



Select Committee on International Relations

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

Wednesday 15 March 2017

2.30 pm

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Members present: Lord Howell of Guildford (Chairman); Baroness Coussins; Lord Grocott; Lord Hannay of Chiswick; Baroness Hilton of Eggardon; Lord Inglewood; Lord Jopling; Lord Purvis of Tweed; Baroness Smith of Newnham.

Evidence Session No. 20

Heard in Public

Questions 218 - 226

Witness

I: Dr Jon B Alterman, Director, Middle East Program, Center for Strategic and International Studies.

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 Jon B Alterman.

Q218 **The Chairman:** Good afternoon, Dr Alterman. Thank you very much for being with us. I advise Committee members to look at the camera so that Dr Alterman can see them, otherwise the camera will just see the tops of their heads. I remind everyone that this is a public session. A transcript will be made available and you are free to alter it in any way you wish. That is all the formal details. I have one apology from Lady Helic, who is unable to be with us.

If we may turn to the subject matter, you may or may not be aware that this Committee is seeking in an ambitious way to evaluate and examine the vast changes in what is loosely called the Middle East, which of course includes many regions and countries; to understand the vast transformations of power and the undercurrents that have torn large parts of the Middle East apart; and to analyse what you call the “wrenching disruptions” in the region. Central to all this is where the United States is going and what its policy is. Can you begin by giving us one or two insights into how US policy is evolving, who is in charge, what its direction is likely to be and who is influencing the shape of its Middle East policy? Frankly, we are getting some very confused signals. Over to you.

Jon B Alterman: Thank you, Lord Chairman. I am aware of your inquiry. I congratulate you on the spectacular array of witnesses you have arranged. I have read much of the testimony and am gratified to see that I have so many friends among your witnesses. I like to think that you have chosen your witnesses well, and I have chosen my friends well.

You ask who is making policy in the new Administration. There are several different groups, and it is not clear how they all interact. There is obviously the National Security Council staff, often thought of as the principal White House staff on foreign policy. The Middle East leadership was all chosen under General Flynn. They are all colonels from US military intelligence. I know several of them. My experience with military intelligence people is that they tend to like yes/no answers. General McMaster, the new head of the National Security Council, comes from a military background, but a background in the armoured corps that is very much inclined towards working with allies. The other important thing to note about this group is that they all come with significant Iraq experience, which makes them somewhat more sceptical of the Iranians and the potential for US-Iranian co-operation down the line, given what Iran did, overtly and covertly, to American troops fighting in Iraq.

There is also the Strategic Initiatives Group, which seems to be made up of about 20 people, including Steve Bannon and Jared Kushner. As far as we can tell, Steve Bannon and Jared Kushner have very different views towards the world. Steve Bannon is an economic nationalist and Jared Kushner has often been described as the person who moderates the President. He reportedly has the lead on Arab-Israeli issues. I heard from

a reporter that when the Deputy Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia met the President for lunch yesterday, that had been arranged by Jared Kushner. I note that nobody from the State Department was there; it was an entirely White House lunch, which is a bit of a break in protocol.

We also have the State Department and the Defense Department. Here, the issue is that they are spectacularly understaffed. The normal level of management that transmits between the Cabinet Secretaries and the bureaucracy is completely missing. They have not even identified people for most of these roles. It seems to me that that significantly weakens the departments because it is very hard for the Cabinet Secretaries to get the kind of support that they need to weigh in effectively.

It is also unclear what the process is to bring different views in government together. Quite frankly, the White House is not really interested in establishing a process up front. There are always going to be tensions between the White House and the Cabinet departments, even within the White House, but these tensions are larger than they have been at other times. Not surprisingly, of course, the strategy remains unclear. That is not only because of our somewhat mercurial President but also what seems to be a desire of this Administration to avoid creating the kind of processes that forge a strategy. I am afraid that if you are puzzled now, the puzzlement is likely to continue for some time into the future.

Q219 The Chairman: I feared you might say that. Is it too early to make a preliminary judgment on whether there is a new direction in United States policy in the region or a pivot away from the region altogether? Is talk of vast increases in American military expenditure and the might of America going unchallenged aimed at crushing rebellious forces in the Middle East such as Daesh? Are allowances going to be made for any new alliances that might be formed? Can we draw any conclusions?

Jon B Alterman: No, some things are very clear. First, this Administration are much more sceptical of Iran than the previous Administration, for which improving relations with Iran was at the core of the entire strategy towards the region. This President is much more focused on elevating counterterrorism as a military task. He is very critical of the way the Obama Administration approached that. How they will actually work it, I do not think they know, but their instinct is to be much more aggressive militarily.

They are clearly much more sympathetic to the current Government of Israel than the Obama Administration were. That is not about being sympathetic towards Israel but being sympathetic towards a certain understanding of Israel's place in the world that is articulated both by the Prime Minister and people to the right of the Prime Minister. Israeli Prime Ministers have always reliably kept their right wing in line by saying, "This would offend the Americans too much to do". One interesting implication might be that we are losing that guard-rail, which might result in Israeli policy moving right as US policy moves right. That could have consequences for the region.

