



Select Committee on International Relations

Corrected oral evidence: Transformation of power in the Middle East and the implications for UK foreign policy

Wednesday 26 October 2016

10.30 am

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Members present: Lord Howell of Guildford (The Chairman); Baroness Coussins; Lord Grocott; Lord Hannay of Chiswick; Baroness Helic; Lord Inglewood; Lord Jopling; Lord Purvis of Tweed; Lord Reid of Cardowan; Baroness Smith of Newnham; Lord Wood of Anfield.

Evidence Session No. 2

Heard in Public

Questions 11 - 19

Witnesses

I: Dr Renad Mansour, Asfari Fellow, Middle East and North Africa Programme, Chatham House; Professor Ali Ansari, Professor of Iranian History; Director of the Institute for Iranian Studies, University of St Andrews.

USE OF THE TRANSCRIPT

1. This is an uncorrected transcript of evidence taken in public and webcast on www.parliamentlive.tv.

Examination of witnesses

Dr Renad Mansour and Professor Ali Ansari.

Q11 The Chairman: Professor Ansari and Dr Mansour, welcome this morning. Thank you very much for visiting us. As is routine in these matters, I should explain that the discussion and evidence session are in public. A transcript will be available afterwards and you will be able to alter and edit anything that concerns you in it. That is the way we proceed. Again, thank you for being with us.

Our concern, which is the beginning of what we think will be a fairly extensive inquiry, is, in shorthand, the new Middle East, but really the transformations and redistributions of power that are going on in the whole region and the implications for the rest of us in the world, obviously including the United Kingdom, where we are sitting now. This is a broad picture and we have to draw a framework around it, which is quite difficult. When we have done so, we hope that we will be able to illuminate some new scenes and aspects for people to consider.

I will start, Professor Ansari, with a specific question to you, but please, Dr Mansour, do not hesitate to come in if you want to. Perhaps we can start with what has been in the headlines in the past year or so, which is the so-called deal persuading Iran to ameliorate its prospective nuclear weaponisation and, with it, the possibility of reducing sanctions and opening up a new relationship. How do you see that deal? How is it seen in Iran, on the home front, and what are the prospects for the deal's sustainability?

Professor Ali Ansari: Thank you very much. I have made it clear for some time that I think the way in which the deal has been sold has been on the reckless side. I think that, as a transactional deal, it works; it works within the strict parameters that it has set for itself. It is focused on very technical aspects of Iran's nuclear programme in return for an alleviation of sanctions on Iran's nuclear programme. It is time-limited, so that, from the Iranian perspective and political point of view, as long as they adhere to those aspects of the agreement, once the 10 or 15 years are up they will be able to move ahead with, in their words, an industrial-scale enrichment programme, should they choose to do so. Some people on this side of the debate would probably look at that with a little concern, but that is what the deal, from the Iranian side, indicates.

On a popular level, there was a lot of anticipation and expectation that the sanctions relief would be broad and pretty immediate. A lot of that had to do with the fact that President Rouhani sold it in very colourful terms. The politics in the United States probably did not help, either. There was a lot of talk of a new dawn, a resetting of new relations and so on and so forth. All this depended on a sequence of developments emerging from the agreement. In Washington, the gamble is that Rouhani can pull this off and use the nuclear agreement to essentially transform the internal politics of the country, which was always a big ask.

Those of us who observe Iran quite closely thought that he would have a hell of a job on his hands to try to do that. In the first two to three years of his presidency, he did not indicate that he was keen to do it. On the other hand, Rouhani himself was very dependent and gambled on the fact that sanctions relief would be the key to unlock various issues and that there would be a huge influx of investment into the country in a way that would support him.

In my view, the weakness—I would not want to call it a flaw—in the way it had been organised is that the political hinterland of the agreement had not been prepared well enough. I fully understand the politics and diplomacy of it, in that you focus on the one thing you think you can solve and, once you get that done, you think that that will move on to other things. But in the broader lay of the land, if you looked at the hawks both in Washington or even in Iran, neither side was really prepared for this great detente that the agreement's supporters were trying to push. At the end of the day, problems emerge from Iran's regional reach, for example, particularly in Syria, which Kerry said recently is causing image problems at the very least for Iran, given that it wants sanctions relief. On the other side, within Iran, you have this sequence. For example, this week has been bad for the arrest of dual nationals. The idea that you are going to arrest dual nationals and put them on trial for two hours in camera, convict them and then sentence them to 10 or 18 years in prison does not encourage a tremendous amount of business confidence. The problem with the agreement is that it relies on momentum to keep going and it is in real danger of stalling, if it has not stalled already.

The Chairman: That is a very telling comment. It is odd that people are busy reacting to the deal as if it is done and permanent, with air routes opening up, businesses examining how they can get in there and people quarrelling about who is entitled to start dealing with Iranian business, with different views around the world. People are reacting as though all this is settled and fixed in concrete, but you have told us that it is in fact pretty precarious. Presumably there are other precarious elements in the US Congress and obviously inside Iran.

Professor Ali Ansari: I think that you have to look at it as a process. Implicitly in the agreement, it will be tested in practice. To be fair, the Iranians have adhered to the early elements of dismantling those parts of the programme that they were asked to. They feel that they have not been given the sanctions relief that they expected. In fact, in the terms of the agreement, the sanctions relief that was outlined has been delivered. They were expecting it to be far more comprehensive, although some people clearly did not read—I would not say the small print—the agreement properly.

The problem was and always has been that, to give you an example, even last January, a number of Iranian officials were saying, "Once we do all the things we have to do, the sanctions will be lifted and permanently eliminated". That was the impression that they gave and it has come

back to haunt them. The sanctions have been suspended, not lifted, and they have not been as comprehensive as they were described. The Iranians have argued—and to some extent they are right about this—that they have shattered the international coalition against them. That is in some ways true, in the sense that the Russians and the Chinese are unlikely to come back and support UN sanctions against Iran.

They miscalculated two things, I think. One is the strength of US sanctions against them. There was a curious anomaly in their whole negotiation where, even according to Foreign Minister Zarif, they are not interested in access to US markets or US financial markets, which I thought was peculiar if you are planning to integrate into the global economy. If they never asked for it, that is a flaw in the agreement, because that hampers them. This idea that you can get the sorts of sanctions relief that you were promised when the Americans are not really lifting their sanctions will make life very difficult for them.

