



Select Committee on International Relations

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

Thursday 26 January 2017

10.30 am

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

Evidence Session No. 12

Heard in Public

Questions 134 – 147

Witnesses

I: Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP, Secretary of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office; Sir Simon McDonald, permanent Under Secretary, Foreign and Commonwealth Office; Dr Christian Turner CMG, Acting Political Director, Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

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Examination of witnesses

Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP, Sir Simon McDonald and Dr Christian Turner.

Q134 **The Chairman:** Foreign Secretary, we are delighted that you have been able to find time to join us this morning. You may have heard that Lord Howell was taken ill last night. He is in hospital and I have been asked to take the chair. We are particularly pleased to see you. You will know that this is a new Committee. The House of Lords has never had a proper International Relations Committee until this one. There has been a great deal of pressure over the years to create one. We are particularly grateful that in the first year of our existence you have been able to come and talk to us.

I have two or three housekeeping notes. You will know, of course, that this is a public session. A webcast will go out live. There is a video transmission that will be accessible on the website. A verbatim transcript will be taken, and in a few days we will send it to you to check for accuracy. It will also be put on to the parliamentary website in due course. It would be helpful if you would advise us of any corrections as quickly as possible. If, after this evidence session, you wish to clarify or amplify any points that you have made, please let us know.

I shall ask the first question. The Committee's view is that the world at the moment is suffering from a series of significant and interconnected changes, with a new United States President, with Brexit and a resurgent Russia, to name just three and to say nothing of terrorism. All have implications for an increasingly fragile Middle East, as well as for the United Kingdom's international standing. Do you agree with the view of the Committee, and how do you think the UK should respond to these challenges?

Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP: Thank you very much, Lord Jopling. Perhaps I can just get the ball back over the net by saying that I think you are right to pose the question in that way, but I think we are very well placed. I shall begin, if I may, by defining a concept—a slogan, a strapline, a theme song—that we have now in the Foreign Office, which is about “global Britain”. I believe that it will be a ubiquitous and ever more justified way of thinking about how we respond to the challenges that you rightly describe.

The world has obviously changed since the days when, out of my office, George Nathaniel Curzon and others ran an empire seven times bigger than the Roman Empire at its maximum extent under Trajan. Everybody remembers the way we acquired that empire: of the 198 countries in the UN, we have invaded or conquered 171 in the last 300 years. Most of my generation grew up thinking that those days were mercifully behind us, but also that Britain was in a long, slow glissando of post-war, post-imperial decline, introversion and shrinking horizons. My view is that today, in 2017, it is quite remarkable to see how our perspectives are in fact widening, and how global we really are. It is not just that we are still this, or still that. We often say that we are still a P5 country, or we are still in the G8. The fact is that UK Armed Forces are deployed in 80

countries around the world. The nearest relevant comparator is, of course, the French, who I think are deployed in eight countries.

More significantly even than that, we have the biggest diaspora. There are more Brits abroad than are citizens of any other wealthy country, if you see what I mean. Of the diplomats, traders, businesspeople, teachers, artists and aid workers, of the British people now alive and born in this country, one in 10 is living abroad. That is an extraordinary global footprint and an extraordinary reflection of our culture and influence. To get to the questions that you rightly pose, there are three reasons for thinking that our international standing and role will not diminish; quite the reverse. First, as you say, we have a new Administration in the White House. Far from being at the back of the queue, we are now at the front of the line with the Trump Administration. It is very significant that tomorrow Theresa May will become the first British Prime Minister to be received in the White House by a new American President in his first week of office. I am very hopeful for the relationship that they will forge.

The second reason relates to your mention of Brexit. We are once again able to reach out around the world and forge new trading relationships after 44 years of being unable to exercise those prerogatives. I am one of those who believe that free trade has lifted billions of people out of poverty around the world. It is a great shame, in my view, that global trade is now not rising as fast as global GDP for the first time in a very long time. I am concerned about that and I think that Britain has the potential to be the number one agitator and campaigner for free trade.

The third reason for being confident is that we have colossal soft power. We have a quite extraordinary reach. The city we are now in attracts more international visitors than any other tourist destination on earth. There are museums in this town that get more visitors than some European countries that I will not name—this is my legendary diplomatic finesse. It is also true that of the kings, queens, Presidents and Prime Ministers now alive, one in seven was educated in this country. That is a massive asset for our country and one that I propose to hang on to. Look at the number just of Chinese students in London: there are 100,000, which is more than in any other city in the world outside China—where they obviously have a lot of Chinese students. It is a reflection of the popularity and, as I say, the cultural footprint of our country.

I make these points about global Britain not in a bragging way. The objective is not just to demonstrate our cultural, economic and military footprint but to show that these things are of value to the world, but also to the United Kingdom. I believe they bring huge practical benefits to everybody in this country, because a safer, more stable world is in our interests; a world in which we work together to combat the threats that we face—security threats and terrorism—is profoundly in the interests of everybody in this country. Of course, it is the growing economic and commercial opportunities that global Britain can help to generate that will bring us long-term, sustainable prosperity. That is the global Britain

agenda, and I hope you do not mind that I set it out at some length to you this morning.

The Chairman: That is very helpful. Lord Hannay would like to ask a brief question about the overnight news.

- Q135 **Lord Hannay of Chiswick:** Foreign Secretary, I have to admit that having worked for 11 years for Margaret Thatcher I do not quite recognise the long glissando.

Leaving that on one side, overnight the new President made statements to ABC that showed pretty fundamental disregard for a whole number of the United States' international obligations, specifically under the torture convention, under the convention for refugees and under its obligations to pay assessed contributions to the United Nations, both for peacekeeping and for the regular budget. Given that the Government's position, which this Committee shared when we produced our first report on the UN, is that the rules-based international community is a major asset for Britain, would you comment on this process of dismantling the rules-based international community?

Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP: Thank you, Lord Hannay. It is a great pleasure to be interrogated by you, since I remember many happy hours when I did my best to try to interrogate you in Brussels. May I just say at the beginning that the long glissando was something that I remember as a child, which, since I am such an old chap now, was before Margaret Thatcher came in? If anything, I think that a lot of fair-minded people—I am looking nervously around the Committee now—would say that the roots of Britain's post-war recovery were put down in her time. I certainly remember your sterling efforts during that period.

