

Foreign Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Kurdish aspirations and the interests of the UK 05 12 17, HC 518

Tuesday 5 Dec 2017

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 5 Dec 2017.

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Tom Tugendhat (Chair); Ian Austin; Ann Clwyd; Mike Gapes; Andrew Rosindell; Royston Smith; Nadhim Zahawi.

Questions 47-123

Witnesses

I: Karwan Jamal Tahir, Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), High Representative to the United Kingdom.

II: Alan Semo, Representative of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) to the United Kingdom.

III: Robert Lowe, Deputy Director, Middle East Centre, London School of Economics and Political Science, and Bill Park, Visiting Research Fellow, King's College, London.

Written evidence from witnesses:

[Kurdistan Regional Government \(KRG\), High Representative to the United Kingdom](#)

[Democratic Union Party \(PYD\) to the United Kingdom](#)

[Bill Park](#)

Examination of witness

Witness: Karwan Jamal Tahir.

Chair: Welcome to this afternoon's session of the Foreign Affairs Committee. Mr Tahir, forgive me one second as I explain why we are wearing these pins. They are marigolds, worn in India in the same way as a poppy is worn in the United Kingdom, in memory of the many Indian servicemen who fought courageously and who so sadly died alongside our own armed forces. We in the Foreign Affairs Committee decided that we would wear marigolds to remember our brothers in arms from the Indian Army who fought alongside us so many years ago.

However, perhaps we can start on Kurdistan this afternoon.

Q47 **Royston Smith:** Mr Tahir, I think I met you at the Kurdistan APPG. Did you appear there?

Karwan Jamal Tahir: Yes.

Q48 **Royston Smith:** I think I remember seeing you there. We will cut right to the chase, then; I remember the conversation was particularly fraught at the time. Can Kurdish aspirations be met without independence from Iraq, in your opinion?

Karwan Jamal Tahir: First of all, thank you so much for having me today. I wish I had one pin to wear myself because we always pay our respects to those who sacrifice, including those in Britain, Iraq and the Kurdistan region.

To understand Kurdish aspirations and Kurdish nationalism, we have to understand the history of Iraq. We have to understand the establishment of Iraq and go back a little and talk about the history. Iraq was established in 1920 under the colonial power. The Kurdistan region was not part of Iraq and was called the Mosul Vilayet at that time.¹ The League of Nations decided to attach the Kurdistan region to Iraq and conducted a referendum for King Faisal at the time. This included the Kurdish people, because they had in mind the creation of a greater Kurdistan, because at the time the Sèvres treaty existed and they left the option for the Kurdish people to become part of greater Kurdistan, if that was established.

All these facts are available, as is the correspondence between King Faisal and Winston Churchill at that time. In particular, in one piece of correspondence, responding to King Faisal's demand on the boundary of new Iraq, Winston Churchill said, "We promised to create an Arab state for you, not an Arab empire".

The British representative at the League of Nations at the time made a statement that the condition of attaching Kurdistan or Mosul Vilayet to Iraq was based on respect for the Kurdish people, and satisfying the

¹ Note from witness: phrase added- 'Kurdish people were excluded.'



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Kurdish people. Therefore, from the olden days up until today, the unity of Iraq was conditional on satisfying the Kurdish people and respecting their rights within Iraq.

That means that the Kurdish aspiration is there, and will remain there until their full rights are respected, whether that is within the Iraqi boundary or, if their rights are not respected, through another way to meet the aspiration of the Kurdish people.

Q49 Royston Smith: But it doesn't have to be full independence? Is that what you are saying?

Karwan Jamal Tahir: Well, this needs a lot of explanation. In 2003, after the Kurdistan region had been attached to Iraq, despite the suffering, the persecution, the denial, the genocide and all that, we voluntarily chose to re-join Iraq and contribute to it politically, economically and on security.

We helped our colleagues from Baghdad—with whom we fought Saddam Hussein and dictatorship—to rebuild Iraq together, to start a new chapter in Iraq, and to have a new relationship with Iraq based on respect for Kurdish rights and the satisfaction of the Kurdish people. Unfortunately, ever since, this constitution of Iraq was not respected, was violated. That left Kurdish people with no choice but to take a different path of referendum towards independence.

Q50 Royston Smith: Can I move on to your opinion of the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office? Do you feel that they oppose Kurdish independence now, or Kurdish independence at any point?

Karwan Jamal Tahir: I watched the Foreign Secretary in the first session of this Committee when he was asked by Mr Chairman about the British colonial idea, and the same argument was repeated by His Excellency the Foreign Secretary, in the oral evidence he gave. It appears to me that this British foreign policy mindset has stuck ever since, up until today. Not only Britain, but some other countries in the international community are neglecting the facts and the history of the Kurdish people and the matters that they have been through throughout their history.