Lord Jopling: You talked about the lack of appointments at the middle level in so many departments. That is one of the big differences from our system here. If we have an election on a Thursday, virtually all the political appointments will be in their departments on Monday morning. In the past, I have always been astonished that it takes maybe up to June until all the political appointments are in place in Washington. My question is: is the current situation unusual, given the length of time it has always taken in the past?

Jon B Alterman: It is extraordinarily unusual. There is not even a leading candidate to be Deputy Secretary of State, let alone Under-Secretary of State for Political Affairs. The Secretary of Defense just withdrew his candidate to be Under-Secretary of Defense for Policy. These are not even the Assistant Secretary-level jobs. There is sort of a cascade.

One of the important things to keep in mind, and why the situation is very different from what we have had before and from the British system, is that this is an insurgent Republican group that is hostile to the kinds of Republicans who held positions in previous Republican Administrations. Several letters went out in the spring that senior people signed off on to say that Donald Trump is not fit to be Commander-in-Chief. Those people have been excluded from consideration in many cases of any government job in this administration. That takes a lot of the veterans of Republican government out of contention.

Of the people in the Strategic Initiatives Group that I described, virtually none of them has any executive branch experience at all, and yet they are at the centre of trying to make the US Government work. It is unclear the extent to which this is by design—that people who do not know how to make the Government work do not want other people who do, because that would take away some of their influence—or due to a lack of understanding that for the Government to work the bureaucracy needs to be staffed.

I hear from my friends in embassies overseas that it is very hard: nobody can direct them because they do not know what the policy is. The juices are not flowing in the departments and it is hard for them to understand how they can even be helpful. Most of my friends who are diplomats generally want to be helpful to whoever the President is. But if you do not know what the President thinks, you cannot be helpful. We have a lot of that going on. I agree with you that June is usually when everything is up and running, but I think that this is going to last well beyond June.

The Chairman: This revolution in policy postures and the resulting divisive effects on parties is not unknown here. We too have not quite existential but very challenging developments in Europe and around Britain's relations with the rest of Europe. These are genuinely uncertain times across the whole world, particularly, as you so rightly said, in the Middle East itself with these "wrenching disruptions", to repeat your phrase. How do you see this all affecting the trans-Atlantic pattern? Lord Hannay has some questions on this.

Q220 Lord Hannay of Chiswick: I wonder whether we can look at two rather salient examples of foreign policy areas: what the President-elect and now President stated as his policy towards Iran and what is, perhaps with a certain amount of irony, called the Middle East peace process, and Israel and Palestine. First, to what extent can the main European countries—Britain, France, Germany, Italy and others, which have always taken a very supportive line on the Iran nuclear agreement and upheld the two-state solution to the Palestine issue—influence the new Administration? Do they have any influence at all? If so, how would this best be deployed in—judging by your statement—the weeks and months ahead?

Jon B Alterman: Lord Hannay, I am reluctant to advise people on how to deal with my own Government. I think that may end up with them putting me in jail. Let me say this. The President was critical of the nuclear deal. I have spoken to scholars, diplomats, experts and all kinds of people, not just in the Levant and in the Gulf, but also in Israel. They say that you may not like the agreement, but the agreement is better than having nothing. While people in the United States were talking about ripping up the agreement on day one, the zeal for that seems to have gone away. The question is: how do you hold the Iranians to the agreement and deal with all the other objectionable things they are doing in addition to the agreement, rather than ripping it up? In my judgment, the Administration will reluctantly uphold the agreement, with or without encouragement from Europe.

The issue of Israel and Palestine and Europe is harder. I am not sure the President is a true believer on this issue. I think he is surrounded by people who believe that US policy has been deeply misguided and biased against Israel. In many ways, the most important address to affect US policy in Israel may be the way in which the Europeans deal with Israelis. Israelis often come to me to complain that Europe is unfairly biased against Israel and that all the rising countries in the world have good relations with Israel, including India, China and elsewhere. Of course, they have deepened their relations with Russia. In many ways the Israelis have written off Europe. The answer is not just about addressing the US Administration, which will be sceptical of European approaches because they are European. Part of the answer might be to change Israeli perceptions of European intentions.

The other key point is that this Administration are not really interested in notions of Europe; certainly the White House seems distrustful of notions of NATO. They have a strong preference for bilateral relations. Most of this will much more effectively be done through a bilateral discussion rather than a multilateral discussion, with the understanding that the disadvantage of a bilateral discussion is that the US is an 800-pound gorilla—or a 400-kilogram gorilla—and it is not an equal discussion. But that is their strong preference. Going through a European context would not really be helpful.

Lord Hannay of Chiswick: What you have to say is interesting and I can see the distinction you are making between the Europeans as a group

or gaggle turning up in Washington and telling the President they think his policies are wrong. But that is not the way diplomacy actually works, because there are very few collective discussions between the President of the United States and the 28 members of the European Union, and there are a very large number of bilateral dealings.