On the overnight news from Washington, we have to be very careful; I do not think we have seen any official policy changes or pronouncements. On the matter of torture, to which you rightly draw attention, the Prime Minister made the position of the Government very clear yesterday in the House of Commons, and that is unchanged.

- Q136 **The Chairman:** Shall we move on? I shall ask you to make a few comments on the situation in the Middle East. As you may know, this Committee is conducting an inquiry into the Middle East at the moment. Will you say a few words about it?

Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP: Yes, I will make a few general points. The Middle East as a whole is in considerable turmoil across many countries. Sometimes we have to be careful not to analogise too much between each case; each country will have its own particular set of problems and they all need addressing individually with careful thought and engagement. Looking particularly at the situation in Syria, where suffering has been most acute over recent years, you talked earlier about a resurgent Russia. I think we need to define our terms when we talk about a resurgent Russia. The Russian economy is not particularly resurgent; nor, indeed, is Russian population growth. There are many

valid criteria by which you might say that Russia is not a particularly resurgent place.

It is certainly the case, however, that Russia has intervened in Syria to a considerable effect. It preserved the regime of Bashar al-Assad and is now instrumental in leading the talks that have been going on in Astana, and in the current ceasefire. To the extent that the Russians are capable of getting a ceasefire and stopping suffering, that must be rated a plus, although it comes, of course, after a pretty brutal and barbaric bombardment of Aleppo and other places, which they facilitated, or, I am sure, perhaps even participated in. Russian involvement in Syria is a fact of life. We left the field open to Russia in 2013 when the House of Commons decided not to honour its commitment on the use of chemical weapons. The way forward, I suggest, is that there must now be some political solution. That must involve a negotiation. It is important that the High Negotiations Committee, the broadly based Syrian opposition, should be involved in that. I now think that we are getting to the stage where some sort of democratic resolution has to be introduced.

The Committee will be aware that the last time Bashar al-Assad had an election in Syria, his only opponent concluded his eve-of-poll rally by urging everybody to vote for Bashar al-Assad, so it was not exactly a triumph of democracy. I would hope that it would be possible to have a plebiscite or an election, properly supervised by the UN, in which all the 11 million displaced persons, including the 4 million who are now outside Syria, are fully entitled to vote. That might be the way forward. We believe in democracy, we support democracy, and if there is a political solution I do not think we can really avoid such a democratic event. I think that is the way forward.

The Chairman: We shall have a number of further questions about the Middle East—in fact, that dominates our questions—but before I ask Lady Smith to ask the next question, Lady Helic wants to come in on what you have just been saying.

Q137 **Baroness Helic:** Thank you very much for coming, Foreign Secretary. Last week, we had an opportunity to speak to Dmitri Trenin, who is one of the leading Russian experts. When he spoke about Syria and the ongoing talks in Astana, he tried to make a comparison between the Dayton peace accords and the Russian plan for Syria, which presumably will be based on decentralisation. The talks would need to be supported by countries that were not at the table in Astana—that means us, the United States et cetera. For the Dayton peace accords to succeed, or at least not to collapse, in 1995, we needed 65,000 NATO troops on the ground. Who do you think will police and implement the Syrian peace talks, and do you think that there is a place or a role for the British Armed Forces?

Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP: Of course, the British Government and the House of Commons have been very clear that they do not want to engage British forces on the ground in any firefights in Syria, so that is something that we have ruled out, rightly or wrongly. When it comes to

the implementation of a Dayton-style accord for Syria and the introduction of some federal solution, which may indeed be the right way forward, or the only way forward, at the end of all this, I can certainly imagine that the UK, with its formidable track record as peacekeepers—if you look around the world, we are a huge player in that area—would want to be involved in that.

The Chairman: I will call Lady Smith to ask a question, and then a number of people want to come in with supplementaries.

Q138 **Baroness Smith of Newnham:** Foreign Secretary, you have talked about the fact that, when you were growing up, you felt that the UK was in decline. One thing that you were keen to talk about in Bahrain before Christmas is that the UK is now back east of Suez. You talked rather evocatively about 1968 and how that was the point of decline when we had retreated from east of Suez. How do you envisage that new role emerging? You talked about the number of troops that we have in the Middle East. I had the opportunity to visit HMS Juffair the week after you did and there is a sense of activity there. As you mentioned, the UK has military based in 80 countries already. That is a significant commitment for our forces. What scope do we have to develop east of Suez? Is it more than rhetoric? What is our defence budget going to be able to cope with? In particular, in light of the cuts to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office over recent years and the stretch for the Civil Service in dealing with Brexit, what capabilities will we have to deal east of Suez?

Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP: Thank you very much for that question, Baroness Smith. I believe that this is a real phenomenon and I have been very struck by it. The military investment in the Gulf region alone is, I think, the second biggest outside NATO—£3 billion over 10 years. I am glad that you went to see HMS Juffair. I talked to a sheikh in one Gulf country who said, “You left us when the flag came down”. It was in my lifetime that the flag came down in the Trucial States. “You left us for the French”, he said. There is nothing wrong with that, of course; they are wonderful European colleagues of ours. But I think that it was a wasted opportunity and we are now making the most of it. If you look at that area, exports to the Gulf alone are the fastest growing in the world. It is our biggest growth market. I am happy to supply the Committee with the figures, but they are quite astonishing. It really is the case that we have exported sand to Saudi Arabia; I do not know whether that is still true, but we have in the past. That kind of thing continues to grow.

Looking further east, when Kipling said, “Ship me somewhere East of Suez”, he was thinking of Burma—“By the old Moulmein Pagoda”, I seem to recall. In the Far East and south-east Asia, you can also see the British presence. You will have seen in the recent SDSR how we are one of the few powers that is committed to deploying more than 7,000 miles—our naval commitments are capable of getting out there. We had the recent deployment of the Typhoons, you will recall, to Korea and to Japan. When the two new aircraft carriers are complete, their first mission will be up through the South China Sea, which, as the Committee will know, is an area of great contention at the moment. So we are there.

