



Select Committee on International Relations

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

Wednesday 18 January 2017

11.45 am

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

Evidence Session No. 10

Heard in Public

Questions 114 – 121

Witness

I: Dr Dmitri Trenin, Director, Moscow Center, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

USE OF THE TRANSCRIPT

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

Examination of witness

Dr Dmitri Trenin.

Q114 **The Chairman:** Good morning, Dr Trenin. We are talking to you from London. This is the International Relations Committee of the House of Lords, which I have the honour of chairing. We are conducting an inquiry that is focused mainly on the transformations of power and new developments in the whole Middle East region—a big subject but one that obviously involves the Russian Federation and Russia very considerably. We want to draw on your wisdom in those aspects of our inquiry.

Thank you very much for coming before us. This is a public hearing. There will be a transcript afterwards of what you said and you are entirely free to change it if you so wish. I am obliged to tell you that.

I begin by welcoming you and by asking you this. It is a big question, and do not hesitate to expand on it as you wish. What do you think are the main interests and priorities in the Middle East of the Russia led by President Vladimir Putin? What lies behind the great increase in activity of recent months and years?

Dr Dmitri Trenin: I am deeply privileged and honoured to be addressing this august Committee, so thank you very much for having me. With regard to your question, if I were to summarise Vladimir Putin as President of Russia and his overall agenda it would be that it consists of two priorities: one is to keep Russia in one piece; the second is to restore Russia's standing to that of a great power that is recognised around the world. In my judgment, Russia's involvement in the Middle East, particularly its involvement in the Syrian war and the Syrian political process, is guided by Vladimir Putin's desire to get that kind of recognition from the world.

I see Russia's involvement in Syria as, to use an American expression, a war of choice. If Ukraine was a war of necessity, using the same analogy I do not think there is any Russian leader who could have stood idly by watching the developments in Ukraine. Syria is different; one could have afforded not to interfere, particularly with military force, in Syria. Russia's engagement in the Middle East is not only about the Middle East. It might not even be primarily about the Middle East. It is about Russia's standing in the world.

Having said that, I would add that this has everything to do with Vladimir Putin's view, supported by the bulk of the Russian elite, about what kind of world order would be best from the Russian perspective. Mr Putin has been actively and vocally fighting against what he sees as a unilateral, or unipolar, US domination of world affairs. In Putin's view, the optimal structure of the international community is a system in which several major powers co-operate among themselves and with others to bring about order in the world. He certainly sees Russia as one of those powers.

In the Middle East, particularly in Syria but using the experience of Libya in 2011, Mr Putin sought to prevent two things. The first was an internal uprising, aided from the outside and leading to the toppling of a regime in the way in which the Gaddafi regime was removed in Libya. Secondly, he wanted to prevent a foreign intervention in Syria on the model of either Libya or Iraq. He wanted to turn the Syrian security and political dossier over to the United Nations Security Council, where Russia, of course, has legal rights.

At a lower level, I think that Russia, as the great power that it sees itself as, is interested in having a foothold in the region, and Syria hosts, and in the Russian view will continue to host even post-settlement, Russian air and naval bases, complete with a measure of Russian political influence.

Russia is also seeking lucrative deals for itself in various parts of the Middle East. Unlike the Soviet Union, which went around the world spending money, including in the Middle East, on its clients and satellites, it is out there to make money, including through arms sales and nuclear energy projects.

Mr Putin is also clearly interested in stemming the flow of jihadi terrorists into Russia. As we all know, a number of ISIS followers come from the Russian Federation or the former Soviet states, and Mr Putin is very determined to prevent those people from coming to Russia. This is therefore not necessarily a war to win, but it is certainly a war to kill. In Putin's view, the greater the number of those people staying immobile for ever in the region, the better it is for Russian national security.

Those, in my view, are the main priorities and interests that guide the policies of Vladimir Putin in Syria and more broadly in the Middle East.