If we do not understand the history—why the Kurds have been in this situation—we cannot apply an appropriate resolution to the Kurdish issue, not only in Iraq but in the other countries as well.

So, yes, British foreign policy unfortunately opposed the referendum and, as I heard from the Foreign Secretary, they were actually lobbying other states to oppose the Kurdish referendum, even though we tried our hardest to make the international community understand the intent of our referendum: why we wanted to conduct it and the reason for it. Unfortunately, our message was not conveyed properly to the international community.

We only held the referendum, as I said, because the constitution was violated and not met; 55 articles of the constitution were violated before the day of the referendum. We were left with no choice but to take this



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action, which we think is the peaceful path for freedom of expression, which the Iraqi constitution does not bar. It is not a crime for any nation or people to exercise the right of self-determination.

Unfortunately, they stood against it. We were disappointed by the international community. We did not expect direct support—or any support—from the international community, because we always thought it was an internal fact and issue between the Kurdistan region and federal Government. We clearly stated that independent Kurdistan must be agreed with the Iraqi federal Government, not with anybody else.

- Q51 **Mike Gapes:** In your answer to Mr Smith, you used the phrase “when the Kurdistan region voluntarily rejoined Iraq”. Even though Kurdistan was de facto protected by the no-fly zone introduced by John Major from 1991 or 1992 until 2003, was it not legally still part of Iraq at that point? So, it wasn’t really a question of rejoining.

Karwan Jamal Tahir: I am sure you all know that the Kurdish people in the Kurdistan region rose against the dictatorship in 1991. Thankfully, the British Government of the time introduced the no-fly zone and the safe haven. We managed to establish our democratic institution and held the first election in 1992. We then formed our Parliament and Government and looked after our population.

We developed our country; it was a complete secession from the Iraqi Government. In fact, they withdrew all their administration. They brought their flags down and withdrew from the entire Kurdistan region, as the Kurdistan region could now run their own affairs. We started our journey from there.

When the international community decided to change the regime in Iraq, we were approached by the United States of America and the coalition to become part of the strategy of overthrowing the dictatorship in Iraq. We were real and credible partners to the international community and we contributed. We liberated Kirkuk at that time in 2003.

- Q52 **Mike Gapes:** I appreciate that, which brings me to my next question. When you later liberated Kirkuk and, more recently, Kurdish Peshmerga forces went into areas outside the area that had been the Kurdistan region up until 2003, and went further south, that meant that you were for a period occupying what were disputed territories. Because Baghdad did not accept that that was part of Kurdistan.

Given what has happened since the independence referendum held in September, was it a mistake in retrospect to go into areas that were disputed and control those territories?

Karwan Jamal Tahir: Well, in 2003 we liberated Kirkuk during the time of dictatorship, as a partner to the coalition. We were asked by the coalition to retreat our forces from Kirkuk before the constitution of Iraq was drafted. So we listened to the coalition partners and withdrew our forces from Kirkuk.



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After the constitution of Iraq, which we played a big role in drafting, we suggested article 140 to peacefully settle the issues of the disputed area, because we thought, "This is a new Iraq. We will open a new chapter with Iraq and we will settle all of our issues legally, and not resort to any violence." That is why article 140 was one of the articles that² settled all the issues of dispute between the Kurdistan region and the Government of Iraq.

Since 2005 until 2014, we never sent any Peshmerga forces to Kirkuk. We had a small Peshmerga presence in Kirkuk and some other disputed areas, and that was in agreement with Baghdad and the coalition—they had a joint military presence in this area. In 2014, with the rise of ISIS, the Iraqi military abandoned or left their posts and weapons in these areas and we had to fill the gap, because otherwise ISIS would have filled the vacuum and imposed threats on the people of Kirkuk and the disputed area. So we filled the gap; we did not occupy Kirkuk when we had Peshmerga in this area.

- Q53 **Mike Gapes:** I understand that, and I pay tribute to the Peshmerga for their bravery. I have been there and seen on the front line what happened in that period, pushing back Daesh and taking huge numbers of casualties in the process. But the question is: should that area have been included within the referendum organised in September, or should it not have been included? Do you think that was a mistake, in retrospect?

Karwan Jamal Tahir: I do not think it was a mistake; it was agreed by all political parties to conduct a referendum in this area.

- Q54 **Mike Gapes:** All political parties within Kurdistan?

Karwan Jamal Tahir: Yes, to conduct a referendum in the disputed area, because we consider the disputed area as a Kurdistan area outside the administration of the Kurdistan region. The Government of Iraq were obliged to implement article 140 and conduct a census and referendum, but they failed to do so. The limitation for implementing the article was 2007, so the people of this area have the right to expression about their political future.