It is important not to be vainglorious about this or to overstate what we can do, but on the other hand it is important not to minimise it or to run ourselves down. It is the commercial opportunities as much as anything else that I see. These are huge, growing economies. We have still—I have tried to ban the word “still” in the Foreign Office, so I should say that we have a growing—what is the word that I want?—cachet or lustre. The idea of doing business with Britain captures people’s imaginations and we should capitalise on it.

Lord Purvis of Tweed: My question follows on from Lord Hannay’s question, to which the Foreign Secretary’s response was to wait and see whether there will be executive orders to review torture and potentially to reopen black sites. Why will the Prime Minister not take the opportunity to rule out categorically the UK’s support for such an action and to say that, if that action does happen, the UK and all its agencies and bodies will have no part in any of that operation?

Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP: If I may remind the Committee, the Prime Minister answered that question in the House of Commons yesterday. She was very clear that our principled objection to torture remains unchanged. The Committee must draw from that the conclusions that it needs to.

Q139 **Lord Reid of Cardowan:** Good morning, Foreign Secretary. I want to bring you back to Britain’s role in the Middle East, but first I think that you perhaps misspoke when you said that the British Parliament reneged on its red line on chemical weapons. From memory, that was the red line of the American President, not the British Parliament. The decision may have been right or wrong, but what happened afterwards cannot be justified on that basis.

On the Middle East, you said that our role is not diminished. I wonder if that is entirely accurate. It may be that, as you said, we are back east of Suez, but we are not, as you said in your opening remarks, somewhere south-east of Moscow, specifically Astana, where the initiatives have been taken to bring some sort of faltering peace to Syria. That is being done by Russia, of course with other powers. It is not just in Syria that Russia is emerging as a stronger power, notwithstanding its lack of population growth, which you pointed out. The Russians are also in Libya now. They played a brokering role between Saudi Arabia and Iran over the oil discussions, although they themselves are not in them. So the question is: how do you perceive what I think is the objectively verifiable growth of Russian influence in the area vis-à-vis our role in Syria, Libya, between the Gulf states and Iran, and so on? Secondly, how might that be affected if, for instance, our closest ally has as its objective unravelling the Iranian nuclear deal?

Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP: There are a lot of points there, Lord Reid. I will go back to the last August decision of 2013. There was no question in my mind that we had decided that if Assad had been plainly convicted of using chemical weapons against his own people, he deserved some form of intervention. What was being proposed was, as I recall, a really rather

modest plan to put beyond use certain facilities that he had for the making of chemical weapons. That was the question that was put to the House of Commons, and it decided not to go ahead with that. My own view is that that was a game changer that led to the American decision not to participate in any kind of action against Assad. A couple of years later it allowed the Russian intervention.

It is very important to be balanced in this. The Russians are certainly, as I have said before, up to all sorts of nefarious activities, whether it is cyberwarfare or what we have seen in Montenegro, where they attempted a coup, or possibly even an assassination, against a European state. Obviously we have seen what they have done in Ukraine and the brutality of the action that they supported in Aleppo.

There is no question that Russian behaviour has in many ways been reprehensible, but we are not in a new cold war. As I said to the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, it is important that we keep the right mindset about this. We have to engage with Russia, we have to talk to the Russians. We cannot endlessly push them away and demonise them. If, at Astana, they can produce some progress, if they can get a negotiated ceasefire that leads to a political settlement that leads to some sort of democratic arrangement that transitions away from Assad, in my view that might not be a bad thing. We should be open intellectually to the possibilities of what they can achieve. We have to be sceptical, and we have every reason to be pessimistic. It is my view that if Assad, by some extraordinary mischance, were to continue in power, he would find it very difficult to command the support of the people of Syria, given what he has done to his people. But I think we have to approach it with a certain amount of intellectual humility.

In other spheres where you see Russian activity—you rightly mentioned Libya—let us see what exactly comes of that. I think we all want to see a reconciliation between the GNA and General Haftar, and progress in Libya. The crucial thing in Libya would be for the two sides, East and West, to come to a joint understanding of the good of the country. We are still hopeful that General Haftar can be persuaded that he can be a big part of the future of Libya but without necessarily having to be a new jefe, as it were. That is what we hope we can achieve. If, by talking to the Russians about that, and of course the Egyptians, we can make progress on that, that again does not seem to me to be a foolish way forward.

I think my answer to your question is, yes, we must be vigilant about Russia, and we must be very guarded in the way we engage with Russia, because plainly Vladimir Putin has many revanchist feelings. He feels that the end of the Soviet Union was a disaster; the biggest catastrophe of the 20th century, I think he said. That is not how I see it. That is not how many of us see it. We see the liberation of the people of Eastern Europe as one of the greatest things that happened in our lifetimes. But we have to realise that he sees it differently, and we have to have a twin-track approach towards the Russians: vigilance; toughness; firmness,

particularly when it comes to Article 5 of the NATO treaty and being resolute in the defence of our fellow NATO members; but also engagement.

In so far as Vladimir Putin wants respect and wants Russia to have respect, I do not think that any of us should quibble with that. People are entitled to respect, but they should also be treated with a great deal of caution and firmness when they behave badly, and there have plainly been occasions in the last few years when Russia has behaved very badly indeed.

The Chairman: Lord Inglewood has a question.

Lord Inglewood: My question has been asked.

Lord Wood of Anfield: Good morning, Foreign Secretary. I have a very quick follow-up question to Baroness Smith's questions about President Trump's executive orders. Do you think it is acceptable, under international obligations shared by the UK and the US, to have a ban on refugees from certain Middle East countries?

Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP: Forgive me, Lord Wood, but as far as I am aware, there has not yet been such an order.

Lord Wood of Anfield: I am asking you about the principle.

Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP: I do not want to disappoint the Committee by retreating too much into this formula, but we have not yet seen the legislation brought forward. Rather than get into some sort of hypothetical dispute, let us see exactly what the proposals are.