The Chairman: Dr Trenin, that is extremely helpful and illuminating. The puzzle for us, recognising totally that Russia wants to be respected and be seen with its full status and talents in the world, is that if you want to be a great power you have to behave like a great power. I am particularly fascinated by your saying that Russia wants to play the policeman role, the responsibility role, in the world, but doing that requires detailed co-operation with other powers and countries that are also playing that role. It has to be combined. How does that fit in with the rather separatist and go it alone attitudes that we see reflected in Russian policy? There seems to be a contradiction there.

Dr Dmitri Trenin: I think that the Putin strategy for reaching that goal included political, diplomatic and military collaboration with the United States from the very beginning in his Syrian operation. Mr Putin aimed to get the United States to agree to a formula that I would call Dayton à deux, with reference of course to the Dayton agreement that ended the Bosnian war, engineered and presided over by the United States. In this case, Mr Putin wanted the United States and Russia to act as two co-chairs of the Syrian peace process.

As a result of that, Putin instructed his Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, to work very closely with US Secretary of State John Kerry. I believe that John Kerry was guided by his own very clear desire to do good and to bring peace to Syria. He won a lot of respect in Moscow for his efforts. As we all know, the United States and Russia engineered two ceasefire agreements in Syria, one in late February last year and the other in early September. Both, however, fell through, primarily because in the Russian view—I understand that this view is not shared by many in the United States—Washington failed to deliver.

Frankly, my analysis tells me that the attitudes in Washington towards Putin's offer of collaboration with Russia on Syria did not have the critical mass of support. This idea enjoyed the enthusiasm of John Kerry, but the Pentagon was never warm to it. In fact, Ashton Carter, the Defense Secretary, several times during 2016 called Russia the United States' security problem foe number one, whereas ISIS was numbered five on that scale. It would have been ironic for the United States to link up with their foe number one to fight foe number five.

As I understand it, the intelligence community in the United States was equally sceptical about the wisdom of collaborating with Russia and that President Obama was somewhat above the fray but not really committed one way or another. So the Putin plan of getting US political and military co-operation, which would have elevated Russia to eye level with the United States diplomatically and militarily—in my view, Putin's goal—was never realised.

In reality, Putin's strategy did not work the way he planned and Russia had to do it in a different way by helping the Damascus forces to fight their way through in a number of areas, including in Aleppo, and most importantly by reaching out to the Turks and making common cause with them while making the Iranians acquiesce in this Russian-Turkish peace effort. This is what we are watching now with the Astana meeting next week, with Russia and Turkey rather than Russia and the United States leading the process of political negotiations that we hope will lead to some sort of reconciliation and political settlement in Syria.

So I would not say that separatism, as you mentioned, was Putin's first choice. It was his second choice, but it was the choice he had to make as a result of the failure of Russia's attempt to get enough support from the United States. As I understand the political developments in the United States, in particular as part of the election campaign, they in effect prohibited closer collaboration between Washington and Moscow on the Syrian issue.

The Chairman: If we have time, we will come on to that in more detail. Lord Jopling has a question.

Q115 **Lord Jopling:** Dr Trenin, given the military intervention by Russia in Syria, I think you are the ideal person to fill in for us the background of Russia's current military potential. So that we can understand this, could you give us as accurate an assessment as you can—I realise it will be a

broad estimate—of the rough percentage of Russia's GDP that goes on the defence budget?

Secondly, is there truth in the assertion by some people in the West—I have heard it said in NATO—that the Russian military is considerably stretched? I heard this particularly from NATO after the Ukraine and Crimea affair. Clearly, with Syria that is more so. Given the fact that only three years ago, as we understand it, the Russian military defence budget was smaller than the United Kingdom's, it would be interesting to know the extent to which you feel that the Russian military is stretched at this time.

Dr Dmitri Trenin: Thank you very much, Lord Jopling, for your question. I think Russia's military expenditure as a percentage of its GDP is one of the highest among the major powers at between 5% and 6%. This causes a considerable amount of debate within Russia and has been a cause for debate since the current programme of military modernisation was adopted back in 2010. That programme called for expenditure of up to \$700 million over 10 years to 2020 to turn the remnants of the Soviet army into a useable modern military force.