Can you give us some idea of what this animus against Europe and the European Union consists of? Is it rational? If it is not rational, is it ideological? What is it all about? Do the members of the incoming Administration have absolutely no idea what the European Union has contributed over the past 40 or 50 years to stability and the strength of NATO?

Jon B Alterman: I am reluctant to sound partisan, but I think the answer is "Yes, they have absolutely no idea." I have been surprised that the President has not understood the importance of NATO. I am also surprised that the President seems not to think that war could break out in Europe again at any point or under any circumstances. But then the President also says: what is the point in having nuclear weapons if you do not use them? There are a lot of things that I find surprising.

The President likes being disruptive and tearing apart what he sees as conventional notions. He likes the idea that he has complete freedom of action and can use that as a way to improve his negotiating posture. I have not seen a lot of signs that he is very interested in investing in institutions that do not bear immediate fruit. This is a departure from the way the US has thought about European security and indeed global security since the 1940s and 1950s.

How much that will be mitigated by his advisers and which advisers will be able to hold sway, nobody knows, including the advisers. There was a story in the newspapers today saying that General McMaster tried to move a 30 year-old aide working on the NSC staff who was working on intelligence in a way that the CIA thought was not constructive. General McMaster was told no, and the aid is going to stay. So there is all this speculation about how much influence General McMaster has over even his own personnel and what that means for the way the NSC works. The fact is that we do not know whether General Mattis or General McMaster are able to weigh in strongly.

I would expect that Secretary Tillerson is not much focused on Europe because that was not his work experience. But I think that for the overwhelmingly military senior leadership the President has brought in, the importance of co-operating with Europe and of our extraordinarily deep co-operation with the UK has been a fundamental experience. I expect he will be getting advice that he should think differently, but how he will think is a mystery to all of us.

Lord Grocott: You referred to the fact that the President may not be a great believer in Israel's position in the way that a lot the people around him are. We all saw the press conference at which he referred to the two-state solution, which can be interpreted in so many different ways. There

has been near universal settled opinion for many years that two states is the objective to solve the insoluble problem. Yet so many of the witnesses to our inquiry have said that we have either reached the stage at which that is very difficult, because of the settlement activity, or gone beyond the point at which it is feasible. Do you have any observations on whether, if not the President, the people around the President have an objection to continuing settlement activity and the feasibility of a two-state solution? If there is not to be a two-state solution, what is it?

Jon B Alterman: I suspect that the objective will be a process rather than a solution. Any solution will take decades to implement. There is plenty of room to negotiate what constitutes a settlement. The Israelis talk about all of Jerusalem being a unified capital and there are certainly negotiations that can be held on that, partly because the municipal boundaries of Jerusalem have changed so profoundly. The Israelis talk about the need to have natural growth in settlement blocks that would be part of land swaps. To me, the issue is whether there is something that looks like progress towards a settlement, and we can characterise it however we characterise it, or whether the two sides look warily at each other and continue to try to undermine each other and commit violence.

The issue is not so much what the end-state is going to be, although it is important to understand that there need to be some objectives. The real issue is: does there seem to be a forward-moving process? I would argue that there is not a forward-moving process. Like a bicycle, if you are not moving forward you are falling down. The important thing is not the exact shape of what we are going to but that Palestinians feel that something is happening that can lead to them accomplishing some of their needs; and that Israelis feel there is some prospect of becoming a more normal state with a more normal set of security concerns, instead of the existential security concerns that Israelis feel. Creating that process creates its own virtuous cycles. The problem is that we do not have that process.

A number of Israelis have looked into what has happened in the past six years in the Arab world. They have said there is no certainty, and that now is not the time to make a deal because they have no idea if the Government are going to be around, and that the last thing they want is greater democratisation in the Arab world because the public hates them even more than the Governments do. In many ways the Israelis are leaning away. The Palestinians are tremendously conflicted with their own internal issues, including corruption in the Palestinian Authority and the tensions between Gaza and the West Bank. It seems to me that neither feel the interest or bandwidth to engage in diplomacy. But engaging in diplomacy and giving some sense of forward movement is important. It is possible that the Administration could get some of that going. One concern I have is that the Administration, by telegraphing so much support for the right wing in Israel, could drive the right wing even further to the right. That would make it harder for centrists in Israel, of which I would say Benjamin Netanyahu is one, to make compromises.

The Chairman: Let us switch to the other area of poison: Daesh. Lord

Inglewood has some questions.

Q221 **Lord Inglewood:** Thank you, Dr Alterman. In your opening remarks you vividly described the difficulties in trying to identify exactly what the new President's policies might be. Certainly it has been stated quite frequently that he plans to take strong action against ISIL. Since the elections advisers have stated that the US is going to increase air strikes against ISIL in both Iraq and Syria. At the same time it has also been suggested that he is open to co-operation with the Russians and Syrians to forge a deal over Syria. On these two issues can you make it a bit clearer what you think the position might be?