Lord Reid of Cardowan: If you were the responsible Minister, as you are, in a leading role in the British Government, and you had 6,000 troops and thousands of your own workers in a given country, do you think it would be wise to declare that you will not allow any immigration from that country, given the potential effects on your citizens in that country?

Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP: I am sure, Lord Reid, that your point will be heard loud and clear in Washington and will echo in the State Department and the White House, as it deserves to do.

The Chairman: Lord Purvis wants a second bite on this one.

Lord Purvis of Tweed: Foreign Secretary, you have said that you expect there to be a greater role within the region; that we are back. How will that be reflected in a diplomatic capacity? Will that be followed by an increase in the budget for diplomatic presence in the region, and what will that be? So far, the trend has been a reduction rather than an increase.

Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP: You are absolutely right, Lord Purvis, to point that out. The Foreign Office does an extraordinary job with what it

has. We have the second biggest footprint of any diplomatic service, and we do it with, I think, three-quarters or two-thirds of the budget of the French foreign service, so we are a very lean, mean fighting machine. I draw strength from the fact that your point of view is shared by my predecessor in my office as Foreign Secretary, who now happens to be the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and I think he would agree with you.

Lord Purvis of Tweed: That will be reflected in an increase in the Foreign Office budget, will it?

Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP: That is certainly my view. Never mind the Middle East, there are all sorts of parts of the world where we have been doing a huge amount with very little, and a global Britain needs to be properly projected and assisted with a really first-class network. We have a first-class network, but obviously one of my functions is to lobby for more funding.

The Chairman: I must say that all my ministerial experience teaches me that any expectations of generosity coming out of the Treasury are totally misplaced.

Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP: I totally agree with you, but the arguments are quite strong.

The Chairman: They always were.

Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP: I remember going in as Mayor of London and being told by my officials, "Don't even bother". I came out with an extra £200 million for TfL and the Treasury never forgave me.

The Chairman: Nor have the taxi drivers.

Q140 **Baroness Coussins:** Good morning, Foreign Secretary. In your Chatham House speech in December you said that you wanted to see a new and productive relationship on security with European partners. Could you spell out a little more how you hope to see that working in practice in a post-Brexit world, specifically on defence and security, including in the Middle East? Alongside that, could you say whether the level of engagement that you would like to see would require additional resources being invested in bilateral relationships?

Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP: First, on the architecture of our contribution to European security and defence, there is no reason at all why all the stuff that is done for instance on the fringes of the Foreign Affairs Council—co-operation within the EU framework—could not be done at an intergovernmental level and between us and the EU bilaterally. I can think of all sorts of ways in which we could, as it were, be bolted on, for instance in discussions about sanctions, or whatever it happened to be. My Dutch counterpart, Bert Koenders, said that in leaving the EU the UK is depriving the rest of the EU of 20% of its GDP, 25% of its military spending and 30% of its overseas aid budget. That is not true, because we are not leaving the EU in that sense; we will continue to be part of Europe and it is vital for the Community to understand that. We will

continue to be contributors to overall European security; we will be there, we simply will not be doing it through the existing treaty system. It does not take much imagination to think of a new pillar structure with a new entablature or architraves, or whatever you need to contrive in order to produce that kind of outcome.

You asked a second question.

Baroness Coussins: It was about resources being invested in bilateral relationships.

Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP: Yes, on bilateral relationships and on resources. I do feel, although colleagues from the Foreign Office may disagree, that the EU system, which has its strengths and, I believe, as you know, its weaknesses, has meant that an awful lot of diplomatic energy has gone into conversations around the table in Brussels, and perhaps less in some EU capitals and countries in the bilateral relationship and in basic bilateral diplomacy. My feeling is that some of the embassies in other European capitals have been a bit run down in their engagement in what is really happening in that country. So I do want to see that beefed up.

Sir Simon McDonald: I will add one point of fact. We have already made one change, a small change but I think an important one; we have looked at the seniority of our ambassadors across the EU, and we have upgraded seven who were more junior than SMS. As the Foreign Secretary says, when we are outside the EU, more of our relationships will be run bilaterally, so we are preparing for that.

Q141 **Lord Reid of Cardowan:** Foreign Secretary, I have a question specifically on defence. You have been typically generous in your speeches to our European allies by allowing them the fact that they may develop on their own after Brexit, but you have not been specific about how you see Brexit affecting NATO itself. Will you comment on that?

Secondly, having looked for something on which we might agree with President Trump, which is more difficult than it appears, on the 2% obligation of European allies towards NATO he has made it plain that he expects people to step up to the plate. Would you give him wholehearted support on that issue?

Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP: I would, and I am sure that that is a point that Theresa will make tomorrow in capital letters. We totally agree with that. We are the second biggest funder overall and even one of the biggest per capita funders of our common defence. We believe strongly in NATO as the vehicle for the defence of the West. Yes, the President is right in the sense that NATO needs to evolve and needs to think about how to address terrorism. What NATO is doing in Afghanistan is very interesting and important, but it needs to keep refreshing its game. You say that I have been generous in my speeches. I am always generous in my speeches, but I have no fears about the EU's plans for further and intensified defence co-operation, because I, like you, John, have been here and we have seen this many times over the decades. We all

remember that when they are looking for another great impulsion towards a new federal project, defence is the one that they reach for. It has not in the past ever added up to very much, to be fair. I do not see any really striking new EU defence architecture being created.

Generally speaking it has been the French who have been in the vanguard of this and they have been absolutely clear. Jean-Marc Ayrault, my French counterpart, said that we should be absolutely clear about this, because Federica Mogherini and the others are thinking of ways of developing Europe's defence architecture. He said that there should be no Euro army, nothing to undermine NATO and nothing that could be construed as protectionist in European defence procurement or putting up barriers in any way. Those sound to me to be pretty reasonable criteria. If they want to go ahead with something that encourages the rest of the EU to spend more on defence, I am all for it.