The second point, as I was trying to say, is that I do not think they fully appreciate just how competitive they have to be to get the sort of business interests they want—the word I have used with them is “competitive”. It is particularly so with the oil price down, which is nobody’s fault. But I think they assumed, “We’ll be open for business and everyone will rush in and absolutely love doing business with us”. As someone pointed out to me, the Iranian banking sector is in a mess. If there were no sanctions on Iran, its banking sector would still be in a mess. It will not be easy for international banks to say suddenly in our post-2008 situation, when everyone is far more cautious about lending and so forth, that Iran is the best place to do business when everything is so opaque.

A number of Western companies have shown a lot of enthusiasm but I would make a distinction between selling things to the Iranians such as Airbuses and Boeings, even though that may not be going as fast as they would like, and investing in the country. What Iran needs is investment. Simply recycling foreign currency will make them feel good, yes, but for a short time. I have also criticised the Airbus and Boeing purchase. Iran does not need 200 or 300 airliners. It is an absurdly ambitious project and reminds me of the Shah, to be honest, although at least he had money. I think the number of planes IranAir actually has on its books at the moment is 46, of which much fewer actually fly. The idea that it is suddenly going to expand this tenfold—to which markets will that be? They talk in very grandiose terms. I am sure that Airbus is thrilled that they want to buy 12 A380s but I would be really interested to know where the passengers are going to come from. This sort of thing tells me that there is less strategic planning in Iran than there really needs to be.

Lord Jopling: But surely it is not just the internal US sanctions; it is the effect of US law on people much more widely abroad who are finding it impossible, because the threat of the US taking action against non-US operators is causing so much of the trouble. My question to you is: to what extent is this logjam caused by the attitude of the United States

Congress? I was in Washington when Netanyahu was there and made that speech to the Congress. If I remember, they came to their feet about 47 times in response to his total rubbishing of the deal before it was finally settled. I said to myself at that time, seeing the support that Netanyahu got, "These people will never make trade with Iran a possibility and have the whole thing hogtied". To what extent can the situation be loosened, relieved and opened up if the United States Congress was to change the law and enable that to happen?

Professor Ali Ansari: You are absolutely right that the US Congress is a major issue, or even a problem, in terms of relations with Iran. This is what I mean by the political hinterland; I do not think enough has been done to bring people on board. There was certainly a window of opportunity last year, after the agreement—I was going to say "was signed" but obviously it never was—was made and up to about February. There was a view that there could have been one, certainly with Democrat senators and congressmen.

The interesting thing—you made this point very well—is that there is a lot of cross-party consensus on that view. Look at the Democrats: they are also not terribly keen. In this respect, you have to say that the Iranians face a very difficult political situation in the United States, which really comes from 1979. There is no doubt about it. The Iranians might claim that they have grievances going back further, to 1953. I do not want to get into the history but the fact is that in the United States, you can see these fairly well entrenched views. The question has to be how you ameliorate that to some extent.

To give you an example, if you want to understand the US mentality, when these US sailors wandered rather ineptly into Iranian waters, there was a point where you would have thought that the Iranians handled it reasonably well, by seizing them and then getting them out. What was probably gratuitous after that, however, was to have lots of parades and floats around the city with people mocked up as crying American sailors, which would then be shown on US TV. This will not win friends and influence people in Washington. That is one example; there are then the dual nationals who were taken. This allows, if one may say so, the hawks generally to say, "Look, they are not being terribly friendly".

The problem with Congress is very real. There is a small possible window of opportunity here: if in the elections on 8 November the Republicans do extremely badly and lose control of Congress, you might find that the renewal of ILSA¹ and the sanctions does not go through as quickly as people would like. I am a bit sanguine about that, in the sense that there are many Democrat hawks as well as Republican hawks, if I may put it that way. There are means and ways of softening that. There was a hope, because President Obama had in effect sold it as such, that this was to be a new opportunity. Sadly, as you see in this case you have the hawks in Iran and in the United States, who do a great job of feeding off—or, how

¹ The (US) Iran and Libya Sanctions Act of 1996

shall we say, informing—each other and encouraging a hardening of their positions. It just makes life very difficult.

The Chairman: Dr Mansour, we will come to some wider issues in a moment. There is just one more area on Iran from Lord Hannay.

Q12 Lord Hannay of Chiswick: If we could turn back to where you started your reply to the first question, which was about the exclusion from the deal of any non-nuclear issues—such as Iran’s activities in Syria, Yemen, Lebanon and so on—then for the record, I do not share your view. I think that if those things had been included, it was inconceivable there would have been a deal at all.

Leaving that to one side, could you say something about how the nuclear deal has influenced Iranian foreign policy and what it has done for Iran’s influence in the region? That will obviously have something to do with the difficulties that the West will have in dealing with Iran’s activities in these areas.

Professor Ali Ansari: I should also clarify my own position. In an ideal world, yes, I would have liked it to have been a much broader grand bargain. I quite understand the position which says we would probably never have got there if we had gone so broad. In terms of a political hinterland, I am talking more about preparing the ground with Congress and others; to make the mood music a bit better, I suppose. I think the anticipation was that after the JCPOA,² we would then move on to Syria and other topics of mutual interest.

What has actually happened is that, for several reasons, the Iranians have started to show a much more robust and muscular regional foreign policy. They quite clearly seem to have stepped back on their nuclear programme. They therefore have to compensate their own hard-line constituency by appearing to say, “We have not caved in on everything. We want to compensate on this front”. It also reassures their allies in the region that they are not pulling out. There is perhaps an interesting contrast with the Obama Administration in this respect. The final thing has to be that they have taken advantage, to some extent, of what they perceive as a US reluctance to take any action in the Middle East, or to have a more robust posture in the Middle East.