Kirkuk historically is a Kurdistan area. Britain is one of the countries where we can find most of the evidence on Kirkuk and the contested area, and about Kirkuk being a Kurdistan area. I can refer back to history. The British representative at the League of Nations said clearly that one of the conditions for attaching Mosul Vilayet to Iraq was a prevention of changing the Kurdish identity of Kirkuk. That was a condition in 1922.

I think politicians and the international community have to refer back to history in order to provide an appropriate resolution for this issue. We just want to implement the constitution and give the right to the people. We are not trying to change the identity of Kirkuk and other areas; we want to give people a chance to decide for themselves whether they want to be part of the Kurdistan region or the federal Government.

² Note from witness: phrase added 'should have been implemented to settle'



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Chair: Mr Tahir, do you mind if we try to be a little briefer in the answers, and stick to the question? That would be great.

Karwan Jamal Tahir: Okay. Yes.

- Q55 **Ian Austin:** Thank you. Welcome to the Committee. I have declared for the record that I was in the Kurdistan region and attended several meetings with you in and around the time of the referendum.

You said in your written submission that the opposition of the international community to the referendum encouraged the Iraqi Government to take what you have described as "aggressive actions". Do you feel let down by Britain and by the Foreign Office?

Karwan Jamal Tahir: Yes, we have been let down by Britain and the international community, because the referendum was a peaceful path. We had discussed the referendum with Iraqi politicians in 2016, when the former President of the Kurdistan region, accompanied by most of the political leaders, went to Baghdad before the start of the liberation of Mosul. They went to Baghdad in order to seek military co-ordination with Baghdad, and they discussed the issue of a referendum and independence with Prime Minister Abadi and other leaders. The Iraqi Foreign Minister was present as well. They discussed the issue with them; you know, "We either implement the constitution as whole—we cannot pick and choose from the constitution and say that we implement this, we like this, we don't like this and we're not implementing it—or we can go for a referendum."

They were receptive to the idea and they said that could be negotiated and we could talk about it, but first let's co-ordinate to liberate Mosul. That is what we did. We co-ordinated and there was good co-ordination between the Peshmerga forces and the Iraqi forces in liberating Mosul. We did the first part of the liberation. We opened the corridor for the Iraqi forces to go through and liberate Mosul, which they did successfully, inflicting huge casualties.

- Q56 **Andrew Rosindell:** Good afternoon, Mr Tahir. You submitted that "Iraq waged an attack on the Peshmerga and the Kurdistan region". That is what you said in your submission. But the FCO told us that Iraq had used largely peaceful means. Which is correct?

Karwan Jamal Tahir: I think they waged an attack on Kurdistan region, because we have casualties. 100 Peshmerga were killed or injured in the confrontation with the Iraqi popular mobilisation unit and the Iraqi security forces. In fact, the fight and confrontation was not a balanced fight, because the Iraqi military was hugely equipped with United States tanks and military equipment. They were supposed to fight ISIS with that, and apparently they turned their guns towards the Peshmerga forces.

They could have chosen a different path and asked the Government of Iraq and said, "Okay we have an agreement and we have to go back to the pre-2014 time when we had joint forces together in this area," and they could have chosen this way. But they chose violence and waged an



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attack on the Kurdistan region. They have been stopped in some areas in which they were willing to go even further towards the capital of the Kurdistan region, Erbil, to take the airport, as they were claiming.

- Q57 **Andrew Rosindell:** I understand what you are saying, but why—from our point of view—is there such disparity? Why is our Foreign Office seeing it in a different way to how it is being presented by you today? How do we know what really happened? How can we be assured of what really took place for us to make a judgment?

Karwan Jamal Tahir: That question should be asked to His Excellency the Foreign Secretary himself, because I am not in a position to answer for him. I think that some of the reality on the ground was not properly conveyed by the diplomats present in Iraq. I can submit other reports from international organisations such as Human Rights Watch and other organisations, with the permission of Mr Chairman.

Chair: We have many reports in writing that have already been submitted. You are welcome to talk to the Clerk about any reports you might like to add to these.

Karwan Jamal Tahir: The reports are to do with the violations conducted by popular mobilisation units and Iraqi forces towards the Kurdish people in Kirkuk and Tuz Khurmatu and some other contested areas. There was humiliation and intimidation. They repealed their civil servants from their work and replaced them with Arab and Turkmen people. More than 2,000 houses were looted, and 500 houses were seized by their forces in Kirkuk and Tuz Khurmatu, 51 houses were exploded, a few more houses were burned. There was abduction and kidnapping on a daily basis.

- Q58 **Andrew Rosindell:** Are you saying that it is all Iraqi troops doing this?

Karwan Jamal Tahir: Yes, it is all Iraqi troops and popular mobilisation units.

- Q59 **Andrew Rosindell:** This has all been verified, has it?

Karwan Jamal Tahir: It has all been documented. It is not just my statement. It is all documented and stated by the international human rights organisations.

- Q60 **Andrew Rosindell:** On another point, why has the KRG Parliament not met in the last two years?

