that particular way. We are able only to estimate enemy killed in action and these are very crude estimates because we obviously do not have people on the ground and we can't investigate every single attack. The aim of these missions is not to kill as many Daesh as possible, but to degrade them on occasions by tackling their leadership and in the end to try to undermine their will to fight by attacking their command and control, their infrastructure and so on. It is far too simplistic simply to measure a mission by the number of people killed. As you are implying, many of the missions are to gather intelligence rather than to inflict casualties.

The pre-planned missions are usually targeted at infrastructure. Of course we take very great care not to kill,and take care to avoid civilian casualties. Perhaps Lieutenant General Carleton-Smith might want to add to that.

Lieutenant General Carleton-Smith: I think your statistics accurately characterise the nature of the tactical campaign at the moment, which in the first instance is focused on a strategy of Iraq first. We are now in the game of the second year of building up the Iraqi security forces, and they are beginning offensive combat operations up both river lines: the Euphrates and the Tigris. Therefore, it is a logical extension that the weight of air effort will be close air support provision in order to ensure a tactical overmatch as they come up against the opposition in the river valley towns and cities.

By comparison, in Syria the object is to disrupt command and control and to interdict and disrupt lines of communication. That speaks to a target array that is principally infrastructure based. Of course, once you have destroyed the infrastructure you do not need to revisit it nearly as frequently as you do on the tactical battlefield in support of ground troops.

Q395 Chair: Well, that is precisely what I expected to hear and I am sorry that the Secretary of State thinks I am trying to extrapolate too much from the numbers of people killed—I only added that as an afterthought. The point I am trying to put to you, Secretary of State, is that in Iraq we are having something like 15 times as many air strikes as we are in Syria. I do not think that is open to dispute. The questioning has already brought out the fact that whereas many of the air strikes are in the close support of ground forces fighting in one country, they are not in the other. Indeed, in Syria they are targeted largely at infrastructure.

If you cannot tell me today, will you write to let me know how many of the 43 air strikes that have been carried out in Syria in December, January, February, March and April—a four-month period—were in support of forces fighting on the ground? If there were some

in support of forces fighting on the ground, how many of those were in support of Kurdish forces or other what you call moderate forces fighting on the ground in Syria? Have any of our air strikes in Syria been in close support of non-Kurdish fighters fighting on the ground in Syria?

Michael Fallon: Yes, they have. Most recently, in the last few days, we have had the RAF engaged up north of Aleppo in the fighting that is taking place along the Mar'a line. I think we probably could get you that kind of information but I do not have it immediately to hand. I simply add the rider that we are part of a coalition and the selection of whose aircraft is part of each particular mission is decided on a coalition basis, but we will do our best to get you that information.

Lieutenant General Carleton-Smith: May I amplify the sense that in coalition targeting there is much less of a distinction made between Syria and Iraq, because the plan is to tackle Daesh across its length and breadth. It is clearly important to pressure it in its rear areas, which in this respect is a geography associated with Syria. While the battlefield geometry and the weight of coalition effort in support of Iraqi security forces might suggest that we are not necessarily doing as much as we might in Syria, in fact we are pressuring the entire Daesh network in those areas where it is deemed most vulnerable.

Q396 Chair: I don't know whether the Secretary of State is able to tell us which forces, other than Kurds, the air strikes in the region north of Aleppo were in support of. The question in my mind is about the much-vaunted figure of 70,000 moderate fighters. If there were 70,000 moderate fighters when we began air strikes in Syria to support them, one would have expected that a considerable number of our air strikes would be in support of such forces fighting on the ground in Syria, and that doesn't seem to have happened.

Michael Fallon: Well, you haven't seen the figures yet. We will provide you with the figures.

Q397 Chair: Considering that there were only 43 raids in all against 103 targets over four months, and that a large proportion of them, as we have heard today, were against infrastructure, there cannot have been many. I have seen the figures.

Michael Fallon: You are simply referring to the RAF strikes. The coalition has been involved in this campaign. There have been strikes by a series of aircraft every night. We will get you the figures. A significant proportion even of the RAF strikes have been to support the Syrian democratic forces. You say that the figure of 70,000 is much-vaunted, but we continue to confirm that figure. All our intelligence suggests that there is still of that order of people fighting the Syrian regime. They have been fighting them now for more than five years, which itself is testimony to the size of the opposition.

Q398 Chair: We will come back later to the composition of that opposition and to what extent it is or is not Islamist. In relation to Raqqa, which has been described as our Prime Minister as the head of the snake, the Syrian defence force has been built up largely by the Americans, but my understanding is that that force, which is going to launch an assault hopefully to defeat Daesh in Raqqa, is predominantly made up of the Kurdish YPG forces. About 80% of it, I believe, is made up of the Kurds. My question is this. Supposing the Kurds and a limited number of non-Kurdish Syrian forces succeed in taking control of Raqqa, to whom will we then hand over control? I can't imagine that the Kurdish forces would be

willing or able to remain in control of Raqqa indefinitely, so under whose Government would Raqqa then proceed to be? Who would supply the occupying forces?

Michael Fallon: Well, you have made a number of assumptions there, and I would question at least some of them. There would certainly be a strong Arab component, alongside the Kurdish elements, to the forces that will eventually assemble and, I hope, encircle Raqqa. That is clearly going to be a long campaign, and we are some way off that at the moment. We already see both Kurdish and Arab elements who have been under pressure from the regime taking on Daesh in the north-west and now in the north-east of Syria. Perhaps General Carleton-Smith can add to that.

Lieutenant General Carleton-Smith: The military contribution of the Syrian democratic forces has suggested thus far that they represent the single most capable manoeuvre force with an exclusive focus on fighting Daesh. Wider opposition elements find themselves in a multiple dimensional fight against regime-backed foreign militia and other elements within the opposition itself. It represents, in some respects, the most capable and homogenous organisation with a tactical ambition, in the first instance, to secure its traditional northern Syrian Kurdish cantons.

Q399 Chair: So what we have got here is a force that hopes to take control of Raqqa—the headquarters of Daesh—and about three quarters of them are made up of Kurds. They will not be welcome there indefinitely, even if they are successful in taking control of Raqqa. So the problem that arises, as it so often does in these circumstances, is what we do after the initial military success, in terms of creating political stability. The problem we have in Syria, as you know, is that, apart from the Kurds, you have Assad on the one side and a variety of fighting organisations on the other side, the majority of which are Islamist. So who would we hand over control of that city to in the long term? I am still not clear.

Michael Fallon: In the long term—

Chair: Or even in the medium term.