Even though Russia's defence expenditure is, I think, number five in the world, the Russian Government have been able to obtain a useable military instrument, as we have seen in Crimea and now in Syria. Clearly, the Russian military modernisation is not complete. Only eight years ago, during the war in Georgia, Russia exposed its post-Soviet military weaknesses in a fairly remarkable way, in five days losing aircraft, including a strategic bomber, against a foe like Georgia. The Syrian operation is a far cry from that. The Crimean operation was also, from a military professional view, executed in a spectacular way. Is the Russian military stretched? I do not think that it is. It is certainly not stretched the way it was during the Chechen war.

I recall Putin saying in the 2000s that they really had to go out of their way to find 50,000 soldiers capable of fighting in the north Caucasus, out of a military force numbering 1 million men. So progress has been achieved; it is real. Russia has been able to do a lot with very little. The Russian military force in Syria now has 3,000 aircraft, more or less, and employs 4,000 or 5,000 men. It has an annual budget of around \$500 million, so at this point it is affordable, or almost affordable, by Russian standards. It is not only numbers that tell the story but the strategy and tactics of employing a force. The level of training has risen dramatically over the past few years. The Russian army has constantly undergone various drills and exercises. Syria is, if you like, another continuous exercise for the Russian military.

As I said at the beginning, it is a burden and it is considered to be a burden, and there is consensus that defence expenditure should go down within the next couple of years to the benefit of human services such as health, education and welfare. But what Russia has been able to achieve in the last eight years since the start of the military reform is truly remarkable. The employment of the military in places such as Crimea in a

non-combat environment, and in Syria, right in the environment of a war, attests to the considerable success of military reform in Russia.

Q116 Lord Reid of Cardowan: First, thank you for your very lucid and comprehensive answers, Dr Trenin.

Can I ask you about an aspect that I suppose is parallel to Russia's ambition to be seen as a major power along with others in the Middle East: that is, the effect of Russia's actions on what some people would call the Middle East "street"—the public there? Some evidence has been put to us that surveys show that perceptions of Russia have become more unfavourable among Arab publics as a result of Russia's policy in Syria and that its relations with Gulf countries in particular have become more fraught. Assuming that these surveys are correct, and some of them may be counterintuitive, is this of concern to Moscow? Does it limit what Russia can achieve in the region, or is Russia concerned less about popular public opinion than it is about its relationship with state elements?

Dr Dmitri Trenin: Thank you for your question, Lord Reid. I have been to the Middle East and can attest to the veracity of your statement. There is a body of such opinion, but it is difficult for me to say whether this is a "street" or elite view, as I do not speak Arabic; I speak only to people who speak English or other western languages. However, as I understand it, at the elite level there is a division. There are those who see Russia as a threat, as doing either more harm than good or only harm in the region. I was treated to an interview in Beirut in front of a large picture of a house that had been totally destroyed. When I asked what it was behind me, I was told that this was a house destroyed by a Russian bomb. I was interviewed by a Syrian refugee who was virulently anti-Russian, and she had her arguments.

On the other hand, in the same city of Beirut I met other people who I would not say were pro-Russian but who saw Russia as more of a positive force in the region. I think that anyone who gets involved in a fight and who has aircraft dropping bombs and launching missiles will, as always happens in any war, kill civilians and innocent people. Every country bears the brunt of accusations of, let us say, inhumane or barbarian behaviour, so there is this element.

On the other hand, it is not that the Russian leadership is ignoring this. I think it is looking at it very closely. What the Russian leadership wanted to avoid in the first place, and I think it succeeded, was falling into the trap of the Shia-Sunni divide. The Russian operation in Syria is being implemented by a coalition with the forces of Damascus led by an Alawite regime close to the Shia. The forces on the ground include the Iranians and Hezbollah, who are also both Shia. The country playing a supporting role in the Russian-Iranian-Syrian or Damascus coalition is Iraq, which again is a majority Shia country. A lot of people, including very knowledgeable experts in the Middle East, predicted that this was a trap that Russia would not be able to avoid falling into.