Karwan Jamal Tahir: The political parties in the Kurdistan region had some political differences. Unfortunately that resulted in—

Chair: We have political differences in this Parliament too, but we still meet.

Karwan Jamal Tahir: I'm coming to that. The main session of Parliament was not held, but their Committees were meeting and following the Government. All of the meetings have been on actions throughout the last two years. It was not the right choice to shut the Parliament, but



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Parliament reconvened and ratified the decision of the referendum and they are operating fully at the moment.

- Q61 **Ann Clwyd:** Welcome. Your submission calls for the FCO to now mediate between Erbil and Baghdad. The FCO's submission says that it offered to do that before the referendum, but "former Kurdish President Barzani rejected this offer and pressed ahead with the referendum." Why did he do that?

Karwan Jamal Tahir: We appreciate the effort made by Britain, the Foreign Secretary and the British diplomat present in the Kurdistan region, but the offer came very late. It came in the last two days before the date of the referendum. I am aware of the meeting that was held between the Kurdistan leaders and officials from Britain and the view that the referendum is a mechanism towards independence. Any alternative to convince us not to conduct a referendum, we will agree to take in the offer. But the offer came very late—two days before the referendum—and the referendum took place.

- Q62 **Nadhim Zahawi:** Welcome, Karwan. To what extent did factionalism within the Kurdistan region and the divided loyalties of the Peshmerga contribute to the Kurdish reversals in October?

Karwan Jamal Tahir: Sorry, could you please repeat?

Nadhim Zahawi: My question is: to what extent did the Peshmerga not being united contribute to some of the reversals in October, post-referendum?

Karwan Jamal Tahir: I am sure you are aware of the structure of the Peshmerga force in the Kurdistan region. Unfortunately, we went through some internal differences in the '90s that resulted in two Administrations in the Kurdistan region and two Ministries of Peshmerga. After the fifth Cabinet, the two Administrations were united and the two Ministries of Peshmerga were in a process of unification. Eight brigades of the Peshmerga force were united and thankfully, again, the British Ministry of Defence was helping and providing technical assistance to the Kurdistan region to unify the other six remaining brigades. Unfortunately, ISIS emerged and the forces were in the fight with ISIS, which slowed the process of unification of those forces. Some of these forces were stationed near Kirkuk and one or two brigades were stationed in Kirkuk. There were two brigades of united forces, which paid with lives and casualties. If we didn't have the fight with ISIS, the Peshmerga force would be united by now. Hopefully, the next step—we have an agreement now. The Ministry of Defence, the United States and Germany have an agreement with the Kurdistan region's Ministry of Peshmerga to continue helping the Ministry of Peshmerga to restructure and unite the rest of the forces.

- Q63 **Nadhim Zahawi:** In your submission—I think it is paragraph 19—you say that the UK had been working to unite the Peshmerga. Can you tell us more about the UK's work and how successful we have been in helping unify the Peshmerga?



Karwan Jamal Tahir: The unification of the Peshmerga was an initiative by the Ministry of Defence in Britain. They agreed a plan with the Ministry of Peshmerga to unify the Ministry, providing technical support to restructure the Ministry. In fact, the Ministry of Defence deployed a permanent commander from Britain to be stationed at the Ministry of Peshmerga and help them on a daily basis to implement the plan. The same offer came from the United States, so they widened the plan, involved Britain and the United States, and Germany came into it as well. So it is a tripartite agreement with the Kurdistan region to unify the Ministry of Peshmerga, and they are progressing. They still have to implement some of the plan that was agreed.

- Q64 **Nadhim Zahawi:** You addressed the issue of the Parliament not convening for two years. Do you still think that political divisions remain a problem for the KRG?

Karwan Jamal Tahir: Personally, I look at their political divisions as a political norm. If we look at political systems everywhere in the world, we see that there are differences. If there were no differences, we could have one political party. The Kurdistan region is a multi-party political system. Of course there are differences, but I can see a lot of maturity among the politicians and people of Kurdistan at large. They are all committed to being engaged in dialogue and solving all their differences.

- Q65 **Nadhim Zahawi:** This is my final question. Last Saturday, President Macron met Prime Minister Barzani and Deputy Prime Minister Talabani at the Élysée Palace in Paris and then held a call with President Trump.

Karwan Jamal Tahir: Yes.

Nadhim Zahawi: Do you think that the UK Prime Minister can do more? The line was that Baghdad and Kurdistan need to work together to resolve their differences within the constitution of Iraq. Everybody seems to agree that the constitution should be the framework by which we work. What can we and our Prime Minister do to engage more? Secondly, what is the appetite for getting people in a room and negotiating a resolution to some of the challenges that you are facing?