Michael Fallon: In the medium or long term, we want to see Raqqa return to a legitimate authority in Syria. You say that there are all these different factions that have been doing the fighting. They have been, but they are now starting to do the talking—they are now meeting as part of the forum that we have started slowly to convene—to work Syria towards a new political settlement that is genuinely representative of all opinion in Syria, that does not contain Assad and that can start building the institutions that Syria will need, not least its own moderate Syrian forces.

Q400 Chair: Before I hand over to my colleague Richard, may I remind you of a written answer you gave in October last year, Secretary of State? You were asked "which moderate, non-Islamist groups with credible ground forces, other than Kurds, are fighting Daesh in Syria." Your response was, "There are a number of moderate opposition forces focused on fighting the Assad regime. Many are also fighting ISIL in areas of strategic importance, for example north of Aleppo"—as you said again today. You added: "The vast majority of these opposition groups are Islamist."

Similarly, in his evidence to the Liaison Committee on 12 January, the Prime Minister said in referring to the 70,000 moderates: "I repeat, though, that, yes, some of the opposition forces are Islamist. Some of them are relatively hard-line Islamist and some are what we

would describe as more secular democrats". That seemed to me to be something of a deconstruction of the idea that there are 70,000 moderate forces in support of which we are waging a military campaign in Syria.

Michael Fallon: Well, I think you are alone in continuing, even now, to cast doubt on this figure of 70,000, which we continue to confirm. It would be very odd for a battle to have been fought against the Syrian regime for five years, if there weren't a substantial number of opposition fighters.

Q401 Chair: Sorry, Secretary of State, but no one doubts that there are a lot of opposition fighters. The question is whether they are moderate or whether they are Islamists. The Prime Minister himself admitted that a significant number of the people he had been talking about are "relatively hard-line Islamist". We have had testimony from several witnesses who make it quite clear that the overwhelming majority of opposition forces—opposition people with guns—are Islamist, which is exactly what you said in October in response to the written question.

Michael Fallon: Let me come on to answer that, but first of all I am glad that you are not resiling any more from the figure of 70,000—

Chair: I am resiling from it.

Michael Fallon: Because we did hear some rather loose talk of bogus battalions.

Q402 Chair: I am sorry, Secretary of State, but I am resiling from it, because I am saying that the 70,000 so-called moderates are in fact in large part Islamist. That is why what have been called bogus battalions are bogus battalions of moderates. There are battalions of Islamists. The question is whether there are 70,000 moderates. The Prime Minister seems to have admitted, and you seem to have admitted, that these forces are overwhelmingly Islamist.

Michael Fallon: The test—since that answer in October we have now had to apply it, because we have had to consider who are the right people to engage in the talks for a political settlement—for all these groups is whether they are prepared to live within a plural political settlement that can in the end be democratic and take Syria towards elections. That is one of the tests that is applied and that I think should be applied. Perhaps Dominic would like to say a word about the nature of these Islamists.

Dominic Wilson: We are clear that the 70,000 is a rump of non-extremist opposition, which we could imagine buying into a broader political settlement in Syria. That is not to say that all of them are exactly the same. There is a range of them, but essentially they are what we view as non-extremist.

Q403 Chair: Let me close and then I will give Richard, who takes a different view from me, ample time to develop a thesis as well. Dr Frederick Kagan gave evidence to us in America. He said: "virtually all the opposition is Islamist, one way or another, at this point". I hope we can reach some convergence on this, but he went to say: "We make a distinction between those"—referring to Salafi jihadists—"and political Islamist groups tied to the Muslim Brotherhood…the likeliest source of acceptable allies that we could work with."

We have had similar evidence from other experts. It appears to be fairly well conceded that the heavy majority of the opposition fighters, as said in your own written answer, are Islamists. It is just a question of distinguishing between those Islamists who are regarded

apparently as beyond the pale, quite rightly, such as Salafists and jihadists and so forth, and other Islamists who might be more closely affiliated to organisations such as the Muslim Brotherhood. That seems to be what we are getting from the experts. Do you concur with that? Are you basically saying that the so-called moderates are what you would call moderate Islamists, such as the Muslim Brotherhood?

Michael Fallon: We can argue for a long time about these precise definitions of what is a moderate Muslim, what is an Islamist and what is somebody beyond the pale or whatever. The political process that is now getting underway does enable us to start to ask these various groups to make their choice, whether they are prepared to work with us for a political settlement and to be part, eventually, of a democratic process. To my mind that should in the end be the test as to whether they can live under some form of secular and plural settlement.

Q404 Chair: As long as their assurances can be believed, of course.

Michael Fallon: We are trying to bring peace to this country. What is really important is to get the civil war stopped, to get people to focus on the danger of Daesh and get them defeated, and give Syria a future in which its own people can have confidence, rather than being driven to making a very dangerous crossing to Europe.

Q405 Richard Benyon: In an attempt to bring peace to this Committee, I ask you to comment on this. The figure of 70,000 as a percentage of the pre-civil war population of Syria is about 0.5%. I would be surprised if there were not that number of relatively secular individuals who, given the right incentives, will be prepared to co-ordinate their activities in fighting Daesh or the regime.

The key point I would like to ask you about is this. What are we talking about here? We are not talking about little green men on one side and civilians on the other, in a binary situation. Our activities in Iraq and Syria can be in support of a structured force of some sort, or they could be to alleviate the pressure on two individuals with AK47s protecting their village. I think the Committee would benefit from a clear understanding about what we are dealing with here because this is a fluid, multifaceted conflict, with individuals protecting their house, village, valley, their faith in some cases and sometimes a concept wider than that.

I hope you might be able to bring to our Report a clear understanding about what friendly forces exist out there, accepting that there are gradations of moderation. Goodness me—there are gradations of moderation in the Conservative party, so I am sure there are in Syrian politics. It would be helpful to have a greater understanding of that.

Michael Fallon: I will ask Dominic to comment in a moment. Just to start, I think that the Committee ought to ask itself, given the might of the Syrian forces and the Syrian war machine, how they have been defied for more than five years now, since March 2011, if there were not a least 70,000 people taking them on. I do hope the Committee will reflect on how that civil war has been maintained for so long.

Q406 Chair: That is not in dispute. The question is whether they are moderates or Islamists.

Michael Fallon: They are fighting the regime. Dominic, do you want to have a go at that?

Dominic Wilson: On the question of moderates or Islamists, it comes down to non-extremists who we believe we can work with, and who we believe will be committed to an enduring political settlement in Syria when it comes. I do not have the details of the make-up in front of me, but they are made up of various groups with various different levels of military capability. I think that is the question you are getting at. Some are more organised than others. I do not know whether Mark knows any more. We could possibly write to you on that.