Jon B Alterman: Air strikes against ISIS are easy because they are observable, measureable and do not require other people to do anything. But they do not necessarily affect the situation on the ground, although I would argue that ISIS is having profound challenges both in Mosul and Raqqa. In many ways, if ISIS is isolated in Mosul and Raqqa, it is easier to fight than a totally underground organisation that is carrying out terrorist acts in Syria and Iraq and potentially throughout the Middle East, Europe, the United States and elsewhere. So having a focus on a land battle where you can see and isolate ISIS is not necessarily the worst situation to be in.

One of the challenges the US has is that it is trying to accomplish political goals through air power. In my reading of history, it is very hard to accomplish political goals through air power: it is a little bit too far and a little bit too indirect. General McMaster, as an Army guy, has been critical of that as well. How this all plays out in the policy discussions, I do not know.

On the Russia issue, the President has expressed an interest in working more closely with the Russians. However, that has run aground because of the practicalities for the US military folks on the ground. The people in the US military do not see Russia as a partner, because they have been dealing with Russian actions against both the United States and others and because of the way that the Russians conduct themselves on the battlefield in Syria. What the Russians consider appropriate targeting and what the US considers appropriate targeting are miles and miles apart. There are civilian casualties. The Russians use dumb bombs and the US use smart bombs. The US is much more interested in precision targeting. Many US missions come back with the bombs still on the planes because they were not able to get a sighting on target. Russians do not come back with bombs on the planes; they will bomb anything in the neighbourhood. There are also intelligence obstacles to close co-operation.

I saw a report this week that said that only 20% of Russian bombs in Syria are directly against ISIS. That gives you the sense that the Russians have a different goal in Syria than defeating ISIS, which is the US goal. My instinct is that we can talk a little about US-Russian co-operation but the practical military co-operation is not going to be there.

There is another piece to this, and I think that Lord Hannay is attuned to it: that there will be some sort of negotiation at the end of this. I think the Russians would like the Americans to be there, if only for a fig-leaf. One of the things that worries me is that the Americans will be there but will be weak because the US has not been impactful on the ground in order to get itself into a strong negotiating position.

In January, a former US Secretary of Defense told a group I was in, "We have been on the back bench for so long, it is hard to see how we can get a seat at the table." To my mind, one of the things that has been missing in US strategy in Syria is the goal to get an influential position so that, when this is resolved, you can help direct the resolution in a way you think is constructive. I am afraid that although the Russians will invite the Americans in, it will be a decision that principally meets Russian and Turkish needs and does not necessarily reflect a US perspective or sense of what a solution should look like.

Lord Inglewood: Do you think that the present Administration will have identified this and will therefore positively be trying to assert themselves and elbow their way up to the top table?

Jon B Alterman: My instinct is that they do not want to invest in Syria.

The Chairman: And yet you said that the idea of striking against Daesh is a reasonably simply concept. Let us switch to Mosul for a moment. Look at what is happening there. American special units are having to work with Iranian special Revolutionary Guard units. The Peshmerga are coming in from the other side, and there are dozens of nations with units in there. The British have troops in Mosul and all sorts of places in the Middle East. So on the ground, there is no general position or strategy. There is just an extraordinary effort, in this case to get Daesh out of Mosul, which is turning out to be a pretty horrific and bloody business.

Jon B Alterman: My understanding is that the Iraqis are leading the strategy, with a range of fighting groups with different strategies and different approaches. This is led by the host nation. We do not have that in Syria, of course, because the US will not work with the Syrians. However, the US is very eager to work with the Iraqis. I was in Iraqi Kurdistan last week. It is my understanding that the Iraqi leadership and US support for the Iraqis is working quite well. The Iraqis can also deconflict with the Popular Mobilization Units and the others to try to get this taken care of. As you say, it is incredibly bloody and incredibly slow. The Iraqis will not talk about the number of casualties they have taken but it is probably in the thousands.

The other question is once you get this all done and you have a destroyed city on your hands, how do you prevent the terrorists coming back in? How do you create enough services? How do you create a sense that people are protected? After all, it is the sense of absence of opportunity and absence of protection that opens the door for these groups to come in in the first place.

Q222 Baroness Coussins: Good afternoon. I wanted to press you a bit more on Russia. Russia has clearly carved out a role for itself in this region, although it is not very clear exactly what its objective are. As you said, only 20% of Russian bombs have been directed to ISIS. You talked about what the US's overall strategic aim might be but what do you think Russia wants out of it? What are its long-term ambitions in the region? I think you were a bit dismissive of the idea, but are there any possibilities for a tactical alliance between Russia and the US?

Jon B Alterman: I was in Moscow late last month for the Valdai Middle East conference, which gathered around 120 people, about half of whom were Russian, to talk about Middle East issues. I was surprised that the Russians seemed less cocky than I expected them to be. There is a lot of commotion in Washington about how the Russians are on the march in the Middle East. I found them to be principally worried about stability and order and their ability to promote that. They see that the only path to do that is through strong Governments and strong intelligence services. They are happy to sell weapons, which of course they manufacture, to help promote that. They are also quietly delighted that although they have put limited investment in Syria, less than 5,000 troops and a couple of dozen airplanes, they have become the deciders of the course of the conflict. For a Russia that is very concerned about its military might—its carrier, the "Admiral Kuznetsov", is not a sign of glory for Russia—it has been quite effective. Russia likes the fact that it has been able to get a sense of respect and demonstrate its influence without a huge investment.