Yet 15 months on, I would say that Russia has been able to avoid falling into it through its rapprochement with Turkey, which is a major Sunni power, through its very careful cultivation of Egypt, which is the biggest Arab/Sunni power, and through its various contacts with the Gulf states. Even though in the Gulf states you hear a lot of criticism of Russia and its actions in Syria, note that it was Russia that facilitated the deal on reducing oil production between Iran and Saudi Arabia within OPEC, although Russia is not an OPEC member. Putin played an important facilitating role between the Saudis and the Iranians, and between the non-OPEC countries and the OPEC countries. So there is something happening in a constructive way between the Russians and perhaps its most serious critic in the Arab world, the Government of Saudi Arabia. I also note that another virulent critic of Russia's policies in Syria, Qatar, decided last month to buy a stake in Russia's Rosneft, and acquired a stake of almost 20% in it. So I think it is a mixed bag.

The bottom line for the Russians is, "We're back as a major force. We cannot be ignored". The worst thing for the Russians is to be ignored. The second worst thing is to be blamed for things, and, of course, they aspire to be recognised and treated as a serious player. I do not think that these days they aspire to be loved or followed; that is not the issue. Getting respect and recognition is their objective, and I think they are getting it. A senior Gulf diplomat told me, "Five years ago in my part of the world, no one was talking or even thinking about Russia. Today, Russia is on everyone's mind". Even the fiercest critics of Bashar al-Assad would agree that the Russians have stood by him through five difficult years of civil war in his country, whereas the United States dropped their ally of 30 years, Hosni Mubarak, on the eighth day of demonstrations in Tahrir Square.

This gives Russia a certain image of steadfastness, cruelty maybe, a will to achieve the desired result, decisiveness—the things that I believe are much valued in the Middle East. This is my answer to your question.

The Chairman: Thank you. Lord Hannay, who I think you know, would like to ask you a question now.

Q117 **Lord Hannay of Chiswick:** Good morning, Dr Trenin. It is a great pleasure to speak to you again. Turning to the domestic attitudes towards Russia's Middle East policy, you have already said a bit about it, but to what extent does President Putin's policy have wide support in foreign policy elites and among policymakers? Even if they support it so far, do they think that there are some limits to the amount that Russia should get drawn into a very turbulent part of the world? What role does public opinion, which perhaps does not count for a huge amount, play in this?

In the domestic field, you referred to the agreement reached between OPEC and some non-OPEC suppliers to limit supply, with a view to boosting the price of oil. Do you think Russia is in a position to continue limitations on its own oil and gas production, given its reasonably precarious budgetary situation?

Dr Dmitri Trenin: Thank you very much, Lord Hannay. It is great to see you and hear you again.

I would stress that going into Syria was President Putin's personal decision, in my view. It was not discussed among the elite very much, and it was certainly not discussed publicly. It was very much the President's own decision, just like the decision with regard to Crimea. When this decision was announced, some members of my own staff at Carnegie Moscow Center came to me for private advice and consultation. The question on their minds, and they were all ladies, was about the chances of their sons being drafted into the Russian military and sent into Syria, the way a generation or two ago Soviet soldiers were sent to Afghanistan. The first thing that an ordinary Russian thought when he or she heard the name Syria as a destination of Russia's military activity was Afghanistan. So Putin was clearly out on a limb with that decision.

I think there was concern for some time. People in Russia do not necessarily always believe what the Government tell them, even a very popular President. He assured them from the start that it would only be an air campaign and that there would be no ground forces, at least not in a combat capacity, but people were still worried. After a few months, I think the conclusion of Russian public opinion was, "Well, we have a military that can do the job relying only on the professionals". If you like, it was Russia's first American-style war, in which you employ the air force and the navy and you do not have ground troops. You rely on others doing the ground work for you, and you take almost no casualties.

To date, as far as I know, the number of Russians who have died in the war, 15 months after the start of the operation, is 23. Russia has lost one airplane and several helicopters, but the level of casualties, as I said, has been unbelievably low in comparison to anything that has happened before in Russian history. So Putin's policies, which were seen initially as risky, have been seen as paying off and not placing much of a burden, particularly not much of a blood burden, on the Russian people. The public have grown much calmer with regard to the Syrian campaign, basically leaving Putin and the military to run it, to the applause of the—

The Chairman: The video link has been disconnected. We will wait for it to come back again. It has probably been cut off by Washington.