Lord Hannay of Chiswick: I welcome what you said about foreign policy co-operation with the European Union, because it is going to be very important, but have you had any indication of whether the other 27 member states share that view, and whether they are prepared to look in a completely innovative way at an external relationship that is quite different from the European Union's external relationship with any other country? Do you not think that being openly critical of them in public makes that rather less likely?

Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP: That is a very interesting question. I have found so far that this is one of those areas of discussion where people simply take it for granted and move rapidly on. Perhaps they should not, by the way. Perhaps it will turn out to be more complex than we currently think. Perhaps there will be difficulties that we have not yet foreseen, but most people I have talked to, in Berlin, Paris or anywhere, think that we are so plainly a massive net contributor to the European defence and security economy, if you like, that they can see big advantages in our staying very closely plugged in.

The controversial subjects are more about the customs union or the single market—about money—as I am sure you know. In the end, I expect there will be a long conversation about money. Those are the difficult areas. You may be right that some heavier lifting might have to be done now just to make sure that we are not being complacent about that question.

The Chairman: We have had three rather general questions. We now have four more questions. A number of Members want to ask other questions, and I suggest to them that they squeeze their questions into the more detailed questions that are to come. Lord Grocott, would you like to say something about Israel?

Q142 **Lord Grocott:** Foreign Secretary, I have a question on the Middle East peace process, assuming that it is functioning. In December, Britain supported the UN resolution, as you know, which among other things called for a halt to Israeli settlement activity. On Tuesday this week,

Israel approved 2,500 new settlements on the West Bank. Just prior to that, 566 settler homes in East Jerusalem were approved. I understand that your colleague, Mr Ellwood, has said that the activities were contrary to international law and an obstacle to the two-state solution. If, as appears to be the case, Israel is not minded to take much notice of the views of the international community on this, what steps, if any, should the British Government and/or the international community take to try to get the peace process back on track?

Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP: As you know, the Middle East peace process has been bogged down, static, paralysed for some years now. I believe that that is a great tragedy for both sides. That was why I thought that Resolution 2334 was balanced. I know that it has been seen as too hard on the Israeli side, but I would just point out that there are two problems. The first is that, yes, the settlements make things more difficult and more complicated. They are an impediment to a resolution and they aggravate the tensions. There is no question about that. That is why we have been consistent in our approach and the Government's policy is unchanged.

I thought that Resolution 2334 at least contained some new, important language about the effect of Palestinian terrorism and the very real security fears of the Israeli public, which we also have to bear in mind. The only solution is for the Palestinian side to stop their terrorism and to find ways of bringing their radical groups under control, and for both sides to get round the table and seriously negotiate it. We all know, and I think people have known for a long time, what the broad outlines of such a settlement could be and how you could imagine land swaps to produce a two-state solution. It is one of the world's great sadnesses at the moment that we seem unable to get there.

Obviously, I hope that a new approach from the Trump White House might break the logjam, paradoxical though that might seem now to those who believe that the Trump Administration will come down very firmly on one side rather than the other. My advice would be: let us wait and see, and let us remember the value of negotiation.

Lord Grocott: We have heard that mantra from successive Governments. It has basically just been repeated, has it not? Most significantly, there is the suggestion that the increase in settlement activity somehow makes a two-state solution less and less likely or indeed possible. At what stage does it go from being unlikely to being pretty much impossible? These events have all occurred since the UN resolution, and Jack Straw, who gave evidence to us not so long ago, said this: "At the moment, Prime Minister Netanyahu and the Israeli Government can do anything. They basically suit themselves about what they do. They know that they suffer no penalty at all".

Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP: I do not think that is entirely true, in the sense that the Israeli population, the people in that country—I am a firm believer in and supporter of the State of Israel, as some of you may know—live daily with the threat of terror. Peace, a solution, would be a

wonderful thing, so I disagree with those who say that the best way forward is just to freeze it all and to maintain a security solution of the kind that we have. That is a counsel of despair. There must be some way of making sense of the old idea of a proper homeland for the Jewish people in Israel and a homeland for the Palestinians. That must remain the prize.

Lord Wood of Anfield: It is reassuring to hear that you continue to support a two-state solution, however difficult that might be at the moment. I am slightly baffled, then, as to why Britain refused to sign the declaration supporting a two-state solution in Paris last week, given that a two-state solution is at the core of our vision of peace in the Middle East.

Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP: The reasons for that were pretty clear. As I said to my French friends, I thought it was a bit peculiar to add a grand conference in Paris about these two states when neither of the potential actors was represented at the event. It was a bit like Hamlet without the prince, I thought.

Lord Wood of Anfield: Does that change our view of the two-state solution?

Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP: If you want to be even-handed in these things you have to concede that Resolution 2334 was much more widely acclaimed in Gaza than it was in Israel, and I think the Committee would accept that. Furthermore, the subsequent series of diplomatic ventures seem to me to be aimed not so much at producing a resolution or solving the problems of the MEPP, but rather at domestic political posturing in the run-up to various elections.

Indeed, the reason why Resolution 2334 took place before Christmas, as I am sure the Committee will understand, is because it was a very convenient American political window between the election and the installation of a new President. In other words, it was a moment of minimum political vulnerability for any politician in America. My feeling about the Paris talks was that with five days to go until the installation of a new President, who might take a very different view from the outgoing Obama Administration, it did not make much sense, particularly in view of America's dominant role in supporting and maintaining Israel.

Lord Purvis of Tweed: There was very high-profile criticism from Downing Street of John Kerry's speech. Were you consulted before Downing Street issued that statement?

Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP: Lord Purvis, with great respect to you, I do not go into my many, many conversations with Downing Street on all kinds of matters, but I think it was reasonable to distinguish between longstanding British policy and quite strong criticism of the Government of a friend and ally. I think that that was what the Prime Minister was trying to get at.

The Chairman: We have covered part of the next question already, with Syria and Assad, but Lord Wood wants to come in on this.

Q143 **Lord Wood of Anfield:** Yes. On Syria, President Trump has been very clear that he wants to eliminate radical Islamic militancy from the face of the earth, and he has also been clear that he is prepared have a new approach: to prioritise the defeat of ISIS, possibly in co-operation with Russia. Would you support a change of US-UK direction to support those goals, possibly even joining forces, figuratively and militarily, with Russia to do so?

Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP: We have heard from the Russians before that they wanted to eliminate Daesh, though most of its attacks in the Syrian campaign have been against the moderate armed opposition. We are already, with the United States, engaged very heavily in attacking Daesh in Iraq. The Committee will know that more than 1,000 sorties have been flown—almost 1,200. We are there; we are instrumental in driving Daesh out of its stronghold in Mosul and we will go on to be supportive of the venture to remove it from Raqqa, if and when that happens, although obviously we have to work out exactly the modalities and the legal basis on which we do that. So we are very much there in the fight against Daesh.

I thought that it was a great moment, and I made no bones about it, when the Assad regime, for all its despicable practices, and the Russians contrived to get Daesh out of Palmyra. The tragedy is that Assad has been unable to maintain that position because he is not strong enough and does not command sufficient support from his own people. I think that what is happening in Palmyra is an absolute tragedy for humanity.

Lord Wood of Anfield: Specifically, are you prepared to co-operate militarily with Russia to pursue these goals, even if that comes at the expense of the goal of removing Bashar al-Assad from power?

Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP: As I told the Committee earlier, I want to see a negotiated solution. It is our view that Bashar al-Assad should go—it has been our longstanding position—but as I have said we are open-minded about how that happens and the timescale on which it happens.

Lord Inglewood: Foreign Secretary, is it not slightly strange to be, as you have just described it, deeply involved in the physical conflict in Syria and yet at the same time excluded from the peace talks?

Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP: We are talking about Iraq, Lord Inglewood.

Lord Inglewood: Yes, I know, and you were talking about Raqqa, but the point was the question was about Syria. Daesh is in both, obviously.

Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP: Yes, of course. Well, as I told the Committee earlier, the UK took a strategic decision. The House of Commons had a vote in August 2013 and the question then was whether we were going to get much more seriously involved in Syria and we decided not to. At that moment we effectively played ourselves out of the game in Syria, and it

is perhaps not surprising that we are not involved in the current peace talks in Astana.

Lord Reid of Cardowan: Sorry to come back to the same point, but the proposition that was put to the House of Commons, if I remember, was not that we take action against Daesh but that we take action against Assad.

Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP: That is certainly true.

Lord Reid of Cardowan: Right. And the decision of the Commons, which you keep referring to as having changed the course of history there, was that the wolf nearest the sledge, which should be shot first, was Daesh. That is what I think you are being asked by Lord Wood. Are you prepared, if Daesh is the biggest strategic threat to this country, our interests and our values, to work with others in that? That has not been rejected by the House of Commons. The House of Commons rejected the use of military intervention against President Assad, while you are now saying that he will have to go ultimately, without a timescale. The House of Commons did not reject action against Daesh. Are you prepared to see an alliance of forces, including Russia, attack Daesh?

Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP: We are attacking Daesh, as I have said. We are part of a coalition that is launching daily air strikes against Daesh.

Lord Reid of Cardowan: In Iraq. But in Syria?

Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP: Well, we do not yet have authority from the House of Commons for wholesale involvement in Syria. We took a decision in 2013 not to take a lead in Syria.

Lord Reid of Cardowan: Against Assad. I am asking you, Foreign Secretary, about Daesh in Syria.

Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP: Well, it is certainly the case that we will face a strategic choice about how to prosecute the war against Daesh. At the moment we are confining our activities to the conflict in Mosul. The question is rightly raised, could we do a deal with Assad and the Russians and team up with them to attack Daesh? My hesitation about is that it would be seen as switching sides. To come in on the side of Assad and the Russians would be seen, I think, as a great betrayal of the people of Syria who have opposed Assad. It would be seen as a betrayal of the moderate armed opposition that we have supported and it would have grave repercussions in the area.

We are engaged in some activity against Daesh across the border in Syria, but we have not joined forces with Assad for that reason, and partly because, of course, it was he who unleashed Daesh. Do not forget that it was his decision to let Daesh out of the jails to create this false alternative for the west. It was his decision to put us in this position: he wants us to be forced to choose—"You either back me in the fight against Daesh or you support Islamic terrorists". We do not see it that way. We believe that he, himself, is a recruiting sergeant for radicalism and I think

that if we were to do what Lord Wood suggests and forge an alliance now with Bashar al-Assad and the Russians, it would have very grave consequences for our reputation and would drive radicalisation, not just in that area but possibly more widely.

Q144 **Baroness Helic:** I think I can understand the predicament and the fact that it would be very difficult to switch sides. I can also understand that it would be morally wrong. I also understand the point about it being a recruiting sergeant for ISIS or Daesh, whatever name we use. However, we might find ourselves in days or weeks to come with the United States on a different side of the argument. That would put us in direct collision, or in an argument, with our closest ally, with which we are trying forge a relationship more special than it has been over the last decades. How would we deal with that?

Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP: I see downsides and risks in us going in and doing a complete flip-flop, supporting the Russians and Assad, as I have outlined. I must also be realistic about the way the landscape has changed. We may have to think afresh about how we handle this. With the Trump Administration, the crucial point to make is that any deal with the Russians of necessity involves an accommodation with Iran. It is not the Russians who are fighting the armed opposition groups on the ground. It is not the Russians who are risking their lives. It is the Shi'ite militias, which are backed by Iran. The real question is whether the incoming US Administration fully appreciate that relationship and how we can help to shape the conversation. Clearly, we do not want a further extension of Iranian power and influence in that region. It may be possible, therefore, to make progress by distinguishing in the American mind between an accommodation with Russia and one with Iran and to drive a wedge between them, if you see what I mean. That is where we are at the moment.

I fully accept that the position in Syria has been catastrophic. It is one of the great disasters of our time. Lord Reid may disagree with this, but I think that the British failures in that theatre can be traced back to that decision not to get involved in 2013. We played ourselves out of the game. It was a great shame, in my view. My predecessor but one as Foreign Secretary, William Hague, felt that it had been a significant reverse for UK foreign policy. We are where we are now, which is in a very difficult position. The Committee is right to draw attention to these dilemmas. There are no good options here. We have been wedded for a long time to the mantra that Assad must go, but we have not been able at any stage to make that happen. That has produced the difficulty that we now face.