I also think Russia does not know how to manage the end-game; it is not confident in that and feels that it will need help. From what I understand, everything it does in the Middle East is discretionary rather than strategic. It is not like Ukraine or the Baltic states at all. This is far away. If it enhances, that is great; if it creates markets, that is great. But it is not core to Russian national security.

My sense of how the Russians operate is that they are eager to make any friends they can rather than thinking through a strategy of what friends they need. They are looking for countries such as Egypt that otherwise feel isolated and are trying to develop relationships. However, I think they are taking from what is offered rather than creating a lot of opportunities.

I could imagine a deconfliction with US troops. Of course, you have to deconflict airspace, and there is some of that going on in Syria. But the practicalities of genuinely co-operating in ground or air operations make it very difficult.

The Chairman: There is some ferment in Washington over Russia, where it seems to be almost an offence to talk to the Russian ambassador. Indeed, we have had a little ferment of that kind in London as well. Do you think it is all a bit overdone?

Jon B Alterman: We have to start from the fact that Russia seems to have engaged in trying to influence US elections. Regardless of whether or not you believe that Russia stole the election, the fact is that Russia seems very clearly to have meddled in US domestic politics to further its own international ambitions. So if that is your starting point, there is sensitivity towards Russia. Certainly talking to the Russian ambassador should not be an offence, but what about co-ordinating with the Russian ambassador about what we will do after we are elected? We have a strong tradition in the United States of having one Government at a time. Making deals with a Government when you are not yet in government is not allowed. Admittedly, thought, there is probably a little bit of hysteria.

The real issue is whether there are parts of the President's relationship with Russia that are not known or whether there were Russian efforts to influence the United States that have not yet been uncovered. Everybody accepts the results of the election, but everybody has redoubled their efforts to ensure that no foreign Government have influence in our elections. I think most countries would feel that way about their national elections.

Q223 **Baroness Smith of Newnham:** You have just suggested that Russia has been lapping up the opportunities that it has in the region on an ad hoc basis. Turkey is a member of NATO but also appears to go off in ad hoc directions. This raises questions about the future of NATO. Given that the new President seems also not to have shown a great deal of interest in upholding the rules-based liberal international order, what future do you think there is for an organisation such as NATO? You suggested earlier that there is no sign that Trump would want to invest in institutions that do not deliver quickly. If NATO does not deliver, does it have a future?

Jon B Alterman: You used the phrase "liberal international order". If you used that in the White House, people would probably giggle. People do not think that there is a liberal international order. The President's whole point is that there is disorder and the US has been paying too much of the bill and we have to get people to move. I do not think that translates to a US abandonment of NATO. Everybody who has had experience in the US military feels the importance of NATO. When you get to implementation, and when you get out of the White House and into reality, everyone says that NATO gives us a huge set of tools that are vital. My guess is that there will be a rhetorical issue on the one hand, but, practically, the US will work to try to invigorate the militaries of NATO member states and encourage them to increase their capability and interoperability. I do not think that four years from now we will be presiding over the death of NATO.

You started by talking about Turkey. Just yesterday I had a conversation about how Turkey presents a whole series of difficult and uncomfortable questions about NATO that NATO is going to have to deal with. Turkey is a country that is partly sliding into harsh autocracy but also a country that seems to be co-operating more closely with the Russians than the Americans. I am not sure how that is going to work itself out. The people committed to NATO have to think through how one deals with a naturally

more sceptical US Government and a NATO member country that is involved in a conflict in ways that seem to exclude, rather than work with, NATO, and that is becoming less and less like other NATO members. That problem has to be managed, along with the US issues. So it is two issues, not one, and they each make the other one more difficult.

Lord Hannay of Chiswick: I want to follow that up, because I very much sympathise with your reaction to us referring to the rules-based international order. I think there is a slight tendency on this side of the Atlantic not to realise the connotations of the "L" word, which are of course different here. I do not think that many people would have regarded NATO as being part of the rules-based liberal international order in any case. I think we should drop that in our discussions.

Could you tell us whether you think the new Administration really understands that NATO has always operated as a deterrent alliance? It is an alliance that does not go to war because it does not need to go war, and it does not need to go to war because people believe that if they did something that affected a member of NATO, there would be war. Do you think the President understands that?

Jon B Alterman: Frankly, no. The President's view is that it is possible to strike a deal with Russia that would accommodate each side's needs, and he wants to explore that deal. NATO was created principally to deter the Soviet Union. The President does not start from that premise. The military people, who in many cases have spent 30 or 40 years looking at Soviet and then Russian behaviour, both against the United States and around the world, have a different view of the possibility of working more closely with the Russians, striking a durable deal and ensuring peace without a strong deterrent. Whether, how and in what circumstances they can convince the President, I do not know. What I have seen consistently from the President is the sense that we can deter people on our own and do not need large, multinational, multilateral institutions to do it.