Almost immediately after the JCPOA was agreed, the Russians moved into Syria and started to take a much more active role. My reading of the current situation is of wanting try and get things wrapped up before Obama leaves office. The anticipation is that with either a Clinton or—perhaps I should not say this in public—heaven forbid a Trump presidency, you would find a much more forward-leaning American Administration as far as the Russians were concerned, certainly against the Iranians. I think you have seen those elements of the more revolutionary wing of Iran in foreign policy in the region in some senses becoming empowered by the JCPOA. It has allowed them to exert a certain leverage. Certainly the more hawkish elements in Iran work on

² The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (or the Iran Nuclear Agreement)

the basis that the United States would not want to jeopardise the JCPOA and therefore would not take action that might do that. That allows them in a sense to manoeuvre.

I have said that the Iranians have a different approach in some ways to their diplomatic dealings. We tend to exchange space for time. I think, if I have got this the right way around, the Iranians have exchanged time for space. They play the long game. For them, offering a concession of 10 or 15 years is not necessarily a bad thing as long as they get various other things done. They feel in their own mindset that they have been there for a very long time and they plan to continue being there for a very long time after the West or anyone else has left. Therefore, in their view time is the one commodity they can sell quite cheaply. They play on the fact that the Americans always have a sense of urgency. You saw this in the negotiations, of course. They were constantly pushing or putting pressure on Kerry. If Kerry had been a little less keen to get a deal by a set deadline, whether that would have altered the terms of the agreement it certainly would have altered the terms of the debate within the negotiating room. At the moment, the hawkish, hard-line view in Iran is that it has not been a bad deal for them. It allows them much more freedom to manoeuvre as far as they are concerned.

The Chairman: Does that mean that Iran will carry on with its covert activities in the Middle East? In many countries one goes to, the one terror is that the Iranians are causing trouble and making difficult situations even worse, such as in Bahrain, and they are up to no good because they are exporting revolutionaries in a French 18th-century style. We will have to live with troublemakers and stirrers-up of every conceivable difficulty for many years ahead. Is that your view?

Professor Ali Ansari: The other aspect is that obviously we have a cold war between the Saudis and the Iranians at the moment, which is not helpful either. Arguably, it is bordering on what I hope will not be a hot war but the situation is very tense. The Iranians also do not help themselves by taking credit for lots of things they actually do not have much to do with. They like the notoriety. There is certainly a contest within the Iranian regime itself between, if I can be simplistic about it, the Foreign Ministry and the Revolutionary Guard about who drives foreign policy. At the moment, the Revolutionary Guard has staked a huge claim in Syria. I remember in 2013 when Rouhani came into office there was an almost public debate about whether Iran should get involved in Syria at all. It was not really something they wanted to get involved in. This was clearly, on the other hand, something in which the Revolutionary Guard had invested a lot of time and effort and was not going to let go. I think you see this contradiction. If you want to bring in foreign investment, you have to reduce or lift regional tensions. On the other hand, there is a tendency on the part of the revolutionary establishment, it is part of the *raison d'être*, that, "This is our policy, this is what we are going to. We are empowering the people of the region and we are forcing out the West". Like all good ideologies, that is riven with contradictions: the fact they are working with Putin does not necessarily

work very well with many Iranians. That has yet to be resolved within the Iranian establishment.

The Chairman: Let us go a little wider than Iran. Lord Reid, would you like to open the wider seam?

- Q13 **Lord Reid of Cardowan:** Obviously another of the huge contemporary issues in that area is the struggle against Daesh or ISIS. That has brought together a range of interests that would not naturally be assumed to be common or happy bedfellows. Probably the approach to Mosul illustrates that, where you have American Special Forces through to Iranian-supported militias, and the Iraqis, Turks and Kurds wanting to come in. Without tempting fate, assuming that this is successful and Daesh is pushed back, it may well be that some of these competitive elements start to cause problems. In particular there is the geographical situation of the Kurds in four countries—Syria, Turkey, Iraq and Iran—and specifically the Kurds in Turkey. Assuming the fight against Daesh is successful, what is the actual role of the Kurds around Mosul and the attack on that? More importantly, what are the likely long-term consequences for the role they have played through the Peshmerga and in other ways in Iraq, Syria and Turkey?

Dr Renad Mansour: A really important year for the Kurds was 2014, when Daesh took over Mosul. A lot has changed since then. I have been working on this for a long time. Before that, if I said I was working on the Peshmerga, nobody knew what that was. I would always have to say, "In Kurdistan, you have the Kurds". A lot has changed since then. So in some ways Daesh really lifted the Kurds in Iraq to the point where, as we all know, today the US and other Governments send direct military aid and finances to the Kurdistan region without crossing the central Government.

To address your question, first we can say that in Mosul the Kurds are fighting—not inside the city but on the outskirts. The first phases have been predominantly with the Peshmerga—the Kurdistan democratic Peshmerga and also some elements of the KRG's³ unified Peshmerga—clearing Christian villages in the north of the Nineveh province. They very much benefited from the situation in Mosul as a bargaining chip. This is how they have been able in their diplomatic relations to negotiate with big states such as the US and the UK. They have been able to use their proximity to Mosul and the issue of the so-called Islamic State as a way to bargain. At the beginning, President Barzani was saying, "There is no way we will interfere. We do not have money or weapons". Basically, he was saying, "Give us money and weapons". If you speak to most American, UK and European officials who have been in these negotiations, they will say they are tired of how much the Kurds ask for in terms of weapons and money, but this was their case. For them this is a really important moment because they are on the international scene. President Obama is inviting and talking to Barzani. Joe Biden and others are speaking to them. They do not want this to go away, to some extent. Because of that, particularly after 2003 they have created an entity that

³ Kurdish Regional Government

is likely to stay. They have built a de facto state that has been recognised by not only the local population but the central Government of Baghdad according to the constitution and, as I say, the international community to some extent. You are providing direct aid and direct military support, moving against central Government. That used to be done before but it was always covert; now it is open. There is no need even to hide it. So they have built a de facto state, they know that they cannot reach any sort of de jure-style recognition, so they have tried to counteract that and move around that.