Lieutenant General Carleton-Smith: I would say that your characterisation sounds broadly accurate. At this stage in a very brutal and bloody struggle, a degree of pragmatism characterises the approach of a kaleidoscope of multifaceted organisations that are fighting for their lives, their freedom and their families. Therefore, in the local tactical circumstances in which so many of these individuals and small pockets of organisations find themselves, all sorts of compromises and marriages of necessity are made to survive. Whether they are more or less extreme, I would expect that they all demonstrate a kaleidoscope of loyalties, interests and objectives, some of which converge and some of which are distinct.

Q407 Ruth Smeeth: Obviously, we are working with a series of different forces and we are doing a great deal to support the Iraqi army, as it currently stands. When we were in Baghdad, we went to meet with some of them. But there have been concerning reports about human rights abuses by the Iraqi army. What are we doing to investigate them? Have we incorporated additional training into our engagement with the Iraqi army about what is and is not acceptable in the 21st-century warfare world?

Michael Fallon: Absolutely. I will ask General Carleton-Smith to add what we are doing, but this is formally part of the training that we offer. We start with assurances from Prime Minister Abadi and the Kurdish Regional Government that any allegations that are made will be properly investigated and that they, too, are committed to respecting the rules of armed conflict.

Lieutenant General Carleton-Smith: You make an important point that has been recognised by the coalition. It is absolutely fundamental, in growing new Iraqi security forces, that we do so on a basis that is compliant in the first instance with international humanitarian law, but also with the law of armed conflict. So those very specific syllabi underpin all the training that is now being applied to Iraqi security forces. Instances where it is breached and evidenced are clearly, therefore, recorded with the Iraqi Government.

Q408 Ruth Smeeth: The accusations are that this is the counter-terrorism force, which, when we were out there, was viewed as the most effective force in the theatre at the moment. Given that they are targeting—we think—Sunnis in some instances, that is not going to help us with long-term counter-terrorism efforts or with counter-radicalisation, either. That they are being reported and recorded is one thing, but what happens next? What processes are we helping to put in place?

Michael Fallon: Where allegations are made—sometimes, of course, they have come through NGOs and we hear about them—they are then raised by our embassy in Baghdad with the Government of Iraq and by the consulate general in Irbil. We have assurances that these allegations, when made, will be properly investigated. We have assurances from both—as I said, the Prime Minister and the President of the Kurdish regime. We have already had instances in which the Kurdish regional Government have conducted internal

investigations. For example, allegations were made about ill-treatment in Sinjar, in that particular operation, and those allegations have been properly investigated.

Lieutenant General Carleton-Smith: The key point is that, where those allegations are held up, the coalition removes the material support that it is providing to those specific organisations. So, for instance, where there are a variety of Shi'a militia, the coalition is not providing the close air support for those ground organisations.

Q409 Phil Wilson: Do you think that Daesh are now adapting to our strategy and changing their tactics? Do we need to change our strategy? Has it been effective? Have they adapted to it themselves, and are they therefore changing their tactics?

Secondly, if we attack Daesh one city at a time—Ramadi, Fallujah and up to Mosul—will that allow them to reinforce other areas of control? Are we in a position that we can attack Daesh simultaneously in Mosul, Raqqa and Anbar, for example?

Lieutenant General Carleton-Smith: Daesh right now are on the horns of a dilemma, whereby their strategic strength is drawn from the geography and administration of their caliphate, so in terms of protecting that, they are increasingly drawn into an attritional, conventional, tactical effort to hold and defend ground against the Iraqi security forces in particular, who will only grow in strength, competence and capability over time. So they now have to make this judgment: the extent to which they are prepared to cede the geography and territorial limits of the caliphate to preserve, first, critical combat power to protect their strategic centres of gravity, particularly in Mosul and, potentially, Raqqa; and secondly, the weight of effort that they might then allocate to an indirect approach, which would see them mutating slowly into a high-end insurgency.

At the moment, Daesh are demonstrating a degree of ambidexterity. They are clearly able to run large suicide truck bombs into the Shi'a suburbs of Baghdad, which is effective in destabilising Iraqi government and sowing fear and concern for the security of the capital, and it leads to the transfer of combat forces from the battlefield back to Baghdad to protect the city. But their ability to sustain both the conventional and the irregular effort is something that will become a much more difficult balance of resource for them over time.

As to whether it is correct for the coalition to conduct simultaneous, concurrent activity towards Mosul, up the Euphrates valley, to isolate and interdict supply routes into Raqqa in Syria, I think it is important that we view Daesh as a wider network, and that we tackle it across its depth and breadth. That includes overwhelming them with the degree of simultaneity that they are confronted by, because they will find it increasingly difficult to allocate resources against all these pressure points, particularly when their own command-and-control systems and levers are being effectively degraded.

Chair: Phil, Ruth wants to come in on that particular point, then you may resume.

Q410 Ruth Smeeth: General, may I clarify something you just said? You said that Iraqi troops, because of the threat from Daesh, are returning to Baghdad. When we were there, there was already a concern that there were too many troops from the Iraqi army in Baghdad, and that they were not being deployed elsewhere. Are we seeing more troops from the Iraqi army returning to protect Baghdad?

Lieutenant General Carleton-Smith: No; what I was saying was that the Daesh strategy, in terms of mounting a suicide bombing campaign in the capital, will be designed to fix an

excess of troops focused on the security of the capital, therefore denuding the tactical commanders in the field of them.

Q411 Ruth Smeeth: At least a third of the Iraqi army is deployed around Baghdad, or that is what we were led to believe when we were there.

Lieutenant General Carleton-Smith: That is not a statistic I would recognise.

Q412 Phil Wilson: As far as Mosul, Raqqa and Anbar are concerned, are you saying that we are getting to a position in which we can simultaneously attack those three locations or cities? Have we moved towards being able to do that?

Lieutenant General Carleton-Smith: There are three principal fronts in Iraq alone, because the Iraqi security forces are on axes up both the Euphrates and Tigris river valleys, and the Kurdish Regional Government, in terms of stabilising its front lines, is also threatening Mosul from the north, the east and the north-east. It is perfectly feasible for the Iraqi security forces to manage that degree of simultaneity, yet at the same time, across the border in Syria, Daesh is clearly having to absorb a not inconsiderable coalition air campaign against it and the prospect of having its main supply routes through to Turkey cut by the Syrian Democratic Forces.