Lord Jopling: We have heard differing messages from the President over NATO. During the election he was very dismissive of it and more recently we have been told that he is 100% behind it. That is a problem. The message that is familiar from the United States is that the European countries must do more to support NATO. We are in a situation where, after Brexit, the contribution of members of the European Union to NATO will be around 20%. There are rich countries in Europe, such as Belgium and Luxembourg, that pay less than 1% of GDP. Do you envisage that the new Administration will put novel and particular pressures on some of these countries that pay far less than 2% of GDP? Do you see much of a difference from previous Administrations, which may have been making exactly the same point for years and years?

Jon B Alterman: I expect the US will try to exert more pressure and use a threat to diminish its contributions to NATO as a way to elicit those higher spending levels. My reading of this President is that he believes that disruption for its own sake improves his bargaining position, and that everything is negotiable and can be traded. He thinks that by

demonstrating commitments over the long term, you lock yourself into unfavourable terms. He thinks that he can improve the terms by showing a willingness to bolt. How that manifests itself in policy, I do not know. What of the establishment figures around him, who have had their entire world view shaped by the importance of working with allies and the whole structure of international and multilateral institutions? The US has worked with the UK to construct that for more than half a century. How that will shape or moderate his views, I do not know.

One of the things I find encouraging about where we are, and I am afraid I have sounded not very encouraging for quite some time now, is that the President became a very successful reality television personality because he used to watch his performances and tweak them. The President is interested in improving and being successful. I think he is looking at what happens and wants to learn. This is not a world that he has ever been exposed to in any real way. I think there will be an evolution in the President, and the notion of disruption for disruption's sake is not necessarily the way we are going to do it for three or four years. But it is where we are starting now, and we have some way to move.

The other issue that we have not discussed is how this President would react in a crisis. It is one thing to talk about how everything is wired and what the President's predilections are when you are just setting up daily meetings and trying to get through the day. But what if you suddenly go into crisis mode, the Cabinet Secretaries are disconnected from their departments and we are left relying on people who do not know each other, have never been in this situation before and do not know how to reach out? What happens then? To me, that is a very real problem. A number of people have pointed out that most Presidents have a crisis some time in their first year in office. How this Administration will respond to a crisis is a mystery to all of us, including, I believe, this Administration.

The Chairman: You are absolutely right. Black swans there will be and black swans will fly.

Lord Inglewood: Dr Alterman, earlier in your comments about NATO you used a phrase that I rather liked: get out of the White House and into reality. Was that a baroque, throwaway line, or was it a considered statement of reality as it is in Washington?

Jon B Alterman: It was something I have never said before and may never utter again. The reality is that the White House is in quite a bubble. I do not know how the Prime Minister's offices work, but in the White House people have a badge that can get them into the inner sanctum; they can brush by all the lines of people waiting to be screened and checked in. There are two checks to get into the White House now; at the second they put you under a blower to see if you have any explosives, for example. It is a very elaborate process, and the staff is reminded every day that they are exempt from it. They have tiny offices in proximity to the President, and all the information in the world is available to them. Everybody in the world will take their phone calls, they have three

computer screens: one for open source, one for classified and one for highly classified. Everybody is working 18-hour days. There is a White House bubble that is profoundly different from the rest of the world. It is hard for the rest of the world to reach into the bubble, and it is very easy for people in the bubble to reach anybody else. Often people try very hard in the beginning to reach out, and often that gets harder over time.

I think that this Administration, because they are avowedly disruptive, have so many people who have not been in these positions before, are distanced from the Republican establishment in Washington and are less inclined to reach out. They are less likely to get pressures from what they consider to be the President's electoral base, because foreign policy issues are not what the electoral base cares about in any detail. So the bubble may be even more bubbly in this White House than in others. It is a very different reality.

I have spoken to a number of diplomats who have met and worked with the senior directors dealing with the Middle East. I have heard that they seem overwhelmed but committed to doing the job well and are not very ideological. But the problem in the White House is that you have all the possible information in the world at your fingertips, so how do you pick and choose and create order? It is easy to get totally overwhelmed by both your inbox and the firehose of information that is available.

Q224 The Chairman: I want to ask about the United States and the United Nations. We in the UK take the United Nations very seriously and look to the new Secretary-General to take on news tasks. Obviously we believe that the United Nations can play an important and growing role in trying to resolve some of the problems in the Middle East. What is your take on the White House and the UN? Will there be a change, and will it be for the worse or the better?