Karwan Jamal Tahir: Currently, we have a relationship crisis with the federal Government of Iraq. The trust is at the weakest level between the Kurdistan region and Baghdad. Since 16 October, we have been calling for negotiations and dialogue, and all calls have been rejected by the Prime Minister of the federal Government, His Excellency al-Abadi.

We need to restore this trust. That is why I sent a letter to Her Excellency the Prime Minister of Britain, Theresa May, on 27 October I think—I can't remember exactly—asking her to provide a good ground for negotiation between the federal Government and the Kurdistan Regional Government, and to invite the Prime Minister of federal Iraq and the Prime Minister of the Kurdistan region to Britain and provide them with a conducive environment to solve their differences and start negotiating within the framework of the constitution.



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Unfortunately, she did not do that. President Macron did so, but hopefully Britain will follow and invite both Prime Minister al-Abadi and the Prime Minister of the Kurdistan region, Mr Nechirvan Barzani, to Britain to continue the effort made by President Macron and President Trump with their support for the call for negotiation. Hopefully this will be concluded here in London, with both of them invited here.

- Q66 **Ian Austin:** Do you think it would have helped and would it have been possible for our Prime Minister to have visited the Kurdistan region? She was in Iraq at the weekend. Would it have been possible for her to go? Would it have been helpful if she had? Would it have helped to end the blockade, for example? I just wondered if you had any thoughts on that.

Karwan Jamal Tahir: It would be a great opportunity if she was allowed to visit the Kurdistan region, because the Iraqi Government are now rejecting or opposing anyone visiting the Kurdistan region, as they did last week with the German Foreign Minister. He wanted to visit the Kurdistan region; he wanted to visit Baghdad and Erbil. He was told by the Foreign Ministry that he was welcome if he wanted to come to only Baghdad, but if he wanted to go to Erbil, they would not accept that. That is why he visited neither.

- Q67 **Mike Gapes:** The Iraqi Foreign Ministry prevented him from going to Erbil.

Karwan Jamal Tahir: Yes—it was the Prime Minister of Iraq actually. So if the Foreign Secretary wanted to visit the Kurdistan region, I do not think there would be any chance that Prime Minister al-Abadi for now.

- Q68 **Andrew Rosindell:** For information and to clarify, because I am really not aware of this, I would like to know what relationship the Kurdistan Democratic Party has, if any, with the PUK and the Gorran movement.

Karwan Jamal Tahir: There is a good relationship with all political parties, despite their differences. In the last week, all political parties have met in order to find a way out of this crisis in the Kurdistan region and Iraq. The KDP, PUK, the Gorran movement and the other Islamic political parties are all heavily engaged in talks to find a way out of the crisis in Iraq. So there are good relations.

- Q69 **Andrew Rosindell:** There are good relations. How intense are those relations?

Karwan Jamal Tahir: I do not know what your definition of good relations is. They are not fighting each other; they talk to each other.

- Q70 **Andrew Rosindell:** Do they collaborate with each other?

Karwan Jamal Tahir: There is a collaboration between the political parties in the Kurdistan region, certainly.

Chair: We will move on. The very last one question from Mike.

- Q71 **Mike Gapes:** Do you think that this crisis with Baghdad will lead to a resolution of the internal divisions that have made things so difficult and



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dysfunctional, in many respects, within the KRG?

Karwan Jamal Tahir: Unfortunately, one of the other factors that the Government of Iraq and Prime Minister al-Abadi are now working on is trying to create more division among the Kurdish political parties and trying to diminish the role of the Kurdistan region and to treat it as a province like other provinces of Iraq, which is, again, a violation of the constitution. He is telling the people of Sulaymaniyah, for instance, "We are paying your salary", and so encouraging them to dismantle Sulaymaniyah from the KRG. So yes, they are trying to create more division between the political parties.

Q72 **Chair:** Mr Tahir, thank you very much for your time this afternoon. We are grateful to have you as a witness.

Karwan Jamal Tahir: Thank you so much; thank you for having me.

Examination of witness

Witness: Alan Semo.

Q73 **Nadhim Zahawi:** Am I right in saying that the PYD does not want independence from Syria? That is not your position?

Alan Semo: Yes, that is right. We want a democratic federal Syria.

Q74 **Nadhim Zahawi:** Has the PYD been involved in any of the negotiations to end the war in Syria?

Alan Semo: Unfortunately, no—not in Geneva.

Q75 **Nadhim Zahawi:** Not on the ground either.

Alan Semo: There are some negotiations, but not in Geneva.

Q76 **Nadhim Zahawi:** Could you say a little bit more about what is happening on the ground with negotiations?

Alan Semo: On negotiating, they are working closely with the anti-ISIS global coalition and, on another side, they have a balance and are working with the Russians as well on the ground.

They have been managing themselves since 2012. They established democratic Rojava in northern Syria with self-governance, protecting themselves and organising daily life for the people. They were very successful and lately defeated the brutal ISIS in Syria. Yesterday there was an announcement that to the east of Euphrates, Deir ez-Zor had been liberated by the democratic Syrian forces.