Q413 Phil Wilson: I was going to ask about the supply routes. How successful is the coalition at disrupting the supply lines for Daesh? Are we being very successful, or are we—

Lieutenant General Carleton-Smith: No, we are being very successful on the principal, main lines of communication. In February, al-Shaddadi, which sits on the main route between Raqqa and Mosul, was recaptured by the Syrian Democratic Forces. It looks today as though they are manoeuvring to cut the main route north into Turkey that runs to Raqqa, and on Thursday/Friday of last week, the Iraqi army secured Ar-Rutbah, which sits on the main strategic line of communication between Amman in Jordan and Baghdad. It looks as though Daesh are now struggling to retain their hub and spoke concept.

Q414 Phil Wilson: That line of communication over the Turkish border is the main route for foreign fighters as well.

Lieutenant General Carleton-Smith: It is. Raqqa is considered to be the principal external attack and lethal aid facilitation node, with the access routes running north to Turkey.

Q415 Phil Wilson: There have been concerns raised that Daesh is using chemical weapons in some areas. What are we doing to support allies who may be in danger of chemical weapons attacks? What kinds of chemical weapons are they and where did they get them from?

Lieutenant General Carleton-Smith: We think there have been credible reports, principally from OPCW, as to improvised—

Q416 Chair: Sorry, what is that, please?

Lieutenant General Carleton-Smith: That stands for the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. They have independent reports, which they grade, in their words, with the utmost confidence, that there have been some isolated uses by Daesh of improvised chemical weapons, probably drawn from a variety of industrial chemical

sources. The product that they are reporting is predominantly sulphur mustard. It has not proved particularly effective on the battlefield. They have put it in explosive projectiles and landmines, and the explosion and blast itself renders the agent neutral.

Q417 Richard Benyon: Hamish de Bretton-Gordon gave evidence and he actually says it is a little bit worse than that. He has seen cases coming to hospitals that his NGO runs and he has been trying to find and source and give anti-CBRN equipment—very basic equipment—particularly to the Kurds. This is one of three very quick questions I have for you: do you think we could provide more protection, particularly as difficult operations like the taking of Mosul come nearer, given the possibility of improvised chemical weapons being part of the legacy of IEDs that they are leaving behind?

Secondly, the heavy machine guns that we have given the Kurds have been reported to us as being battle-winners and have been very welcome, with the training that came with them, but there is a shortage of ammunition. It would be a great shame if we were not able to continue to support that.

My third question is about training. It was reported to us that Kurdish commanders were saying that those troops who had gone through British Army training programmes were four times as effective on the battlefield as those who had not. May I ask for your comments as to whether those sorts of assistance will be continued or forthcoming, particularly on the ammunition point that was made to us?

Michael Fallon: Yes, as I said earlier to the Committee Chairman, each country has been asked by the American leadership of the coalition to look at the contribution that it is making to see what more it can offer. I announced some additional troops to go to Iraq back in March, and we continue to look all the time at what more we can do to support the momentum of the campaign.

On your three specific points, in terms of protection, this is something that has to be done across the coalition. It has to be done on a collegiate basis, rather than individual countries making individual offers. We are specifically asking the Iraqis to use the coalition mechanism so that we can determine exactly what they believe the risks are and can help meet those requirements when they are properly identified. That work is in hand at the moment.

On the ammunition, yes, the heavy machine guns that we supplied, which I have seen in training, have proved very effective. We are now looking at a further package of ammunition to support them. That goes through various processes, including approval by this House, but I hope that additional ammunition can be supplied in the next few weeks.

I think our training is highly valued by the Iraqi and the Kurdish forces there. I think it is actually concentrated rightly. We selected IED training right at the beginning as a specialism to offer. I think we have hit on one of the right pieces of niche training, simply because so many IEDs have been seeded by Daesh in the towns from which they have been driven. General Carleton-Smith may want to say something further about training.

Lieutenant General Carleton-Smith: The training issue is clearly progressing constructively and positively. The question is the degree to which the infantry-trained soldiers are then integrated into a wider, all-arms capability that is logistically sustainable, that has the right command and communication systems, and that has sufficient combat

engineering support, because the bulk of their activity is actually static defence along the Peshmerga berm frontline. To that extent, we would expect to sustain the effort that we are doing at the moment. The coalition commanders are not yet reflecting, with the specifics to the KRG, that there is a deficit in terms of the training pipeline and its capacity to push through. There is clearly a minimum critical mass to the reserve recruiting pool and reservoir of available manpower in the KRG, and at the moment it seems to be in balance. People are not waiting to be trained; we are able to train all those who present themselves.

With respect to Hamish's evidence, I think there is a specific point as to the degree to which the regime retain a limited chemical weapons capability. Of course, there is recognition that they almost certainly do. A significant proportion of the barrel bombs have a chlorine element to them, and there is uncorroborated evidence that they may have used the sarin nerve agent. But regime storage and production facilities associated with their previous chemical weapons regime feature high on the coalition target list.

Q418 Richard Benyon: Can you report back that we were very impressed by the training package offered by the Princess of Wales's Royal Regiment in Cyprus? All the ranks that we spoke to have done it and got something out of it themselves. If that can be developed into your ORBAT—I think it delivers what we all want in this place and what the greater strategy wants, and it is very good for the soldiers concerned.

Let me move on to talk about the ink spots that seem to be appearing on the map as Daesh's areas of control diminish. What happens then? We have touched on this before, but we are trying to get some idea of how we can support whatever emerges in that area, preventing it from being a vacuum into which other malign forces might move and making sure that there is stability, infrastructure and all the other things that we take for granted in a civilised society. What happens as they are pushed out of certain towns, villages and valleys to make sure those areas become peaceful?

Michael Fallon: That is the key challenge: not just that they become peaceful, but that the population have the confidence to return—they largely flee, of course, when these towns are being liberated—that the essentials of life will be provided and, above all, that there will be security and local policing. We do that stabilisation work in conjunction with our colleagues in DFID. Of course, it also requires continuing political reform in Iraq, and we have continued to encourage the Iraqi Government to crack on with the reforms that are needed in terms of the National Guard, local policing and giving governors the devolved powers they need to be able to organise the essentials of life for their people. Dominic may want to add something.

Dominic Wilson: No, that is exactly it. The stabilisation relies on a political framework that people are prepared to buy in to; it relies on local security that people have faith in and are prepared to buy in to; and it relies on the local services that are being provided, some at a local level and some at a national level. Counter-IED would be a classic example. The counter-IED effort, in terms of liberating areas, is of course important, but one of the shortfalls at the moment is that most of the IED capacity is in the Iraqi security forces who are clearing areas and then moving on to the next battle, potentially leaving behind a number of IEDs that we need to be able to clear through other mechanisms. We are working through the UN Mine Action Service, for example, to ensure that that's done. That is all part of the stabilisation effort, which is absolutely essential, as the Secretary of State said, to the political framework that ensures that people buy in to a return home.