Jon B Alterman: I have never met Ambassador Haley. She is considered a rising star in American politics and as the ambassador to the UN she has several times contradicted the White House on issues that matter. Whether that will mean that she will have influence or demonstrate that she is out of touch, I do not know. The White House's orientation is to be sceptical towards the UN, as many Americans are. It seems to me that the UN has a vital role not so much in leading diplomacy but in providing an umbrella for diplomacy so that people can share a stake in resolving issues of conflict and development. I do not think the Administration are going to look to the UN to lead, but they may acquiesce to the UN taking ownership of resolving conflicts. For instance, if the Administration have no interest in resolving the conflict in Yemen, and if the special envoy can make progress I think they would be generally supportive of that. However, I do not think that the Administration will be looking to the UN at all. Again, it counts as one of these multilateral institutions that water down American will and direction.

There is a whole stream of thought—and about 95% of people who hold it probably voted for this President—that the UN is seeking to depose the US Government and subjugate the United States, and it has a swarm

black helicopters that will swoop down on unsuspecting Americans and impose its will. There is a certain resonance in the White House for that point of view.

The Chairman: I want to ask a deeper question behind that. President Trump has said that he wants to vastly increase, by \$54 billion, expenditure on the American military, which is already colossal. Behind that must be some belief that sheer spend on military power can achieve American influence and effectiveness around the world. Everything we have seen in the past few years seems to contradict that. Do you think that a debate is going on in the White House as to whether more military spending will solve the problems of America?

Jon B Alterman: The first question is: how are we spending on the military? There are any number of ways to spend, some of which have the desired effect and many of which do not. Everybody in the military believes that you need civilian support. The problem in the past 15 years of war in the Middle East is not that the military has not had enough, but that it has not had enough civilian support. Civilian organisations and instruments have been so much weaker than the military ones, and those have been let down by their civilian counterparts. I think there will be a lot of lobbying from the military and retired military not to hollow out the civilian side of this. I do not think that multilateral organisations are going to be the recipient of American largesse as we think about security issues in the world, but I can certainly imagine an effort to reinvigorate some of the diplomatic side.

The cautionary and contrary note is a report that the President wanted to cut the State Department budget, including foreign aid, by 37%. That would cut not fat but a tremendous amount of muscle from American diplomacy around the world. I do not think that the Administration are universally convinced of the need for diplomacy. I think they will become convinced of it, but when and how that will happen is a mystery to me. I think the President really believes that he is the best diplomat because he is the best negotiator, and getting a sense for other skillsets and how they can be effective will be an important part of his learning process.

Lord Hannay of Chiswick: I have a follow-on question on the United Nations and multilateral organisations. There are large areas of the world where I suspect President Trump, and perhaps other Presidents before him, has not really identified a very obvious narrow national US interest. Africa is a case in point, as are parts of the Middle East. Would you totally discount the possibility that he will come to the view that perhaps it is quite useful to have somebody else to look after those things, particularly an organisation like the United Nations, which has a capability to deploy civilian staff to do the peacemaking, peacekeeping and peacebuilding jobs? Is that hopelessly overoptimistic?

Jon B Alterman: I think it is pretty optimistic. There is a strain in his base and among his advisers that is extremely hostile to the UN as an organisation. The fact that John Bolton has been floated for so many positions is a sign they think that is an important part of their consistency

to speak to. They might acquiesce on some issues in conflicts that they do not care about, but generally they think that the UN is wasteful and ineffective.

There is a broader point too: how many issues in the rest of the world does the President really care about? The US has been fairly engaged in a large number of things, and when it engages it is always the largest player. I do not think this President has figured out how much of the world to engage with. His electoral constituency talks about focusing more at home, but I do not think he has thought about what US policy should be. Should the US play a role in peacekeeping in Africa and, if so, what? How should the US think about international trade regimes as opposed to bilateral treaties? There is a whole series of things that he just has not thought about. His instinct is to pull in rather than spread out, and that will have consequences.

Much as people talk about the way the Obama Administration created a vacuum in the Middle East that others, including the Iranians and the Russians, have walked into, it is quite possible, and seems likely, that there will be other situations in which people will say, "Where are the Americans?", and the Americans will be nowhere to be found.

Q225 Baroness Hilton of Eggardon: You talked about the President's lack of engagement with many parts of the world. One of the consequences of the collapse of order in the Middle East is the growth of positive groups such as the Kurds, the regional government in Iraq and so on. Do you see the US Administration being able to engage with those non-state actors or has that not crossed the President's mind yet?

Jon B Alterman: There is certainly a willingness to engage with the Kurds, who have a long relationship with the United States. The problem is that there are lots of different Kurdish groups and they tend not to work extraordinarily closely with each other. How the present US government will slice and dice that will depend largely on the advice they get from the military and intelligence folks who are working with them on the ground.

Broader non-state actors are more difficult to foresee. The US is certainly hostile to Daesh/ISIS. Are there other quasi-Islamist groups that might play a useful role here and, if so, how do you deal with them? How do you think about the whole menu of non-state actors in the Middle East and around the world? I do not think the Administration have thought about it. The President's deep instinct is to work with Governments when you can, but I do not think that the question of how the US would act when there is a Government with whom he had a very cold relationship and a non-state actor with whom we might have a warmer relationship has come up. I do not know how he would respond to that.