They have their own relationship on the ground and they are well incorporated into the coalition, and with the Russians as well on another side. They keep the balance to try to protect that area and push for a



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democratic, political settlement in Syria, featuring and establishing the suggested project of a united federal Syria, based on a geographic federalism, which means non-ethnic, non-religious and federal.

That is a successful model, not only for Syria and for Rojava—for northern Syria—but for the Middle East. That is what we are thinking: all-inclusive, non-religious and non-ethnic. People have been through all this brutal civil war. Northern communities, which is what we call them, rather than minorities, are getting together and having a social contract together. Arabs, Kurds, Armenian Christians and Yazidis defended themselves all together, with Government sharing the power and duties and managing very well democratically and peacefully.

Q77 Nadhim Zahawi: That has been the position for negotiations on the ground between you.

Alan Semo: That is correct, yes. The international negotiations started in Geneva in 2012. They have been consulted by de Mistura lately and in previous UN negotiations in Geneva, but they have not been invited officially or participated.

Unfortunately, they said we have not been invited on this. It is not fair that they have excluded the northern Syrian federal system that had been running peacefully and democratically and, most importantly, had contributed with huge sacrifices against ISIS, which contributed to your safety in Europe, including the UK, and stopped this brutal force coming to western countries and being a threat.

The UK Government should recognise that contribution publicly and support those people who defeated and are still defeating it. Our vision now is to try to transform this successful military defeat of this brutal global threat into a political settlement and negotiation, all-inclusive of the Syrian people, who can shape and discuss their future.

Unfortunately, this is now the eighth round in Geneva and we think it will not be successful because it excludes 30% of the Syrians themselves, who control the area. Therefore, we think the Syrian people themselves will have to negotiate and discuss our future. We appreciate the international UN effort to get us all together and agreed on it.

Q78 Nadhim Zahawi: What level of engagement have you had with the Foreign Office?

Alan Semo: We had and still have engagement with the Foreign Office. We have met most of the Syrian envoys of the UK and we keep contact. We would encourage it but, unfortunately, I have to say that it is occasional contact. Since 2015 and 2016, after the liberation of Manbij and another area, I think the UK has got contact on the ground. I am pleased to hear that they are on the ground and have more contact in the region, working closely with the civil administrations and civil councils for Manbij, Tabqah and Raqqa. I am pleased to say that they have established their own contacts and are working together there.



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Q79 Nadhim Zahawi: How much support has the UK given directly to the PYD and YPG?

Alan Semo: Officially, they have not got any help or anything direct. We expected the UK to at least support the humanitarian aid. Unfortunately, we do not have any, despite having hosted about 2 million displaced people in the region, coming from different corners of the Syrian south and even from Iraq, with Yazidis from Sinjar now in the Qamishli and Nowruz camps. We have 10,000 Yazidis still there in the camps, and unfortunately we have not received even encouragement, despite having offered safeguarding to the UN and the UK to deliver humanitarian aid personally, for transparency and free delivery. Unfortunately, that did not happen. We are, unfortunately, trying with our very, very limited resources.

Q80 Mike Gapes: You are, however, receiving support from the United States.

Alan Semo: Not as a political party—as the PYD, but as the democratic self-administration of Rojava, yes; they are in contact and co-operation. Mostly, military support is going to the self-administration. YPG and YPJ are the military forces of the self-administration of Rojava in northern Syria, not a military wing of PYD.

Q81 Mike Gapes: The Americans have been giving you support. Are you confident that that will continue in future?

Alan Semo: Yes, we hope so, because we see they have been promising their contribution and they are on the ground with that contribution. As I mentioned, in this phase now we are trying to establish stabilisation and democracy in that area, with a coalition of all ethnic minority group communities in northern Syria.

Q82 Mike Gapes: The Turkish Government have been strongly critical of the United States giving support to Syrian Kurdish forces. Turkey has military forces that have intervened in Syrian territory. Do you envisage potential conflict where your forces would have to fight against Turkish forces in the future?

Alan Semo: Unfortunately, Turkey has been playing a very destructive role and is still occupying part of Syria: Idlib, Jarabulus and Bab. Unfortunately, Turkey contributed to and facilitated to this—as you know, there is obvious evidence, arguably, that Turkey opened its doors and facilitated the coming of 10,000 jihadis to ISIS through Turkey. The evidence is there that Turkey is destroying democracy and the establishment of democracy in any region—in its own south-east Kurdish area, Syria, Iraq and Iran. Turkey has a destructive policy and a Kurdish phobia, and unfortunately, yes, Turkey has been obstructive on this. I think the exclusion of the Syrian Kurds from participation in Geneva—an international platform for dialogue and peace—was caused by Turkey. Turkey plays the main destructive role in Syria.