Q419 Richard Benyon: My final question is about the political strategy. I am trying to understand what is being done across the board to try to make sure that there are more benign political forces that want what we all want to achieve, which is a degree of stability in this country. Is the military activity properly being backed up by efforts to encourage forces of moderation to reoccupy areas and to try to find a political solution? I recognise that that is a wider issue than just an MOD issue, but can you give the Committee some comfort that there is a real political imperative to find a solution?

Michael Fallon: There is on our part and on the part of the coalition, but my worry now is that the military progress is getting ahead of the political progress that we need—it is not being sufficiently backed up. That is why we are looking to see what we can do to help the economy of Iraq, which has obviously suffered quite significantly from the drop in the oil price. The Chancellor discussed a package of assistance through the World Bank when he was at the G7 last week, and we continue to urge political reform in Baghdad. Our diplomats have played an important role in trying to bring Baghdad and Irbil closer together and to encourage the return of the Kurdish MPs to Baghdad. We continue to emphasise to Prime Minister Abadi that this is not going to last unless he can properly bind in the tribes of Anbar and unless he can provide a degree of reassurance to the Sunni population that they are not going to be exposed again to any of the kind of malevolence that they experienced under the previous regime.

Q420 Richard Benyon: Just to be clear, is there a role for other agencies, whether it is DFID, NGOs or even the private sector, to deliver the degree of stabilisation that we are going to need once the military phase is over?

Dominic Wilson: Yes, in some cases it will be provided by NGOs. Clearly, the politics has to be solved by the Iraqis themselves and by the Iraqi Government. Local security has to be provided by local security forces that people can buy in to, but some services can be provided externally. We are putting money into that ourselves, and DFID and the stabilisation unit that we have here in the UK are working very closely on that. As the Secretary of State says, the difficulty is the pace. The military campaign is being successful, but arguably the politics and the stabilisation effort more generally are lagging some way behind.

Q421 Phil Wilson: If Daesh is defeated militarily, it has been suggested to the Committee that one of three things could happen: Daesh would turn to insurgency like the Taliban in Afghanistan; it would relocate to Libya; or it would increase the number and scale of terrorist activities. Which one of those do you think could happen, or do you think all three could happen? What are the UK Government doing to prepare for each of those scenarios?

Michael Fallon: On the insurgency, as we are doing in Afghanistan, I imagine that for a while we will have to continue to support the Government of Iraq in its counter-terrorism effort, even if Daesh is pushed out of the country. On Daesh's ability to expand abroad, we have already seen Daesh grow quite rapidly in northern Libya. That is obviously of concern, and we are intensifying our efforts now to support the new Government in Libya and to get it—of course it has 100 priorities—to focus on what needs to be done to stop Daesh spreading westwards from Sirte. I'm sorry, I've forgotten the third point.

Q422 Phil Wilson: Do you see them escalating the scale of terrorist attacks?

Michael Fallon: It is certainly possible that we will see attacks increase elsewhere in proportion to the way they are being diminished in their caliphate, and we will have to continue to be extremely vigilant about that. Do you want to add to that?

Lieutenant General Carleton-Smith: It is worth reminding ourselves that Daesh itself is an evolution from al-Qaeda in Iraq, which was an insurgency and a terrorist organisation. It will almost certainly revert back to some of those roots. It clearly has the virtual dimension, which can be sustained irrespective of its numerical and geographic strength and critical mass, and there needs to be no dilution to the international effort to continue to identify and defeat it in the internet space. Thirdly, where it becomes displaced, it lays an onus on the international community to continue to reinforce the strategy of hardening the regional neighbours in terms of their ability to be able to handle this sort of low-level ebb and flow of insurgency.

Dominic Wilson: On external attack planning, the success that we are having on the ground in Iraq and particularly in Syria puts pressure on Daesh and their ability to engineer and launch external attack plans. When they are feeling squeezed and under pressure, there is an argument that that is the point at which they resort to it—there is that argument. Equally, they find it harder to operate as well when they don't have the freedom, the time and the space to do that planning.

Q423 Phil Wilson: What in general is the UK doing to counter the ideology and the financial revenue that ISIS or Daesh is getting? On the logistical strands of Daesh, what are we doing holistically to try and defeat them on all fronts, not just the military one? I am thinking specifically of the financial aspect.

Michael Fallon: Yes, it is a battle that has to be waged right across the spectrum. There is work going on to limit Daesh's access to finance. In the early days, they seemed to be able to trade in oil quite successfully. They seemed to be able to get some revenue from selling art, artefacts and antiques around the world. That, too, is being constrained, so there is a lot of work going on to limit their sources of revenue.

On strategic communications, we take the lead here in the United Kingdom. We have a strategic communications cell in the Foreign Office that is staffed by people from other countries. It links up what we are all doing to combat some of their messaging through new social media, to take down websites and to reduce the amount of tweeting and whatever else they employ. There is a lot of work going on there to try and make it more difficult for them to get their message out.

There is also work going on to limit the number of foreign fighters joining them. There is some evidence now that the numbers have dropped off quite markedly from the early days as the different countries of western Europe have begun to tighten their controls to restrict people's travel and take passports away from those who are likely to go off and fight Daesh. They are all now developing, as we have now for some time, their own deradicalisation programmes at home. So the military part of this is just one strand.

Q424 Phil Wilson: On the finance side, do we have any evidence of private donations to Daesh from individuals from other states?

Michael Fallon: I don't have information about the private flows. Obviously there aren't countries financing Daesh. There may be some private flows of finance in, but we have to

make that harder. We are doing some work to understand Daesh's particular financial networks, their—

Dominic Wilson: Hawala.

Michael Fallon: Well done! We have work in hand to understand their hawala system of finance and to cut down on some of the intermediaries they may have been using.

Q425 Phil Wilson: What kind of analysis are we doing to find out how much of a threat Daesh affiliates pose to the countries in which they are situated? We know about Libya, but what other affiliates are there, what analysis have we made of their threat, and what kind of threat do they pose to the UK?

Dominic Wilson: It is mainly the intelligence agencies, the Joint Terrorist Analysis Centre and others that are doing that kind of analysis. There are very different kinds of groups. Some affiliates have just taken the name. Some have bought into the ideology and are using the brand. Some aspire to have more established links with Daesh in Iraq and Syria. There are a mix of individuals and groups at differing stages of development, but the agencies are obviously keeping an eye on them all. Key to the strategy to deal with that is that, while they are in their relative infancy, you have the opportunity to nip them in the bud through, as Mark said, building the capacity of local security forces and agencies to deal with the problems before they expand.