In Mosul, because it is so close to their border, obviously their first aim is to ensure that Daesh is no longer on their border and presenting a threat. The second aim is to make sure that the future governors of Mosul and Nineveh are friends not antagonists or close to the central government. They have their own list of personalities they would like there and whom they have been working with, such as the former governor Atheel Nujaifi and others. Where did they flee? They fled to Erbil and have been living there for the last two and a half years. In that time, they have grown close. The Kurds have provided security, salaries and a lot of things for these fighters. Another important point is that the Kurds have had relations with Turkey—the Iraqi Kurds, the KDP⁴ particularly. You have this triangle of Turkey being involved in Mosul, as well as the KDP and some of these governors. Their final aim in Mosul is to ensure that the Shia militias, Iran or the central government do not come back, and to push for this kind of local autonomy and decentralised style of federalism in order to surpass their fears of a centralised Iraq.

Lord Reid of Cardowan: May I follow up with one question? You interestingly said that de facto they have a state. Are you talking only about the KRG, the Kurdistan Regional Government, or are you including in that the canton in Syria to the south of the Turkish border? Some would argue that that provoked Turkey to get involved: rather than being anti-Daesh, Turkey wanted to stop the progress from east to west along its southern flank of the Kurds. Are you including that YPG⁵ area?

Dr Renad Mansour: I am sorry, I should have clarified that. When I speak of the Kurds, it is hard for me to even speak of one set of Kurds. There is no one set of Kurds. I am only talking about the Iraqi Kurds.

Lord Reid of Cardowan: You are only talking about them?

Dr Renad Mansour: In Syria it is a completely different story. In 2011, the central government moved out and gave them a space to be able to build these federal units. As long as Turkey, particularly under Davutoglu but also under Erdogan, was against this regime in Syria, they were able to move and fight against ISIS as well as try to develop federalism. It is important to note that they have problems with the Iraqi Kurds, so with this idea of pan-Kurdish nationalism or even when we talk about Kurdish statehood, we will never talk about one Kurdish state. We are talking

⁴ Kurdistan Democratic Party

⁵ People's Protection Units (armed service of the Federation of Northern Syria – Rojava)

about four different state-building projects here, if not more. That is really important to note. In Syria, they have tried to link the cantons. Unfortunately, in the summer of 2015 President Erdogan of Turkey after not winning as much in the first election of that year decided to change his electoral tactics and no longer needed the Kurds. There was a fight again with the PKK,⁶ who are linked to the Kurds of Syria—the YPG and the PYD⁷ have links to the PKK. Because of that, the next summer—2016—after the coup and the purge, Turkey entered Syria, went to see Russia and is talking about somehow completely changing the policy on Syria because the number one threat to Turkey is the Kurds, even more than Islamic State. For them, they would rather keep Assad now and make sure that this federalist dream of the Syrian Kurds is quashed.

- Q14 **Lord Grocott:** Perhaps a slightly different way of saying “de facto state” is to say “de facto changes in international boundaries”, which can become permanent in many examples we can think of round the world. There is a question if you are right—I am sure you must be—about a de facto state and change in the boundaries between Kurdish areas and what was Iraq, if we are talking about Iraq to begin with. Let us stick to western policy. What does that mean for western policy?

Dr Renad Mansour: For the longest time, international relations were governed by state-to-state relations, in the Middle East the state meaning central governments in Baghdad, Damascus, Beirut and elsewhere. Unfortunately, if you want to speak to the south of Lebanon, you would not go to Beirut and talk to the Beirut Government. If you want to speak to the north-east of Syria, you would not go to Damascus and speak to the central government there. If you want to talk about the Kurds in Iraq, you do not go to Baghdad. That means that international relations have fundamentally changed in this region. Yet because there seems to be, especially in the post-World War II, decolonialisation phase, this reluctance to recognise new states in fear of a breakdown of world order, you are seeing fundamentally de facto changes of states without this formal aspect to it. Borders are redefined, and different borders are stronger. The border between the KRG and Iraq is a lot stronger than that between Iraq and Syria. Think about that. Borders are being completely redefined on the ground, and the policy world is just slowly realising what has been happening for 10 or 20 years.

Lord Grocott: Quickly, is the likelihood almost that you end up with a situation like Kosovo, where the state is recognised by a fair number of the members of the United Nations but not by a large number on the other side? Is that not a likely development?

Dr Renad Mansour: What is really interesting about the model the KRG has tried to pursue is that, okay, President Barzani, will use independence and give a referendum, but primarily for a domestic audience. Really what has happened is that they have just tried to become a state without trying to push that, “We need independence”. That is very different from

⁶ Kurdistan Workers’ Party

⁷ Democratic Union Party (Syria)

the Palestinian model for a long time, which was, "Give us independence first and then we will build our state institutions". They have decided, "We are not going to fight to try and gain recognition because it looks tough. Let us just build the state, then they have to speak to us".

Lord Reid of Cardowan: This is fascinating. I take your point that if you want to speak to north-east Iraq now you do not talk to Baghdad but to Barzani or Talabani, or one of the leading families there. Do you envisage that that will end up with a federal nature, effectively, so that the external borders of what was Iraq will still exist but you will have Kurdistan and you might even have Shia dominance in the south and then a central state? Or are you talking about effectively moving towards a state separate from Iraq itself, or is it an incremental process?

Dr Renad Mansour: That is a really good question and an important clarification. Even though we are talking about state building, today the KRG are unable to govern given the economic situation without links to Baghdad. They need co-operation, and they need to work with each other. They have realised that. If you look at the discourse, two weeks ago the KRG Foreign Minister was here as part of a delegation with the Iraqi Foreign Minister. They have gone through ups and downs, because it is very much an era of transition where we are trying to understand what type of system will work. The ideal system that they should be trying to get to is a type of federalism where there is a central government able to devolve power: give power rather than lose power.

Lord Reid of Cardowan: Do you see that in Syria as well?

Dr Renad Mansour: In Syria it is a bit more complicated because it is still very much in a civil war. In Iraq it is great because at the moment spirits are high. For the first time, by the way, for as long as I can remember, you have the Peshmerga fighting alongside the Iraqi Army. Think about how monumental that is: they have always viewed the Iraqi Army as an Arab army against their national movement. That is happening in Iraq. In Syria, it is a bit more complicated and needs a bit more time. The debates are happening at international level and are not really coming down to the ground. In Syria, you will probably have to have regionalism and a central government that is able to give not lose power. At the moment, the Government are really losing power. They will have to restructure and move towards federalism. Unfortunately, whereas in Iraq, the US and Iran are together, in Syria they are against each other, and that has huge repercussions or consequences.