The Committee suspended and then resumed.

The Chairman: I am sorry, but the connection was lost for a moment.

Dr Dmitri Trenin: Let me finish by saying that public opinion certainly matters in a country like Russia. It is the legitimacy of the rulers that is the problem. Let me put it this way: the rulers base their legitimacy on public approval of their policies and their own status, so it counts. So far, the public have been largely supportive of the Syrian campaign, although it is a distant war in a country that is not seen to be of vital importance to Russia. Since it is presented as a war against terrorism, which does affect the lives and livelihoods of ordinary Russians, this is seen as the right

thing to do, but primarily, as I said, because so far the war effort has been successful.

The Chairman: Dr Trenin, Lord Hannay unfortunately has to leave this Committee now, but I would like to press you a little further on his question about oil and gas revenues, which after all supported the Russian economy very substantially and are now considerably reduced. What is the impact of this? Can Russia really deliver on the targets discussed with OPEC for reducing its oil and gas output, or are these matters not under the direct control of Moscow?

Dr Dmitri Trenin: I think the spike in the oil price benefitted the Russian budget handsomely. In my view, that compensates for the fall of production. I do not know; we do not have inspectors who monitor how much Russia produces. I imagine that the risk of being exposed for cheating is too high and the pay-off not sufficient for Russia to cheat on its commitments.

On how much of a problem this creates for the Russian budget, as I said the oil price that has grown substantially over the past several weeks is certainly a compensation. Moreover, again I am not an energy expert, but the energy experts I trust tell me that Russia finds itself at the peak of its oil production and that it cannot go much above the levels it was producing at. Russian production was going to be reduced just by natural causes, and now you make a virtue out of necessity. This may be a cynical view, which is fine in Russia. Again, this is what I am told by my energy experts.

Q118 **Baroness Coussins:** Sticking with Syria, you said that in your opinion Russia's policy there is having success. Clearly, Russia is currently positioned as the key decision-maker, although it seems that achieving peace will be far from straightforward. How successful do you think Russia can be in delivering a sustainable political process in Syria?

The other element I would just like to include is that you said earlier that one of Mr Putin's priorities was to prevent terrorists coming to Russia, yet there seems to be some possibility that there is traffic both ways. We have certainly become aware of some reports suggesting that there is some movement of Russian Muslim radicals going to Syria. How worried are you by that, and could this, if it is the case, threaten, compromise or undermine any success that Russia's Syrian policy is having in Syria?

Dr Dmitri Trenin: Thank you very much for this question. Although the war is ongoing, I think it is now largely at a standstill between the opposition and the government forces. The ISIS forces are still at war with both the Syrian government army and the Russians. So any success today is not yet sealed, and it can be sealed only through a political agreement, which I understand will be very difficult to reach, between the opposition and the Government. So I think that the Russians can be successful only if they manage to operate very closely with the Turks, who hold many keys to the Syrian political settlement, and as long as

they can make the Iranians acquiesce in receiving something less than the Iranians would want from a Syrian settlement.

Russia would also be successful only if there were some sort of understanding between the Russians and the Saudis in particular. I do not believe that you can have a final agreement without the United States being at least benignly predisposed to it, if not an active participant. We will see what the Trump Administration's policies will be on that. The United States is important. Certainly, if the United States opposed an agreement, I do not think it would be implemented. The United States at least needs to engage or take a benign view of something in which it prefers not to engage directly. That would be the answer to your question.

I think that the Russians and the Americans, in the months of their negotiations led by Lavrov and Kerry, managed to come up with an outline of that future settlement in Syria. I believe that what will be discussed in Astana and later will be based on the work already done by the Russians and Americans. We are talking about a decentralised Syria, essentially, in which various groups are given certain rights and privileges: if you like, a Lebanon-ised Syria. That is what I understand is emerging from those blueprints.