Q426 Phil Wilson: Do we have any intelligence on whether any of these affiliates are a direct threat to the United Kingdom?

Michael Fallon: I'm afraid I would not want to comment in open session on the intelligence we have, but the franchising of Daesh can clearly happen very rapidly. We need to be aware of exactly that particular danger, but I would not want to be drawn on that any further.

Q427 Ruth Smeeth: I'd like to move temporarily away from Daesh for a second, because they are not the only threat we face on the ground in Syria. We have heard significant evidence about the threat posed by Jabhat al-Nusra. Some of that evidence suggests that in the longer term the threat to coalition forces will come from them rather than Daesh. What preparations are being put in place, not least because we know they are currently attacking the allies we are supporting in the Free Syrian Army? What additional support are we providing?

Lieutenant General Carleton-Smith: The Nusra Front is one of the very most extreme, hard-line Salafi jihadi groups. It emerged in Syria in 2011 as an adjunct to Daesh, which was then very Iraq-centric. It is probably the strongest AQ franchise globally. It has its stronghold in Idlib province. It is certainly a spoiler in the political process in Syria and might represent a Petri dish that becomes a threat to UK national security. It has refused to sign the cessation of hostilities agreement, but it's probably not an homogeneous group at the moment. A significant proportion are Syrian-focused, and they provide a wider wrapping to those much more specifically AQ-aligned elements that might harbour ambitions to use Syria as a springboard for international terrorist attack planning. The ratios between the Syrian elements and the external-facing elements probably vary region to region.

There is potentially a small element of British foreign fighters associated with it; the specifics remain unclear. The strategy is to continue to deny it the political and operational space, including the communication platforms that it has used in the past, and to encourage the wider coalition allies not to regard it as a tool that can be used and manipulated in Syria, but to recognise it as a wider and enduring common threat. We are not specifically targeting the al-Nusra Front at the moment, although if we were to determine that there was a specific, direct and imminent threat to UK national security, we would legally be able to do so.

Q428 Chair: I will just follow up on that. As Ruth said, we heard some quite strong testimony to the fact that, in the longer term, al-Nusra could be the worse threat. Tim Marshall, for example, said Jabhat al-Nusra is "much deeper inside the opposition movement" than Daesh, and "it is a longer term threat to Syria than ISIS." Anthony Loyd said that "Jabhat will be a far longer-term entity in Syria," when agreeing with what Tim Marshall said. Is the danger we face that, while ISIS has been unusual in seizing and holding territory, thus making it more visible, once the campaign succeeds in taking that territory back, we will face a longer term, more typical international terrorist threat, without the advantage of being able to see what is happening? A lot will depend on the nature of the Government in Syria as to whether this major al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria is allowed to form a new springboard for worldwide terrorism?

Lieutenant General Carleton-Smith: There is a real danger that it will remain an abscess in the system.

Q429 Chair: Nothing more than that?

Lieutenant General Carleton-Smith: Well, I think much more than that is to speculate as to what the endgame really looks like. When one gets to a scenario where there is an enduring and enforceable ceasefire that sets the conditions for a political conversation and transition, the assumption is that a political framework, supported by a security apparatus—including with the international community's contribution—is afforded sufficient resilience and capacity to be able to target that specific threat, which would only survive if it was left with the space to do so.

Q430 Chair: You can see what is at the back of my mind, which is, if we end up with the successful removal of Daesh/ISIL, but with an Islamist Government in place, that Government—even a moderate Islamist Government, such as a Muslim Brotherhood-oriented one—would be ill-equipped to contain a lasting threat from effectively al-Qaeda in Syria. We know what al-Qaeda can do when it has a base.

Lieutenant General Carleton-Smith: Yes, but we also know what the international community is able to do with respect to neutering the AQ senior leadership threat in northern Waziristan, so I don't necessarily think the scenario is potentially quite as dramatic and insoluble as you might infer.

Chair: That is very clear and encouraging. Thank you.

Q431 Richard Benyon: There are those who say that, in order to achieve that enduring ceasefire and the development of a political process that the general has just described, we have got to do something that is very difficult: appease Russia. We have got to work with them both strategically and on the ground, and in order to achieve that we might have to row

back on some of our stances against Russia for their other activities in places like Crimea. What is your comment on that, Secretary of State?

Michael Fallon: We touched on this on Tuesday. It is perfectly possible and proper for us to engage with Russia where we have interests in common while maintaining our very sharp disagreement with and condemnation of what Russia has been doing in the Crimea and Ukraine. We have engaged with Russia. Russia was a key part of bringing about the settlement in Iran on nuclear power, has been engaged in the Syrian peace process and is now beginning to get involved in the Libyan talks as well. We continue to urge Russia to play a role and use its influence constructively towards a future settlement in Syria. They need to do so, and it is within their gift to do so. It certainly need not be linked to our policy anywhere else, if that's what you were suggesting.

Q432 Richard Benyon: Yes, but some people suggest that we should be going much further, and perhaps even examining sanctions, because—

Michael Fallon: The sanctions, Mr Benyon, are not there as a punishment; they are there as a condition. They will continue to apply until the Minsk agreements are respected. They are not there for any other purpose. They are not part of a general policy; they are very specific. Russia can have those sanctions lifted if it gets on and encourages the full implementation of Minsk.

Q433 Richard Benyon: Strategically, on the ground, it must be a very confusing aspect. We spoke with the team that are targeting in Syria, and I know that there are discussions to match areas of activity to ensure, for a start, that there are no accidents. But it must be very confusing when a country like Russia, with its power, moves in and starts operating across the piece with relatively little co-operation with the coalition.

Michael Fallon: There are more than discussions—there are arrangements in place to de-conflict the airspace to ensure that there are sufficient gaps between aircraft and so on—but there is not co-operation or co-ordination of targeting. We are very clear about that. Russia is not part of the coalition effort.

Q434 Chair: Should we be pleased or sorry that the Syrian Government, with Russian and other outside help, have regained Palmyra from Daesh?

Michael Fallon: I don't think I am pleased or sorry about anything that happens in Syria. Do you want to add to that?

Lieutenant General Carleton-Smith: If it means that what remains of the historic site of Palmyra is preserved, that is probably a net benefit. I think the strategic advantage for Palmyra and Tadmur for Daesh would be control of the associated gas fields, and it is important that that does not fall into their hands.