Q15 **Lord Purvis of Tweed:** It is really fascinating to hear from you, Dr Mansour. I have been in Erbil a number of times over the summer. In that area I met governor Hammadi of Nineveh province, who is in exile, as you mentioned. The hospitality that they have been providing is really interesting, especially in the context of having no funding from Baghdad for the Nineveh officials in exile. I have a follow-up question to Lord Reid's question on the wider integrity of the Iraq borders, within the context of the existing decentralisation law. You did not mention the tension within the Kurds between the PUK⁸ and the KDP, which is still a

live tension. The offensive on Mosul may well expand that tension rather than ease it. Could you comment on that? Can you still see Iraq, in the long term, being within its borders or having a more confederal than federal approach, with Kurdistan as a stable way forward?

Dr Renad Mansour: First, it is important to note that if we talk about the split-up of Iraq, we are just talking about the split between the Arabs and the Kurds. The Sunni and Shia sides both want to be part of Iraq, not part of north Iraq or south Iraq. Both sides believe that they are Iraqi whereas the Kurds do not believe that they are, even though they have to say it. Again, the nation is built after the state-building.

In terms of the KDP and the PUK, as I say, the Kurdistan region has been in economic crisis. They have not been able to pay the salaries of the employees, which is almost 90% of the population, for two years, because of their cut funding. What has happened in the Kurdistan region is that they were to some extent quite arrogant about their trajectory: they would be the new Dubai and become a state, with all these oil companies—Exxon, Chevron and Gazprom—signing deals from all over the world. Then a few things happened. Primarily, the price of oil went down, which is not very good for an emerging oil country, and that cut its funding: 17% of revenues or even less—whatever they were giving—which was huge. Because of this, tensions began to grow within the Kurdistan region and you had a protest movement. This is significant in Iraq as well.

We talk about identity politics, which have been very important in Iraq. If you are Shia, you vote for a Shia; if you are Sunni, you vote for a Sunni and if you are Kurd, you vote for a Kurd. For a long time, Barzani was able to use this identity politics to say, “Let’s keep our house in order because we are trying to negotiate independence”. That is how identity politics was working. Today in Iraq, you have Kurds protesting against Kurds and Shia protesting against Shia—you can see this in the south—meaning that issue politics has become more important. This is issue politics: they are fed up with not having electricity, salaries or money. That is more important than independence.

That is why in 2005, when an unofficial referendum was done in Kurdistan, something like 95% of the people said that they wanted independence. Today, the figure is nowhere near that high because, first, they view independence as a kind of political tool which the president is trying to use and, secondly, they realised: “How can we be independent? We are a landlocked state and that whole promise of a new Dubai has gone away. We need recovery now. We need state institutions”.

The KDP will try to reassert its influence. Barzani, as you probably know, has a lot of legal issues with his presidency—having surpassed it by two years by trying to use Isis and other reasons to say, “I need to stay in power”. The PUK has its own internal crisis. Talabani, the former president of Iraq and PUK leader, has been unable to move or speak for

⁸ Patriotic Union of Kurdistan

two or three years but is still the leader of the party. Because of that, the PUK has no real direction. For example Qubad Talabani, the Deputy Prime Minister, seems to be closer to the KDP but then there are other influences which are moving closer to Gorran, which is the opposition. So what will probably happen post-Mosul?

Another important thing is that the Kurds want to take Kirkuk, which they really do view as part of their province. If they get Kirkuk, that is largely PUK territory. That is why ambitions in northern Nineveh become important, because those are KDP territories. For the Kurdistan region's leadership, land aspirations will continue because of domestic internal politics as well. On the issue between KDP and PUK, I think most sources would say that we will not have a civil war between the two, as we had in the 1990s. But you could very much have two Administrations, one in Erbil and one in Sulaimaniyah. That could probably happen if things go really sour between the two.

The Chairman: I am going to ask that we keep our questions quite short because these are fiendishly complicated situations. We have learned that everything in the Middle East is connected to everything else.

Lord Inglewood: To some extent you have answered my question. When you began debating this we were talking in terms of things that were or were not states, or had certain characteristics that might relate to states. The more I heard you talking, the more I was struck that this is the wrong intellectual framework for looking at all these issues. We have to throw out a lot of traditional baggage from our minds and try to see the evidence in a different way.

Dr Renad Mansour: Yes, exactly. As I say, you will not understand the country by looking at it in status terms. In the field of international relations, from an academic perspective, this type of realism where states are the main actors in international affairs is no longer that relevant. It is problematic, because it is a lot easier when you can deal with just a few states and say "This is Iraq: they are all Iraqis and these are their representatives". It was an easy way out, but unfortunately taking that easy way out led to a lot of fundamental misunderstandings of those societies. Now we are trying to understand the societies better by moving away from state-centrism.

- Q16 **Baroness Coussins:** My question was going to be about non-state actors. You have already addressed it to a large extent in your last few answers. Could you build on that a little further and perhaps paint us a more detailed picture? Can you give us an explanation of the very wide range of non-state actors in the region, whether politically, socially or economically? What is your assessment of how they have developed or evolved over the last five years or so, and where their funding and support comes from? How are they seen by the local populations and how are the actual states responding to them? Do some or all of them pose an existential threat to the nation states?

Dr Renad Mansour: Here, it is really important to make the distinction between sub-state and non-state actors.

Baroness Coussins: We thought that you might say that.

Dr Renad Mansour: A lot of people refer to Hezbollah in Lebanon as a state within a non-state. That is what they say in Lebanon: Hezbollah is a state in the south inside Lebanon, which is not a state. Until recently it had no president. The boundaries are blurred and it is not known who the actors are. Again, it seems as if the key is legitimacy at three levels: the local level, the state level—or central government level—and the international level. The issue of legitimacy is what really differentiates these actors. The local population in Lebanon view Hezbollah as their Government, or as their state provider of services. In Beirut, they have been able to take over the central Government, who are also recognising Hezbollah. But certain international communities view Hezbollah as a terrorist organisation. This is where the definition of terrorism gets really complicated in the first place.