Q83 Mike Gapes: Turkey argues—and members of our Committee have heard this directly in Ankara—that there are links between the PYD and the PKK, and the reason they are in Syria is to combat the PKK. Do you agree



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that the PKK is a terrorist organisation? This is the position the British Government take.

Alan Semo: No, I do not, and let me explain this one clearly. PYD is a Syrian-Kurdish political party with its own leadership and decision-making. PYD is Syrian and regarded as a Syrian political party, as is all its decision-making. However, we have an equal relationship with all political parties. We worked with the KDP and Barzani himself in 2014 in the liberation of Kobanî. Two days ago, on 1 December, there was an election, the second council election in northern Syria, with parliamentarians from KRG coming and observing the election. However, including all this, we do not agree—and I think non-Kurdish political parties agree with this statement—that PKK is terrorist. All of them they say it is not, and we think it has been unfairly listed.

Q84 **Mike Gapes:** You have referred to your links to the KDP from the KRG. What links do you have with the PKK?

Alan Semo: I do not have any organisational links, either to the PKK or to the KDP—or to any political organisation. I do share the common Kurdish national interest in Kurdish stability and security in the region.

Q85 **Mike Gapes:** Would this be an ideological coherence, rather than an organisational relationship?

Alan Semo: It is not ideological. It would be some kind of national common interest.

Q86 **Mike Gapes:** National in the sense of all the Kurds, a greater Kurdish—

Alan Semo: Yes, Kurdish national interest.

Q87 **Mike Gapes:** So you do not see, even though in your answer to a previous question you said that you wished to have a federal relationship with Syria, you are not arguing for a Greater Kurdistan, even though you regard yourselves as having a common ideological interest with other Kurds, whether in Turkey or in Iraq?

Alan Semo: That is correct. It doesn't stop the support of being Kurds, Syrian Kurds. We think, in the future, it will describe our vision for a united Kurdistan. All the region has to be federal and democratic, based on non-ethnic, non-religious factors. We now have two regions that supposedly will be a federal system. If you have a federal system in Turkey in future and a federal decentralised system in Iran, then we can talk about and suggest Kurdish self-determination for a confederal united Kurdistan in the future. But at the moment, the regional and international circumstances are not mature there to get to that position, because we quickly need to democratise and decentralise this Government, as Turkey, as Iran, and so on.

Q88 **Mike Gapes:** A final question from me. You have mentioned your relationships with the US; what are your relations with Russia?

Alan Semo: There is the same balance, the same position, there because, yes, unfortunately, the Russians and Americans are mostly controlling the



airspace in Syria, and we have to deal with both of them in equal positions and equal, common interests. If they are going to help us defeat ISIS and democratise and self-govern the region, their co-operation is—

Q89 Mike Gapes: But the US is actually giving weaponry to the Syrian Kurds. Are the Russians?

Alan Semo: Somewhere there are Russians as well, but officially, they are working mostly with the coalition. I cannot speak militarily for YPG and YPJ, but they co-operate very well militarily and the coalition is supporting them on the ground. We therefore think they are continuing with their stabilisation, the peace process and democratisation of the area, such as in Raqqa, Deir ez-Zur, Tabqah and other mixed areas.

It may be helpful to mention one point. If it is a federal, non-ethnic, non-religious federation, we do not have an issue with the disputed area or the mixed area. We make it sure from the start that we are governing ourselves regionally, democratically and peacefully, joined together with a co-existence of communities.

Q90 Ian Austin: Have Kurdish forces in Syria, including the YPG, largely avoided fighting the Assad regime?

Alan Semo: Yes. If somebody is not attacking me, why should I attack? The next question is: why should I make an enemy when there are no enemies? Why should I wake the lion which is sleeping, or weak? Yes, I should be smart enough to approach the issue peacefully and not fight when it is not necessary.

We have been doing this. We did this in Aleppo in 2012. There are still half a million Kurds in Aleppo and Sheikh Maqsoud and al-Ashrafia. They are still controlling it, despite Aleppo falling because of the deal of Erdoğan and Assad, selling out Aleppo against Idlib, and the Kurds still keeping their position and then governing and protecting themselves. In Hassaka we did it in 2016, fighting the regime, and we did it just two weeks ago when the regime tried to push on the Syrian democratic forces in Deir ez-Zur.

Q91 Ian Austin: Do you think the Kurdish forces in Syria might have to fight the regime in the future, or do you think they are prepared to negotiate and reach a deal with Assad?

Alan Semo: Hopefully, that wouldn't happen. We are against violence. We are against the war. We don't want this war and we think it has been opposed to us. We don't want it. We are against violence, but if somebody is going to attack us, we would rather just defend ourselves and protect ourselves. We have been controlling this. The Kurdish forces and also the Syrian democratic forces are not attacking forces; they are defending forces. They are forces for governing themselves and protecting themselves. They have not ever attacked another force—apart, of course, from ISIS with the coalition, with Arab forces, and with Syriac Christian forces as well.