Lord Jopling: Can I go back to the Chairman's question about the proposal to increase military spending? The President has suggested increasing public spending not only on defence but on infrastructure; roads and tunnels and everything else that was in the inaugural speech.

He has also talked about cutting taxes. These things do not really add up unless you go back to the Reagan policy of massive borrowing. Of course the United States is already, from a federal and state position, eye-wateringly in debt. Do you think that the economic prospect over the next few years is likely to be a massive increase in the debts of the United State?

Jon B Alterman: My gut reaction is no. I agree that the President has had a lot of experience profiting from both leveraging his activities and declaring bankruptcy, which is not a prospect I look forward to from the US Government. The reality is that the President proposes budgets but Congress is the body that passes spending Bills. They have to originate in the House and are approved by the Senate. The President's only role is supporting or vetoing. The budget really comes out of Congress. You are already seeing signs of congressional independence. You have seen it in discussions on the healthcare Bill, which the Congressional Budget Office said would take 24 million people off insurance in the next 10 years. You have seen Senator McCain and Senator Graham be increasingly critical of the President in public, giving cover to others. So it seems to me that Congress's role is large in this space. The President has yet to build credibility with Congress.

In fact, one of the greatest surprises of his first 50 days in office is not merely that he has not lined up people in his Cabinet departments to staff the Government, but that his legislative agenda has been so weakly accomplished. He has created scandals and distractions that have prevented things getting done. Traditionally, in the US concept, upon taking office the President has a 100-day opportunity. The wind is at his back, the press is attentive; he can work with Congress and push things through. This President has not pushed things through, certainly not in the first 50 days. He seems not to have a mind towards legislative accomplishment. If he wants to do anything on the budget, it will require the legislature. He seems not to have figured out how to work with the legislature, which is, after all, led by members of his own party. The Republicans control the House, the Senate and the White House. Despite all those things aligning, the President has not been able to move it forward.

Q226 **The Chairman:** We have kept you for a long while, Dr Alterman, and we must let you go. Let us try to end on a more cheerful note. You have written that it would be a mistake to conclude that the Middle East is destined to suffer a bloody decade, despite all the chaos that is going on. You say that the young and creative population that captivated the world in 2011 is still young and creating, and it is finding outlets in Cairo and Casablanca, in Beirut and Dubai. That is a very cheerful statement, although I must say that having travelled in those parts I have not seen all that much of it. Give us an uplift at the end. You have a chaotic situation in Washington, frankly. Our British policy here is trying to reorient in the light of what is coming out of Washington and finding it difficult. We are going through some fundamental changes ourselves here in Europe. I see that the *New York Times* this morning says that the

European Union is being hit by a series of existential crises. Tell us how you reached the conclusion that there is going to be a less than bloody decade ahead for the Middle East.

Jon B Alterman: It is hard to instantly build governmental capacity. Governments such as that in Egypt have suffered through the fact that they have quite limited governmental capacity. Part of the violence in Syria is a consequence also of limited Syrian governmental capacity. What I see, though, is a whole generation of young Arabs who have grown up interconnected with each other, interested in innovation and possibility and exposed to different ways of doing things. They are walking away from tradition at times while upholding tradition at others. They are thinking about new blends between the old and the new. I think we saw a lot of this in the Egyptian revolution of 2011, which ultimately, on a governmental level, was not able to consolidate change. However, on a private and economic level, there is ferment and more possibilities.

We see people moving throughout the region more easily. People get experience in the Gulf, working either for a consulting firm or a governmental agency, or go to Europe, and then they go home. There is a certain dynamism for people with ambition and a certain sense of possibility that you can forget if you meet only with Ministers. There is, I think, a great sense of possibility among young people, at the same time as there is frustration with governmental incapacity. It seems to me that what is happening more broadly in the world is that the disproportionate influence of government over how things function is diminishing, while the role of non-state actors of all kinds is increasing.

There are pockets of fascinating people in Tunis, Casablanca, Cairo and Alexandria who are doing really interesting things, seeing real possibilities and seizing open space that nobody is in and that Governments do not necessarily feel threatened by. More broadly, there is a greater sense of experimentation, largely among the public but partly in governance. Different Governments try different approaches to deal with their challenges. I think that will lead to a lumpier Middle East, that is to say, that the Middle East will be more diverse in the way it is going. The consolidation toward similar attitudes toward politics and economics that we saw in the 1990s and 2000s will diminish. Some of this will work, and then people will try to follow the example of things that work. I would not say that it is a truly rosy view in the Middle East, but it is a more dynamic view with more possible upsides than most people give her credit for having.

The Chairman: Thank you very much for that. We would dearly like to build on that analysis. It would be a change from a lot of the very gloomy evidence that we have had from many witnesses about the whole region. You have been marvellously illuminating. It would be misleading to say that you have provided us with total reassurance and comfort about what is going on in Washington; it still seems very confused. Your contribution has been enormously valuable to the Committee. We have kept you longer than an hour, I am afraid, but thank you very much for being so frank, persuasive and informative.

Jon B Alterman: Thank you, Lord Chairman and members of the Committee.