The Kurds—the PKK—are a terrorist organisation in Turkey but if they just walk over the border to Syria, they are freedom fighters who are fighting against Daesh. It is very much the same fighters with the same ideology. It is the same sort of Öcalan-Marxist ideology. In that way, I guess that border has some sort of influence. Anyway, a lot of sub-states have emerged. We have talked a lot about the Kurdistan region. There are projects in Syria for the Kurds and there is Hezbollah. These are very much states, except in name.

Then you have other sub-state actors. There are obvious economic actors where you have different foundations: the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation is very prominent. A lot of NGOs are in the region, trying to make some change. In the 20th century, central Governments were able to dominate all the space and they are no longer able to do that. That is why you have had all these different types of sub-state and non-state groups emerge.

Baroness Coussins: Can you just say something about the funding and where it is coming from?

Dr Renad Mansour: It depends. First, a lot of them, like Hezbollah and the Kurdistan region, are able to begin sustaining themselves by making their own funding—they have their own businesses. But I suppose there are a lot of initial start-up costs, in Hezbollah's case coming from Iran. It is interesting that Iran has done it as well with the Shia militias in Iraq. It does the start-up costs but then very much wants them to become self-sustaining, so even though Iran was the primary funder of the militias when they began in 2011—they were then justified after 2014—the central Government of al-Abadi are now paying for the militias. The funding comes from all over. They sustain themselves by getting international funding. As we have heard today, the UK is also funding some of these groups.

The Chairman: Professor Ansari, would you like to add a word on how Iran sees all this? Presumably, Iran does not want the same fragmentation to apply to Iran but is happy to promote it everywhere else.

Professor Ali Ansari: Well, not officially; their publicly stated views on Iraq and Syria are that they want them to be maintained. They very much present themselves as a status quo power. Certainly, as far as Iraq is concerned, the view has always been—I remember this from talking to a number of Iranian officials—to say, “We want to maintain Iraq as a unitary state” but they wanted to avoid any possibility of a military threat coming from there. That is a fair point, but basically they want to do that by keeping the state weak. That is the way in which they operate and, as Dr Mansour has said, they have managed to extend their power in these regions rather efficiently. In some ways, certainly in Iraq, they have been allowed to do so: they moved in, first, through various charitable organisations and then through the IRGC,⁹ with what we would effectively call seed money to get things going. They then provide the backing when necessary.

You can see a similar process in Syria, which is also quite interesting. There is a certain amount of friction between the Assad regime and Iran there. Whereas Iran wants to establish a continuous influence, if you will, the Assad regime does not necessarily want to see the Iranians having a permanent militia base in Syria—although goodness knows what will come out of what happens in Syria. The Iranians are obviously insuring for the future.

I have always said that Iran manages chaos well; one of the big flaws with the Allied occupation in Iraq was that we did not. We wanted to establish order. The Iranians said, “This is not how it works in the region—we manage chaos well”, and they do. This goes back to my earlier comment that if you want to transform your country into an investment hub, managing chaos well is not actually the best way to do it. These internal contradictions work quite well for Iran in terms of its regional influence. It has exploited, if you will, a sort of strategic incoherence that has come from the West towards the region, where we back one group here and another there as allies.

The ideal scenario, if we all had what we wanted, is that the way Obama was talking there would have been some sort of detente with the Iranians, then we would all have sorted ourselves out and fought Daesh together. The fact is that it is not working out that way because, lo and behold, even the Iranians have different arrangements in different areas. It is very byzantine.

The Chairman: So who do we back or link with? Baroness Helic, it is your turn.

Baroness Helic: I was surprised to hear that Melinda Gates is a sub-

⁹ Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps

state actor but obviously if she is, let us hope that she has a revolution on her books—

Dr Renad Mansour: Non-state.

- Q17 **Baroness Helic:** A non-state actor. I am trying to distinguish in my head what non-state and sub-state are. I am sure that I will get there. In the meantime, if I am not able to distinguish those two, do you think that the UK Government and western Governments are able to distinguish the non-state actors and how they engage with them? Do we have the full understanding and capability to properly engage with them? On top of that, from all you have said, my conclusion would be that our position is one of sitting and waiting for a fait accompli, so that we can go and rubberstamp it. We are looking for local solutions rather than having a strategic view. If we are already involved by supporting the military and engaging with the political leadership, should we not have our own strategy for how we see the region and how we want it to develop? I fear, from all you have said, that it is all left to somehow come out on its own. That is more of a statement than a question.

Dr Renad Mansour: First, what I meant to say is that there are sub-state actors and non-state actors. Sub-state actors are trying to institute Governments: they are local and trying to develop states. It is like they are on the way to becoming a state. Non-state actors in civil society, like these foundations that are trying to support—

Baroness Helic: Positive and negative.

Dr Renad Mansour: Yes, positive and negative. Also, radical groups were for a long time non-state actors; they did not really have state incentives. Al-Qaeda, for example, never talked about building the caliphate because, as al-Zawahiri said, it was the long game that was important. It was a non-state actor. Daesh, for example, tried to become a sub-state actor by building and trying to transition to a state. That is what I mean in differentiating the two.

On why it seems really messy, unfortunately, the history is that Governments located in the Middle East are always going to be reactive rather than strategically astute. It seems very complicated today because in the Middle East they do not know where they are going. If you speak to the leadership among the actors, they also do not know what will happen. There is no real strategy. Look at the fight for Mosul. They know that they have got to get rid of Islamic State/Daesh but that is it. None of them knows what should come next. They cannot come to a decision or an agreement. Even they are saying to themselves, "How can we govern this?".

This is because the Middle East is going through an era of transition. The post-World War I boundaries and system have crumbled. Transitions are messy, which is why it seems very complicated and why it is hard to have some strategic foresight. They are trying different things to see what will

actually work. That is why it is really hard to assert some sort of strategic foresight in the region.