Q435 Chair: So there can be some circumstances in which, in a choice between the lesser of two evils—in this case, Palmyra was either going to remain under Daesh control or be seized by the Syrian Government and their Russian backers—it might be a net benefit for the Syrian Government to make some progress.

Lieutenant General Carleton-Smith: Well, I am pretty certain it is a net benefit to those people who continue to survive in Palmyra today.

Q436 Chair: Thank you for that. A second question arises from this; I think I know the answer already. Do you accept, Secretary of State, that it is perfectly possible to stand up strongly against Russia where our interests clash in one theatre, such as central Europe and eastern Europe, while for hard-headed tactical reasons finding ways in which we can co-operate with Russia, given that that is sometimes the only alternative to the continuing control of territory by Daesh terrorists?

Michael Fallon: Broadly, I do accept that, and not just for hard-headed reasons; for humanitarian reasons. It is within the gift of Russia now to bring this indiscriminate killing and shelling to an end, to use its influence constructively and to respect the ceasefire that we thought we had organised back in February. It is within Russia's gift to do that and we will continue to encourage them to do that, while taking—perhaps the hard-headedness is on the other side—the hard-headed approach to what they have been doing in Europe.

Q437 Chair: You mentioned the ceasefire there. The ceasefire, of course, did not apply to Daesh; everyone was allowed to go on fighting Daesh. That means that with the Syrian Government forces under less pressure from opposition fighters other than Daesh, the Syrian Government with their Russian backers have been able to go on the offensive rather more than they did in the past against Daesh. Colonel Steve Warren, the US Department of Defence spokesman, said on 20 April that,"when the Russians first came in, they claimed that they wanted to fight ISIL, and in reality, only a small fraction of their strikes were against ISIL. About 80 percent of their strikes were against the opposition. Since the cessation of hostilities was declared, we have seen that shift…At one point…in the last…week or so, the Russians we estimated—really more than 70 percent of their strikes were against ISIL." Does that not suggest that if there could be some form of hard-headed—I use the term again—co-operation with Russia, it would be easier to get rid of the ISIL menace, rather than trying to have a situation where we want ISIL to lose and the Syrian Government forces to lose as well?

Michael Fallon: That sounds superficially attractive, but it would leave the moderate forces at the mercy of the regime. We have seen the indiscriminate nature of the regime's attacks on them, not respecting the laws of war, in which thousands of civilians have been killed. Perhaps General Carleton-Smith will give you a better military answer.

Lieutenant General Carleton-Smith: Well, I suspect that where they have reapportioned their assets from attacking the opposition to Daesh, it is where they have been confronting competition for the strategic natural resource of the country and where the regime and Russia's own strategic interests have been threatened by Daesh, not as a net contributor to the wider international effort to defeat Daesh.

Q438 Chair: Once again we come back to the question of what sort of regime will be left at the end of all this. Perhaps it is for another occasion to revisit the question of how moderate the moderate forces are, but this seems to be the key point: whether we end up with either a brutal dictatorship once again or an Islamist regime, which might be unhelpful in the global war against terrorist movements.

Michael Fallon: I am not sure that the choice ought to be as stark as that. That is why we are working in the International Syrian Support Group to bring about a better alternative. Syria has had elections before; Iraq has had elections; Afghanistan has had elections. There is no reason why we could not lead Syria, in the fullness of time, after this appalling

war, towards a settlement where it has the kind of plural democratic Government that Iraq has.

Q439 Chair: And you think Russia might be willing to allow Assad to be replaced then?

Michael Fallon: I would hope so. There have been some signs towards that.

Q440 Johnny Mercer: I wanted to come back to the broader strategy that we were talking about earlier. Thank you very much for coming along today. The challenges around this are pretty humbling—both the scale and the complexity of the threat that you as a team are up against at the moment.

It is quite difficult to really grasp what the strategy is. General Carleton-Smith, do you feel that the men and women who are serving on these operations really get it? Do they get the bigger picture—do they get what we are going after? Is there more that you would like from the Government or from us in Parliament? Do they feel entirely unencumbered in this fight to degrade, to set the conditions for success and whatever that success may look like in the Middle East?

Lieutenant General Carleton-Smith: You will recognise more than most, in a sense, the professional satisfaction that those engaged in this sort of struggle draw from it. We have already heard the extent to which the Princess of Wales's Royal Regiment found it professionally stimulating and challenging in terms of supporting the training of the peshmerga. I don't think that the British Army per se feels that it lacks public support, material sustainment or indeed a clear sense of the purpose and object of the coalition effort in Iraq and Syria. They have a clear recognition now of the wider threat that Daesh represents. They are working in support of an international effort and, more importantly with respect to Iraq, a sovereign Government that needs to survive.

Q441 Johnny Mercer: On a more general point, to people like me, who have a very low-level understanding of and engagement with these things, it would seem that we have made two fundamental errors, which have characterised the last 15 years of engagement. One of those is the failure to really go for corruption, perhaps in Afghanistan, and things like that in the fight at the moment. The second is the inability to have the political stomach for the fight. We have often seen previous operations in the Middle East and in Afghanistan defined by the electoral cycle, in some cases. The feeling that we have certainly come across, from witnesses to this Committee and from visits to Baghdad and so on, is that we need to fundamentally rethink how we go about these things. We need to have the stomach and the will to really see these things through. How do you think we can do that better, both in Parliament and nationally? Do you think we need to be completely rejigging or rethinking how we see these operations, as we tackle these more diverse threats around corruption, counter-insurgency, asymmetric threats and all the rest of it?

Michael Fallon: These are big questions.

Johnny Mercer: Sorry.

Michael Fallon: I will do my best. These are big questions, and it may be that when the Chilcot report is published it will give us further guidance towards answering them. On corruption, you have to be right; I think we have to do far more to deal with the degree of corruption in these countries. The Prime Minister has taken a lead recently, in the anti-corruption summit, on transparency, on the way in which our aid is more carefully

directed and on the pressure that we and others are bringing to bear on some of these regimes to root out corruption in their countries.

On the bigger questions of whether we have the stomach for it and whether we are doing it in the right way, I think we have learned that these are very long campaigns, to try to establish some of the values—not necessarily Western values—that we take for granted here: freedom to be able to get rid of a regime that you don't like; freedom to own property; freedom of expression. To get these values rooted in areas where they have not previously grown is a long-term undertaking; it takes years and billions of pounds and dollars.

Thirdly, I think we have learned that when you are dealing with insurgency and terrorism, in the end it has to be done by local forces. Simply putting Western boots or British boots on the ground is not the total answer, as we have learned fairly painfully in successive wars in Afghanistan. But let's have a better military reply to these questions.