If there is a possibility of an arrangement with the Russians that simultaneously allows Assad to move towards the exit, diminishes Iranian influence in the region by getting rid of Assad and allows us to join the Russians in attacking Daesh and wiping them off the face of the earth, or whatever the President has said, that might be a way forward, but the Committee will appreciate that there are perils in that approach. It is by no means clear that we would achieve the end of the Assad regime or

that—and this is the real kicker—even if we did achieve it, Syria would be in a better place. That is, I am afraid, the horror of the dilemma that we face.

The Chairman: Foreign Secretary, infuriatingly, although we want to pursue this, we have a further two important questions and we only have 15 minutes before you need to go, so I am afraid that we are going to have to move on. I am sorry.

Baroness Smith of Newnham: May I ask a very quick question of clarification, please?

The Chairman: All right.

Baroness Smith of Newnham: Foreign Secretary, do I understand you to be saying that the Government's position is that they are more concerned to get rid of Assad than to defeat Daesh?

Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP: No, I am not saying that. I am saying that we face a number of alternative scenarios, none of which is particularly full of hope and promise. Broadly speaking, we could do a flip-flop and say, "The facts of life have totally changed. We must accept that we were wrong about Assad. For five years, we have been mouthing the mantra that Assad must go, but it turns out to be wrong. In fact, we were barking up the wrong tree. We should throw in our lot with Assad and the Russians". However, I do not think that that would necessarily be in the best interests of the Syrian people. It is very possible that there would be further carnage and blood-letting and that Assad would find it impossible to deliver a credible Government for the whole of Syria.

On the other hand, we have tried for years to support the moderate armed opposition with the limited tools that we have at our disposal and to boost the High Negotiations Committee, Dr Riyad Hijab and others. We have tried to project the idea that there is an alternative Syrian Government in waiting, but we have not been able to carry that off. The Russians have been able to move in and create these facts on the ground, plus we have a new American President, who in some of his pronouncements has seemed to take a very different attitude towards a relationship with Putin. The old policy, I am afraid to say, does not command much confidence and, as the Committee has pointed out, because of our decision to opt out in 2013 we are not at the Astana talks.

Perhaps I can summarise this discussion by saying that we need to understand exactly where the White House is coming from now. We need to understand how it sees the end game. We need to help to shape that conversation, making some of the points and the reservations that we have, particularly about Iran. There may be some political way forward of the kind that I have described that leads, as Baroness Helic suggested, to a new federal solution for Syria and a political deal. It is very far from clear how we get there from here. It will be a tough road. Any advance on that, Christian?

Dr Christian Turner: No.

The Chairman: We are going to have to move on, because we have two more important questions to cover.

Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP: I think that I have said all that I have to say on this.

The Chairman: Lord Hannay, would you like to come in on the Iranian nuclear deal?

Q145 **Lord Hannay of Chiswick:** Yes. On the question of the use of force against Daesh in Syria, I thought that, after a rather tumultuous debate in the House of Commons, that was in fact authorised and that that is the basis on which we are operating. Could we turn to Iran, which Lord Reid mentioned in an earlier question, and particularly the P5 plus 1 nuclear agreement? The President of the United States has spoken very disobligingly about that agreement. I think that he described it as the worst deal ever made. I assume that that is not the view of the Government, since the Government are a party to the deal and presumably do not go around making the worst deals ever made. Will you try to persuade the Trump Administration not to renege on the Iran deal? If, alas, they were to do so, will Britain stick with it? Have you given any thought to how we could improve the Iran deal in what is one of its weakest spots, which is its rather short duration—there is a series of time limits of eight and 15 years—by trying to generalise and globalise the constraints in the agreement and apply them worldwide, thus making Iran look and feel less put upon?

Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP: I heard what the incoming Administration had to say about the JCPOA Iran deal. The deal seems to me to have worked so far in containing Iran's nuclear capabilities. That must be a good thing. It has not yet delivered enough by way of trade between our countries and it is important to develop that. If there is something that we can do to boost confidence in the deal on both sides, I am all in favour of it.

Lord Hannay of Chiswick: But if the US Administration either renege on the deal or try to destroy it, what will the position of the Government be in the discussions?

Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP: As I said, we have already made our views clear to the Trump Administration. We think that trying to improve relations with Iran through this deal—it is a pretty cautious thing—is on the whole a good thing. We regard it as one of the achievements of the Obama Administration.

The Chairman: Do you not think there is a great worry that the Congress in Washington may decide to renege on it? I was in Washington when Mr Netanyahu addressed the Congress. My impression was that there was no way that, given the opportunity, the Congress would in the long run endorse the deal.

Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP: Well, we must see where we get to with Congress. I am aware of the feelings of people on Capitol Hill about the deal. Let us wait and see. Where we think that it is of value—and it would be good thing to improve relations with Iran rather than the reverse—we will make the case.

Q146 **The Chairman:** Let us move on to the final question, which relates to the suggestion that has been made to the UK Government to suspend arms exports to Saudi Arabia, pending the inquiry by the United Nations into alleged violations of international humanitarian law. Three Commons Select Committees have pontificated on this, following the suspension or limiting of sales by the United States and some European countries. What is the Government's attitude to these calls and recommendations?

Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP: We are well aware of the concerns of those Committees, although I note that the Foreign Affairs Committee did not call for a ban on weapons sales to Saudi Arabia. We follow very strict guidance and criteria for the export of weapons. Although we follow this on a day-to-day basis, we do not think that the threshold for a ban has yet been met. At the moment, for the export certificate not to be issued, there has to be a clear risk that there will be a serious breach of international humanitarian law. We have received sufficient assurances from the Saudis about the incidents that have taken place so far to think that we are still narrowly on the right side of that threshold.

The Chairman: The Foreign Affairs Committee also recommended that we should issue no further licences. What is your attitude to that?

Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP: As I say, we think that we are on the right side still, though it is kept under constant review. To be fair, while there have been some atrocious incidents, the Saudis have been very heavily scrutinised and they have done a great deal to try to satisfy us that they are taking steps to make sure that nothing of that kind can happen again. For instance, on the use of cluster munitions, the BL755s, we have not exported one of those for a very long time. Since the admission by the Saudis that they had been used, they have undertaken not to use them again.

Lord Wood of Anfield: With respect, the UN's humanitarian co-ordinator estimates that 10,000 civilians have been killed in Yemen. It is somewhat astonishing to hear you say that we still feel that we are on the right side of the line, when Saudi aggression is responsible for a significant number of those civilian deaths. How can we still be on the right side of the line in our support for the arms trade with Saudi Arabia?

Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP: You are absolutely right to draw attention to the scale of the humanitarian suffering in Yemen. We want that suffering to stop. It is also the case, however, that there is an illegitimate Government, supported by the Houthis, in Sanaa. The coalition is widely drawn and has our support in trying to restore the legitimate Government of President Hadi. Yes, we want peace in Yemen and, yes, I think that it is a catastrophe, but I do not believe that any UK action on export

licences will affect that process. That process needs to be driven by dialogue between the Houthis, the Saudis, the Emiratis, the Americans and ourselves, as it has been. If you ask me whether I am deeply concerned about the humanitarian situation in Yemen, yes, I certainly am.

The Chairman: We have a few more minutes. In the previous question about Syria, I cut off Lord Wood and Lord Hannay. I think that Lord Hannay caught my eye first. Would you like to backtrack to that?

- Q147 **Lord Hannay of Chiswick:** Could I come in on an angle that has not been referred to about Syria, which is the role of the United Nations, and ask you to comment a little more widely on that? The United Nations was running a peace conference in Geneva and is still, as far as I know, running it. What are we going to do to revive that process and to channel the efforts that may have been made in Kazakhstan back into the UN channel? It seems to me—I do not know whether you agree—that that is the best way forward, however much the Russians and Turks may prefer discreet discussions among themselves.

Given the challenges that face the UN, with its new Secretary-General having just taken over at the beginning of this month—in a process which the Government take considerable credit for having made more transparent and a better choice-process than we have ever had before—António Guterres really does need our help. If he listened to ABC yesterday, he is going to be a worried man this morning. Are we going to make sure that the UN has our full support and will we make that clear in our discussions with the United States? Should we be prepared to see the United Nations is not marginalised and deprived of resources when we think that it should be doing more, not less?

The Chairman: Perhaps you would answer that one and the next question, from Lord Wood, together?

Lord Wood of Anfield: My question is back on Syria. Is it conceivable that, in the fresh thinking for Syrian peace in the future, we would find it acceptable that Bashar al-Assad runs for election?

Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP: Yes. I said that already.

Lord Wood of Anfield: Sorry. I did not hear you say that.

Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP: Yes, I said that. I think that I said it. Did anybody notice me say that? Thank you—Lord Hannay spotted that one, with his customary acuity. I totally agree with you about the UN. I have been a few times. I think that I even voted for the UK. I moved a resolution on aviation security. It was a most wonderful experience. I believe profoundly in the UN. I think that the process led by Staffan de Mistura in Syria is very important and that the Astana process should lead back to that and the UN should retain its role. When you talk about António Guterres, I share your positive view. I think that he could prove to be a very good Secretary-General indeed. I saw him in action in the recent Cyprus talks. Obviously, we were very far from getting there—you,

Lord Hannay, will have experience of that particular number—but the UN is very important. I support it strongly and we will be making that position very clear to our friends in Washington.

Dr Christian Turner: If I may make one clarification to Lord Hannay. Staffan de Mistura, the UN special envoy, was in Astana and issued quite a strong statement afterwards pointing to the outcome of the talks and the fact that they confirmed that the terms and sequencing of a negotiating process and political process should be in line with Resolution 2254 and a return to Geneva.

Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP: Sorry—Christian is of course right. What I was driving at was that the talks should not continue in Astana but should return to Geneva.

The Chairman: Thank you. Do any of my colleagues want to come back? Lord Reid.

Lord Reid of Cardowan: I would not like you to think that people round the table in this Committee do not understand the quandaries and perils of Syria. I think that we do. Is it not the case that the central practical and moral question that you face in trying to find a way forward on this is that, historically, however difficult it has been to remove brutal dictators, it has been even more difficult to ensure that what follows is better than what we have got rid of? Witness Saddam, in some ways; witness getting rid of Gaddafi and I suppose even the Shah many years ago. Is that not the central practical quandary?

Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP: Lord Reid, you have direct experience. I think that I have been very frank with the Committee about the quandary that we are in. It has been the long-standing position of the Government that Assad must go and we are facing the reality that things have changed and we have to think about what is best for the Syrian people. I have tried to highlight the dilemma as clearly as I can.

I went to Baghdad shortly after it had been liberated by what was then your Government, Lord Reid. It was about 10 days—or less than that—after that statue of Saddam had been pulled down, so there was a very lively atmosphere. My guide was a Christian and he said to me, “As your great novelist William Shakespeare has written in ‘Julius Caesar’, ‘It is better sometimes to have a tyrant than not to have a ruler at all’”. I cannot find that quotation anywhere in Shakespeare, but there was wisdom none the less in what he said. That, I am afraid, is the dilemma. It is a very painful dilemma, because we know that neither option is likely to be good, but we are getting to the point where we will have to choose.

The Chairman: This must be the very last question.

Baroness Helic: I will not ask the Foreign Secretary a question now, because it relates to foreign policy and European affairs, but I make a plea to him to reply to my letter if I write to him.

Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP: Of course, with pleasure.

The Chairman: Foreign Secretary, you have been very patient. You have answered our questions extremely clearly. We value your visit to us enormously. We hope that this new Committee will have the pleasure of seeing you over the years on a regular basis. We would appreciate that. Thank you for coming.

Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP: My pleasure. If you thought that I was speaking clearly, then I have obviously totally failed in my mission.

The Chairman: Thank you.