With regard to the terrorists, one striking thing is that in the 15 months of the war Russia has not—let me touch wood here—seen a major terrorist attack on its territory. I do not think that was the result of neglect on behalf of jihadis, because Russian targets were of course hit, starting with the passenger plane shot down over Sinai two weeks into the air campaign, killing 224 people, and all the way to the killing of the Russian ambassador in Ankara in December. Yet I understand that within Russia the security services have so far been able to prevent attacks that affected a number of other countries, starting with Turkey. True, the thousands of Russian citizens who are now fighting, or who were fighting before they were killed, in the ranks of ISIS left Russia to go to Syria. There is a whole stream of such young men but also young women. There are some pretty celebrated cases involving women who left Russia to go through Turkey to Syria to join ISIS. This is certainly a pretty important stream of people, but as you know there is a practically visa-free regime between Russia and Turkey. You can go to Turkey fairly easily, and then you can end up in Syria.

As you said, there is traffic both ways, so some of those veterans can come back, and some of them have come back, to places in the north Caucasus. Some of them have been involved in attacks there, in Dagestan and Chechnya. A few of them have been killed and a few have been arrested. Terrorism is a major issue for Putin. Let me say that he made his name as a fighter against Chechen separatism and terrorism, and he is not lowering his guard. To him it is a major priority. This is something he has been doing ever since he was called upon by Yeltsin to become his Prime Minister back in August 1999. He has been fighting those people, ordering their elimination and liquidation, and neutering

them. I do not think he will stop doing that as long as there is a threat out there. But now he prefers to engage those people on foreign territory.

Lord Reid of Cardowan: Could I just probe a little further on this? You said, and we all welcome it, that there has been a relative absence recently of terrorist attacks inside the Russian Federation. It has been said in certain quarters that part of the reason for that is that, as a matter of policy, Russian authorities and agencies have encouraged and facilitated the outflow of domestic jihadists and would-be terrorists to Syria. Is this your observation? If so, is this not a rather short-term policy? One remembers the encouragement and facilitation of jihadist groups by the United States and others a few decades ago in order to undermine the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. Of course, what goes out can come back in. Do you have any observations on both the facts of this and the potential longer-term implications?

Dr Dmitri Trenin: I have heard those reports. Certainly, there is no official confirmation of that; nor do we expect such confirmation. You can regard those reports as plausible. This is speculation on my part, but I could imagine people saying, "Let's allow those people to leave the country and get to Syria. Then, first, we rid the country of them and, secondly, we'll manage to get them killed in Syria". Again, this is speculation on my part, but if that were policy I would say that there are risks to it. You may end up with battle-hardened people coming back and becoming more of a problem. Again, I have no facts except the rumours that we hear: the reports suggesting that that was one of the reasons why so many people went to Syria.

I hear that there is a lot of work and activity now done in the north Caucasus with the families of potential jihadis and with the potential jihadis themselves to persuade them not to go. If we are talking about Chechnya, people who want to fight bad things that they see around them can be inducted into the official paramilitary forces that exist there. Again this is a pretty complex situation, as I understand it. Much of what is going on, particularly in the Caucasus region, is governed not only or even primarily by the laws of the Russian Federation but by the habits and norms of those societies.

With Chechnya, in my view, you have a state in all but name that is linked to Russia by means of almost a personal union between its leader and Vladimir Putin. The laws that operate there are not all laws of the Russian Federation. Other norms, principles, ways and habits are as effective there. As I said, if that is the case as you describe it, it may be a double-edged sword but I am sure that the Russian security services have taken on board a lot of their own experience from Afghanistan and the experience which the United States gained there and in Iraq and other places. The fact that there has been a marked reduction in terrorist activity in Russia, as I mentioned, is partly the result of those lessons being taken into account. But, as I said, if even part of what you are saying is true, there are risks that need to be look at very seriously.

Q119 **Lord Grocott:** Dr Trenin, thank you very much for the clarity of the

insights from your answers. I particularly noted down your comment that, as far as Russia was concerned, the involvement in Syria was a matter of choice whereas its involvement in Ukraine was one of necessity. I think I am saying it roughly as you described it. That is pretty important for western diplomats to be mindful of. I am sure they are, but it is an important observation.

In the light of that, I have a rather general question that leads to something more specific. How would you characterise the state of UK-Russian relations at the moment? In particular, what areas of common interest, perhaps common diplomatic activity or areas of co-operation, do you see our two countries having in the Middle East?