- Q18 Lord Hannay of Chiswick:** We have talked a lot in the last half hour about fragmentation. Everything that you have said illustrates that there is a great deal of fragmentation in Iraq, Syria and possibly more widely in the Middle East. Could we look just for a minute at the opposite end? Is there any scope at all in the medium and longer term for looking to some form of sub-regional or regional grouping organisation, which will ensure that the relationship between either the nation states or the sub-states is handled in a peaceful and non-interfering way? It would be a little like, but obviously not exactly modelled on, the OSCE in Europe after the Cold War. Is there any scope for that at all and is it the way in which one could hope to see some relief from the cold war between Saudi Arabia and Iran, or is it a complete pipe dream?

Professor Ali Ansari: In the situation that we face, the only option is to find some regional security organisation or some sort of means by which you get the Turks, the Iranians, the Egyptians, the Saudis and others as guarantors, in a sense, of regional stability. You ask whether it is a pipe dream. It will be difficult to achieve in the current circumstances, but that does not mean that we should not try to pursue something like it. In terms of what the UK could do in the next decade or so, these are certainly the ideas that we need to put out there. I see nothing good coming out of it while you have no sort of framework in which all the major players have a vested interest in that stability.

Of course, when you look at the divisions between Riyadh and Tehran at the moment—although I notice that they came to some modest agreement over the oil price recently, so all things are possible; how long that will last we do not know—ultimately, they should realise that it is in their own interest to have exactly the sort of ideas that you suggest. I do not see an alternative, to be honest.

The Chairman: Dr Mansour, do you have anything to add?

Dr Renad Mansour: Yes. I feel that a lot of today has just been us talking about problems. Obviously it is also good to talk about potential solutions, even though I completely agree that they are hard to see. There are certain ways in which you can bring them together. Part of that is raising awareness of the need for communication—the need to talk to each other—which is fundamentally what I thought the nuclear deal was. At its core the deal was, so to speak: would you not rather be talking to your enemy than ignoring them? That needs to be encouraged. I know that these sort of talks are being encouraged in Oman and elsewhere. Just bring everyone to the table so that everyone can understand where the other side stands—a sort of pre-negotiation of this—to try to find where there are commonalities, particularly economic but also security commonalities.

The Chairman: Supposing Islam, instead of tearing itself apart, saw its leaders trying to talk to each other and come together. Would that help?

Dr Renad Mansour: Do you mean Islamic Governments?

The Chairman: I am talking about the great Islamic divide between Shia and Sunni. They do not talk to each other, do they?

Dr Renad Mansour: This is why there was a bit of confusion on my part because the problem is not really Islam or about religion. It is political, and sectarianism is the politicisation of these sub-national groups. Again, I do not see much merit in trying to use a religious way to deal with this problem.

Lord Reid of Cardowan: I have one quick comment in response. The schism, whether it is religious, ethnic, Arab/Persian or political, is not just about the sub-groups, is it? Part of the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia is at least perceived as or promoted in terms of their leadership within Islam. On the one hand, there is the custodian of the two holy sites and, on the other, there is the "correct" Shia version. It is not just the sub-sets that manifest themselves in this way, is it?

Professor Ali Ansari: One thing we have to be very careful of is of reading things back into the record. It is currently interpreted very much in sectarian terms; certainly the Saudis have sought to promote it in that way. There is obviously a Sunni/Shia confrontation on some level but we have to remember that even in recent memory Ayatollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic, said during the Iran-Iraq war that he would make peace with everyone but never make peace with the Saudi royal family. Within a few years of his passing and Rafsanjani coming into office, suddenly some sort of detente had taken place—particularly after the first Gulf War, when Iran made a big effort to schmooze with the Arabian states in the Persian Gulf. Then you had a fairly good relationship up until President Ahmadinejad came in, but he did a fairly good job of wrecking Iran's international relationships with almost everyone. That is when the relationship with the Saudis became really sour. Of course, that was tied in with the Iraq war.

I remember vividly when Saddam Hussein was executed that Iran was probably the only country in the region, apart from the Iraqis and their Government, that did not have a view on it. Let us put it that way; they were actually quite pleased about it. Almost every other Arab country was fairly appalled by it and viewed it as a Shia conspiracy. You saw that sort of rhetoric emerge then. The Iranians themselves tried to push back against that rhetoric. They did not want to see it because their view is that the Islamic revolution is meant to be everyone, so the last thing they want is for it to be identified as Shia.

Within recent memory, relations between Riyadh and Tehran were manageable. They were not bad at all; even the sectarian element was not there. But as has been outlined quite well, what you have seen is a complete throwing-up of the region's geopolitics with this clash of basic interests. The Saudis feel that they have lost Iraq and are effectively saying to themselves, "We will not lose Syria too". The Iranians are saying, rather helpfully, "We are happy to share Syria with you". I have

to say that President Obama's comment that the Saudis should learn to share the Middle East with Iran was fairly odd because it apparently did not take anyone else in the region into account. These sorts of comments have increased tension rather than reduced it. There needs to be a lot more knocking together of heads at the top. From my point of view the Russians, who have particular interests of their own to pursue, are not the people to do it. They have been involved in the Middle East for a very long time, by the way. There is the idea that they are newly come in and setting up, but the Russians were very active right back in the 19th century so that is part of their overall policy as well.

The Chairman: Professor Ansari, I am sorry that you have to go at 12 o'clock. We are well over time but we have two more issues or areas to discuss briefly. I know that Lord Grocott wants to come in but I would like to let Lord Wood in on the UK side.

- Q19 **Lord Wood of Anfield:** I could listen to you all day. Somewhere in the midst of all this, one of the things we want to look at is how we should recalibrate the UK's engagement in the region. I am interested in your view of how the UK is perceived, not just in the context of its traditional, long-term historic engagement in the region but particularly in the light of recent interventions. I think you referred earlier to what is perceived to be strategic incoherence. So this is not just on how Britain is perceived and its recent activity, but how do people perceive Britain's preferences in the region, and its sense of alliances and strategic interests there?

Professor Ali Ansari: I think that Iran will probably be quite central to the perception of Britain in the region. During the last election in Iran, the hardliners tried very hard to paint the progressives or reformists as British agents. There was a wonderful poster in Tehran of a fox in a Union Jack waistcoat saying "Welcome" or something. That sort of influence just goes to show that, as a colleague of mine said, the British Empire is alive and well in Iran.