Lieutenant General Carleton-Smith: I thought that was very clear, Secretary of State. You have spoken about whether we have the endurance for it. If we think we need to have a sustained commitment, there is clearly something about wider and better informed strategic communications publicly, as to the purpose and degree of commitment that the nation should expect and whether it is prepared to match that commitment with the resource and the political stomach, as you termed it, to see this thing through.

From the military perspective, we have learnt that a campaign is of finite duration, even if the problem endures, and there is therefore a limit to political tolerance for that duration. We need to use the time that we do have to best effect. I think we might reflect that on Afghanistan, we spent a near decade organising our inputs rather than being very clear about what our outputs were and ruthlessly focusing on those.

We also determined that to get to the root of the problem, we had insufficient boots on the ground and, therefore, that the key metric was mass, but then discovered that mass was subordinate to legitimacy. If there were reservations locally about one's very presence, one was not necessarily a net contributor. We deduced from that that we needed an indigenous proxy—a legitimate element—with which to engage. It is easier in the countries where that exists, and it is that much more difficult in countries where one has to create it.

Dominic Wilson: The only thing I would add brings us back to where we started—or almost where we started—about the whole-of-Government approach to these problems. Certainly in the 20 years that I have been dealing with them—20 years ago they felt like very military problems for Ministries of Defence to deal with. It is so different from that now, partly—as the Secretary of State said—because of the National Security Council construct, but partly because of the way that the machine works underneath that. They are truly inter-agency problems and we approach them in exactly that way. That is a necessary lesson that we have learnt over the years.

Q442 Chair: In evidence to the Committee, General, your former colleague, Jonathan Shaw, used a rather striking phrase. He said that successive British Governments could be criticised for intervening in countries and regions that they did not understand and trying to achieve what he called "cultural change on a management consultant timeline."

What I take that to mean is that, in many cases, countries can be at a stage of development that might even be 100, or several hundred, years away from the point of being able to make democratic institutions work. Do you all feel that we have sufficiently understood that? Because if we haven't, we perhaps ought to think what politics in this country would have been like 500 years ago and how well it would have worked—when we were burning people at the stake for heresy—if someone had tried to impose 20th-century democratic institutions upon us. Have we absorbed that lesson sufficiently in the case of countries like Syria, for example?

Michael Fallon: I think—others may want to contribute—you are right to remind us that a degree of humility is needed in these things. When I travel abroad and meet other Governments, I am always quick—when they talk about the mother of democracy and all that—to remind them that it is still less than 100 years in which women have voted in this country. We have not always been this perfect democracy—it is only relatively recently. I am struck, too, by the change that took place in West Germany and Japan after the second world war. It was a collective effort by the West, and largely by the United States, of years and, as I said earlier, of billions of dollars and a very large standing force. It was a colossal effort over, as Mr Mercer said, several electoral cycles. A weight of effort was required, so General Jonathan may be on to something there. Now, who would like to improve on that?

Dominic Wilson: I don't think I can improve on that, really. If Jonathan's point essentially is that these things take time, that has to be absolutely right.

Lieutenant General Carleton-Smith: I think General Shaw occasionally goes further than your quote and says, actually, that it is the wrong political soil and we tried to bureaucratise and politicise tribal societies. I think that is probably unduly pessimistic, but it depends on the frame of duration.

Chair: Those were three very interesting answers. Thank you.

Ruth Smeeth: As someone who would not have been sitting here 100 years ago, I had better make this a good question.

Chair: Two good questions.

Q443 Ruth Smeeth: Obviously, our battle against Daesh and other partners is very different and one of the necessary evils is that we are giving resources and support to people who are accountable not to this Parliament or this House, but more broadly. How will we deal with the future consequences, given that this sets a new standard? It is a breakdown of the rules-based international system. In the long term, how are we going to deal with the fact that we are engaging individuals?

Dominic Wilson: I am not quite sure who you are referring to in the question.

Q444 Ruth Smeeth: It is more that as the system has changed, we are now, in our battle against Daesh, picking people who are not state actors. We are working with and providing resources to people in a way that is outside the previous typical international framework. There will be consequences to that in the long term. Have we started thinking about what they may be and how we will deal with them?

Dominic Wilson: As a general rule, we don't use non-state actors. The model in Iraq, supporting a sovereign Government, is the one that normally applies and that we would

favour. There are exceptions when that is not possible and we have touched on some today.

The quick answer to your question is that you need to think very hard about who you are providing support to, the nature of those individuals and the longer-term consequences of doing that. Some of those judgments may sometimes be very fine and difficult, but that is essentially the process we apply to any kind of support for a force, whether it is indigenous or the law of armed conflict.[1]

Q445 Ruth Smeeth: So we are using the same criteria, regardless of whom we are giving support to and whether it is a state actor or a local force.

Dominic Wilson: Fundamentally we are. It is in line with the law of armed conflict and how we expect any support we give to be—

Q446 Chair: We are giving support to groups in Syria that are non-state actors—I think that is what we are trying to get at—and therefore we must obviously look at that very carefully.

Michael Fallon: We are not giving them material support. We are not giving them lethal support. We are being quite careful about that. When we train them outside Syria, we are very careful about the groups we train and in the training we insist on respect for the law of armed conflict, as we said.

Ruth Smeeth: My second question is, I hope, slightly more cheerful.

Michael Fallon: Please.

Q447 Ruth Smeeth: It might be a nice end point. At some point, please God, hostilities will end in Syria and we envisage a peacekeeping force of some kind at that point. Have we started thinking about and planning for a British contribution to such a force? I am assuming that, given all our commitments to getting thus far, we would be prepared to contribute if it is going to work. Will our boots on the ground have a positive or negative impact?

Michael Fallon: That is the key criterion. It will be for the new Government of Syria to make it clear exactly what security assistance they require. The new Government in Libya is very clear that they do not want foreign troops on the ground. They see that as undermining their authority right from the beginning. Obviously, we can offer training, material assistance and that kind of thing, but we are not deploying troops there.

I think it would depend on the demand from the Syrian Government. We have a strong record of assisting and peacekeeping. As you know, more recently, we have sent peacekeepers to Somalia and South Sudan in addition to our peacekeeping in places like Cyprus and so on.

Chair: Thank you very much. It only remains for me to say this has been an excellent session. We have covered a huge amount of ground and it has been particularly impressive testimony, so thank you, Mr Wilson, thank you, Secretary of State, thank you, General Carleton-Smith.

[1] Note by witness: The key consideration would be ensuring consistency with international law, particularly the law of Armed Conflict.