Dr Dmitri Trenin: Thank you for this. In a word, I would characterise the relationship, again with all my bluntness, as “frozen”. I do not think that much moves between Moscow and London these days. I look at the Russian TV coverage of UK policies and politics, and it is very useful to watch the state-run television programmes, because not only do they tell you—sometimes not so much—what is happening in the world but they give you a lot of insight into what the Government think about this and that; what they really think and cannot say in so many words but allow their broadcasters to say for the Kremlin. I think the one meeting that the President had with the Prime Minister, judging by the coverage in the news media, went pretty badly.

At this point there is practically no co-operation on issues linked to anti-terrorism or security in Syria. In fact, one striking thing about the Syrian issue that we have been discussing is that Europe, not just the UK, is largely absent from it, although I imagine that what happens in Syria has already had much more impact on what happens in Europe via migration, terrorism and other things than it does in Russia. Europe is largely absent from Syria. At least, I see it as absent, and this is striking to me. I understand that attempts were made at resuming UK-Russia collaboration, including in the security area, at some point last year and that later those were put on hold. I do not know the story, but that is my understanding, and it has not led to any additional warmth in the relationship. As I said, that remains frozen.

The common interests of the UK and Russia in Syria and the Middle East are, I think, pretty obvious. Europe suffers from flows of migration. It suffers from terrorists who have links to or roots in the Middle East. Russia also suffers or may suffer more in future from terrorism, and it certainly wants to contain and eliminate the threat of terrorists emanating from the Middle East. There is clearly a lot that the UK, which has one of the best intelligence services in the world, and Russia, which also has a very able and capable security service and military forces, could do together, but unfortunately for political reasons that are, as I understand it, linked to Litvinenko and other things, co-operation is not happening. We are all paying the price for that.

Q120 **Lord Inglewood:** Thank you, Dr Trenin, for your comments, which I have found most interesting and helpful. In your remarks, you touched

on the fact that Russia has built alliances with, for example, Turkey, Egypt and Iran, partly in response to recent events in the Middle East. How enduring do you think these alliances will be, and do they have a shared strategic aim? In turn, how might they change the relationship for example between the Europeans and our own country with what is going on in the Middle East?

Dr Dmitri Trenin: We have seen Russia's relations with Turkey evolve in a most dramatic way in the 15 months of the Syrian war, from some sort of partnership that went sour and led to almost a war between Turkey and Russia, to a new rapprochement and a near-alliance relationship in which the Russians are bombing targets that are a problem to the Turks in Syria.

I think that all those alignments are, at this point, more tactical than strategic, if by strategic we mean something that is permanent, like NATO. I do not see NATO-like relations between Russia and any country in the region. Russia is in the unique position of being in contact with all players in the Middle East, with the sole exception of ISIS and al-Qaeda, or its affiliates. On the other hand, it is nowhere 100% against anyone. There is always room for bargaining and co-operation, but there is always quite a big measure of competition. That is unavoidable.

In Syria, it looks to me as though some sort of peace settlement would lead to Turkey being given assurances on the Kurdish side that it will not see a deterioration of the security situation as a result of what happens in Syria after a future settlement there, in return for Turkey's engagement with the Opposition so that they come to some sort of closure with the Government in Damascus. I see this as representing the balance of interests that is a favourite modus operandi of Russian diplomacy. Of course, we know that we are dealing not only with countries but with people, and people are changeable. We have seen President Erdoğan blowing hot and cold and doing different things. There is no guarantee that the alignment between Russia and Turkey will see through the end of the Syrian conflict, but at least for now it looks as though it is a productive alliance.

With regard to Iran, it is more complicated. Iran has a set of goals in Syria that go way beyond Russia's goals. Let us put it this way: Iran's goals in the Middle East are not supported by Russia, so there is more of a tactical alignment of interest between Moscow and Tehran on Syria. Yet the two parties depend on each other to an equal degree, which makes them partners for the time being. As long as rationality prevails, I think that the alignment between the Russians and the Persians can hold. Of course, it has its limits. Last August, we saw Iran giving Russia a right to use its air bases for strikes in Syria. That lasted for a couple of days and then the Iranians basically withdrew that right from the Russians.