I always say to colleagues that they have to look at this with a much more nuanced view. They must not go round handwringing all the time about British imperialism and so forth, because the popular vote rejected that. That vote actually said, "Thank you for warning us of perfidious Albion, but we are going to vote anyway". That does not mean that the official position is not riven with this sort of ideological or historical view of Britain as highly malevolent—one where it basically engineers a lot of things in the region as the great imperial power there. But more seriously-minded Iranians will be well aware that there were two imperial powers in the 19th century—Russia and Britain—and of course we have the United States. Actually, the Russian situation is not much more helpful, although politics today means that the case study of the Russians is shelved and Britain and America are raised up.

From our perspective, what I have always argued as what needs to be done on a practical level is to have a much more thorough engagement with the region and its problems. I hope that some of you will like this, but I think there has to be much more investment in the Foreign Office

and our diplomatic capabilities. There has to be much more investment in linguistic training. There just is not enough. Even the good sources in Iran I talked to about the nuclear negotiations quite clearly said, "We were pleasantly surprised that the British played a constructive role in the negotiations". Britain has an asset there. It is not clear or simple but a much more complex relationship. I think the better armed or forewarned we are, the better we will be able to navigate that relationship: by understanding our own very long relationship with Iran, which goes back several hundred years, and acquiring not just a linguistic but that sort of cultural understanding. There is a lot that can be done. Unfortunately, where Britain falls down on Iran—it happened in the 1970s, and I fear it will happen again—is when we are driven solely by commercial interests. I have to say that, and I do so as a member of what is, I hope, one of the leading universities in the country. Universities, education and culture are all extremely important aspects in the exercise of Britain's position in the outside world but I do not think we do enough. Instead, we are worried about whether we are selling enough cars or whatever. That is great, but it will not win us the influence that we need.

I cannot speak for the rest of the Middle East but from an Iranian perspective there are pros and cons. As in any relationship, you need to be able to soften the negative side but also to develop, promote and construct the more positive aspects of that relationship, which I have to tell you are not insignificant. I could go on all afternoon but I will not. There are some very positive aspects of that relationship, which we do not talk about enough. I think the last person to mention them was Jack Straw when he was Foreign Secretary, which was a long time ago. These things could be much better developed.

The Chairman: I think we like that message very much. May we urge you to read our House of Lords report on soft power and persuasion? Finally, Dr Mansour, because we really are running out of time, would you like to have a go at that? We mentioned Russia but the great powers of today include China, which is very influential all round the world in a way that it was not even 10 years ago. Would you like to say a word on that and then we really will have covered it? I am trying to speed things up.

Dr Renad Mansour: I just want to make one quick comment about alliances and whether you should be re-questioning them. The UK is a NATO ally of Turkey, which is largely viewed as having a border that at least facilitated the emergence of foreign fighters going into Syria and oil being sold back out from Syria, among other things. The UK is a strong ally of Saudi Arabia, which pays a lot of money to Wahhabi schools and organisations that act against the UK's interests. It is important to question alliances and, I suppose, whether you are backing the wrong horse when you think of what the UK's interests are. Anyway, we will not get into that because it is a big thing.

Another interesting point about perceptions of Britain is that they also show how borders are changing, because in north Iraq the Kurds are very happy with the British, but if you move south to Basra they are a bit

more anti-British. Of course, Britain had a huge role in Basra and the people there are asking: "Why is it that we have all the oil and one of the worst cities?". I am not sure whether you have been to Basra but it is one of the worst. It has no development; there is no economic funding into it. People are starting to associate that with the military presence and asking whether the Brits had anything to do with that. They are not blaming them but you do hear anti-British sentiment from the occupation. Finally on this question of perception, the UK's role in 2003 with the US is obviously very important for judging perceptions of the UK among Arab Iraqis and in the Arab regions. Perhaps trying to move past that would be good.

On the question of Russia, this is what seems to have happened. Obviously Putin has re-emerged in the Middle East, particularly in Syria, and basically by calling Obama's bluff. He has realised that Obama said all these things about a red line and intervention, after the chemical weapons, and did nothing. So at some point the Assad regime was down but there have been many times throughout this conflict, which began in 2011, where we have said, "Okay—this is it. There is no way that Assad can survive". First, it was Iran sending militias; then it was Hezbollah intervening; most recently, perhaps the biggest intervention has been Russia's, which has meant that it is hard to see Assad leaving in the short to medium term. In Turkey right now, the rapprochement between Erdogan and Putin means that Russia's way is going to happen.

It looks as if Obama is now negotiating with Putin on some sort of settlement. But who holds most of the bargaining chips? It is Russia that is involved and has the power. It is on the right side of this battle. What this means we might have in Syria—it is probably the saddest thing for those who focus on the Middle East—is that five or six years later, 1 million people will have died and there are millions more refugees outside the country, but we are almost going back to where we started. So in the negotiations now between Russia and Obama, he needs to make it look as if there is something changing, such as putting in an interim parliament or some sort of check on the executive. To all intents and purposes, Russia has been emboldened in Syria. Whereas after the Cold War, it lost influence in the Middle East it has now regained it.

China is interesting. We have been seeing more and more of its delegations in the Middle East, where it is increasingly interested in investing. Obviously there are sanctions on Iran—I am sure that Professor Ansari could speak more on this. China has interests in Iran's oil and investments there, but China wants to focus on the economic side. It does not want the Washington kind of consensus: "We also want to dictate what type of political regimes there should be". A lot of Middle Eastern states will think that is great: "If we can do business and you don't have to give me a hard time on our human rights record—that's fantastic". Another important thing is that China does not want to provide the security guarantee in the Middle East. They want the US and the UK to continue to provide that security guarantee while they still do business in the Middle East. It is hard to say how long that will last. There might

be a period in the future where China also has to start providing some of the security elements of stability. For the time being, they seem to make really good negotiating bargains with several other states.

The Chairman: Professor Ansari and Dr Mansour, we knew that we had a tough task ahead but now that you have brought us this picture you have reminded us, with your brilliant analysis of incoherence, of how steep the hill is for us to climb as a Committee. We intend to climb it all the same and you have given us a great start, so thank you both very much indeed.