Egypt is another interesting case. Russia sees Egypt as both its major political partner in the Arab world and a client for its arms industry, but the arms that the Egyptians buy from Russia are bought with Saudi

money. Of course, there is a connection to Riyadh and the Russians must take account of that. So it is all pretty complicated.

As I said, nothing is 100% this way or that way, but as long as you can manoeuvre on that very treacherous political and diplomatic field, which is also partly a military battlefield, and as long you can continue to play the game, you can earn the title of major power with an impact on what happens outside your borders. If Russia comes up with a Syrian political settlement, I think it will be a public good that will be a feather in Russia's cap as a major power. Russians are looking at other areas in the Middle East where they can do political facilitation in conflicts as far apart as Libya and the one between the Palestinians and Israelis. So the Russians are getting deeper into the region's affairs. I think they should be careful not to overextend themselves, but so far they have coped.

The Chairman: Dr Trenin, we have one last question for you, but it is a big one. Baroness Smith will put it to you.

Q121 **Baroness Smith of Newnham:** Dr Trenin, you talked about the first meeting between Theresa May and Vladimir Putin as appearing to go pretty badly. By contrast, relations between Putin and Donald Trump appear to be rather good. Trump said earlier this week that he starts his presidency assuming that he trusts Angela Merkel on the one hand and Vladimir Putin on the other. To what extent is that relationship reciprocated? Does Vladimir Putin trust Donald Trump? Do you think that the improved relations between American and Russian Presidents, compared with Obama and Putin, will play out in the Middle East in a way that enhances outcomes there? What are the potential challenges?

Dr Dmitri Trenin: Thank you very much for the question. I do not think there is much of a relationship at this point between Putin and Trump; there is more a series of gestures that each person has issued for the other. I do not think that you can talk of trust at this point. I would use a different word: each party gives the other some credit. That is a better description of the starting point in US-Russian relations under Trump and Putin.

As I said before, in international affairs we are dealing not only or primarily with countries but with people who represent them. In that case, I think that the relationship between the United States and Russia suffered very much because of the disconnect between Presidents Obama and Putin. Actually, the relationship between Presidents Obama and Medvedev was a bit better. In the end, that relationship fell through because it did not reach what was expected, certainly by Moscow. I think that at the beginning, before Obama and Putin ever met, the two could speak the same language of realpolitik or transactional politics. Trump sees himself as a deal-maker, or deal-maker in chief, and Putin is also very much focused on specific deals and transactions, although he is guided by a certain "quasi-ideology", or something like it. They might use the language of national interest. I see Mr Trump as an American nationalist and Putin as a Russian nationalist. If they speak the language

of their respective national interests, there is something they can talk about and potentially agree upon.

I do not believe that we will witness another reset between the United States and Russia. I do not think that we will revert to the halcyon days of US-Russian and Russian-western partnership. I think that is over, at least for the time being. But there may be a series of agreements and deals that would lead to some public good becoming available, including in the Middle East. As I said before, nothing can be done in the Middle East, or elsewhere for that matter, against the active opposition of the United States. The United States is an indispensable power in agreements and deals being done in various parts of the world. It might not be always indispensable in reaching deals, but it is in allowing those deals to be implemented. I think it is an important goal of Putin's foreign policy to get the Americans on board.

Again, it is one thing to celebrate the Syrian settlement with Turkey but a totally different thing to celebrate it alongside the United States. Putin's goal is not to make Russia a co-equal of Turkey but to rise to the eye level of the United States. So I think that he will work hard to get Trump on board and have the United States become an active part of the Syrian political process. If they decide to have a coalition effort against ISIS, I think the Russians would be very pleased, as I said earlier, if the formula for that were a US-Russian coalition of equals. So it is not to be ruled out that they reach some sort of accommodation and do some deals on the Middle East. I wish them both well, but as I said it is not a given. I am not holding my breath for a paradise regained of US-Russian or Russian-western partnership.

The Chairman: Dr Trenin, on that note, we must let you go. Your insights have been extremely illuminating and greatly valuable to this Committee. We thank you very much for your time. We much appreciate all that you said.