Q92 Ian Austin: So you think there will be a deal with Assad eventually?



Alan Semo: If the Assad regime is going to try to attack us and take it, the Kurdish forces are saying, “Yes, we are ready and we can defend ourselves but would rather not do that”. It is not wise, and we do not want any conflict. We have a political solution, and we want to come to the table, but we have to do it ourselves—only Syrians can shape and discuss our future. We have to decide our future. We don’t want any settlement, even if it is a peaceful settlement and even if it is democratically imposed on us. We want to be part of it—we decide and agree it.

Q93 Mike Gapes: What is your relationship with the many hundreds of thousands of Syrian Kurds who have fled to Iraq? The KRG is hosting large numbers of people who are refugees, as well as the internally displaced people from Iraq. I have had conversations with some of those people. They told me that they found the situation in the areas that were controlled by the YPG difficult for them, because they were not supporters of the ideology of the group there. Although you have said “democratic” many times, are you really democratic? Do you respect diversity of political views within your structures?

Alan Semo: Definitely. We do that and we can prove that, and that is why I take this opportunity to invite you to go to northern Syria and see how democratic it is. There have been two elections. There are 16 parties. Kurds and non-Kurds are involved. People are electing freely and democratically. What you might call in the community a minority has been involved. We have Syriac forces—we have a colleague here who has been fighting with Syriac Christian forces against ISIS—and we have Arab co-chairs and administrations for themselves. Yes, it is democratic and based on grassroots democracy, gender equality and ecological democratic solutions in that way. We will provide you with safeguarding. Go to northern Syria and see this de facto democratic self-government, and see how democratic it is. See it with your own eyes; come and evaluate it. You will find the fact.

We are open to criticism. It is welcome; we learn from it, and we will learn from it. As an example, I will give you three main factors that we ourselves have to prevent one-party dominance. One example is that we have a court. In these elections, we have a percentage: the minority has a 50% right to have a seat. For example, in Qamishli it is 90% Kurds and 10% Syriac. This is just an example percentage. These Syriac people are in the council itself. It is not just 2%, as against 90%, that is Syriac. They have equal seats. So the Assyrian people in Qamishli council have equal seats to Kurds, Arabs and other communities. So equal representation is one thing.

The co-chair system is there to prevent patriarchy; you don’t like that word. There is gender equality and women have the same rights. In every single commune, in every single election, women have a participation of 50%. That is against patriarchy, to prevent it being just men sitting and deciding on healthcare, women’s care and women’s health. Most importantly, there is the percentage of participation of all non-ethnic religious minorities with the same equal opportunity. We call it egalitarian,

if you don't like the word democratic. Equal opportunity, equal sharing and equal duties.

Chair: Mr Semo, thank you for coming.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Bill Park and Robert Lowe.

Chair: We had some full answers from our previous two witnesses, for which we are grateful. Feel free to be brief, and there is no need to repeat one another's points if you agree.

Q94 **Ian Austin:** We were in Kirkuk at the time of the referendum. How united do you think the Kurdish public and political parties were behind the referendum?

Bill Park: Not very. As you say, I was in Kirkuk and otherwise based in Erbil. I mainly operated in KDP-controlled areas or, in Kirkuk, in an area controlled by that part of the PUK that was sympathetic to the referendum, but I had put together half a team of observers, some of whom spent the day in places such as Sulaymaniyah, and they found no campaigning, no joyousness on the streets, and the reports of turnout in places such as Sulaymaniyah were about 50%. In Erbil and the Kurdish parts of Kirkuk, it was maybe 90%.

It wasn't until the very eve of the referendum that the PUK said, "Okay, grudgingly we'll support the referendum," though it was quite obvious that they then split down the middle. Gorran, the other main Kurdish party in Iraq, said, "We won't instruct our supporters how to vote," so they were neither for nor against.

When you look at what happened in Kirkuk, both running up to the referendum and after, I think the split in the PUK was clearly quite substantial. I heard on the grapevine that some Peshmerga were sent by one element of the PUK into Kirkuk to get the local PUK element in Kirkuk to enable the referendum to take place.

You also have to note that there were questions before about what happened in Kirkuk when the Peshmerga left. You only have to look at President Barzani's statement, which was that "we were betrayed by an element within the PUK". I think there were splits between the KDP on the one hand and Gorran and PUK on the other, and then splits within the PUK.

Q95 **Ian Austin:** If the results were disaggregated, how do you think Kirkuk as a city by itself would have voted?

Bill Park: Kirkuk is a disputed city, not just between Erbil and Baghdad, but among the people who live there. The Turkmen and Arabs, by and large, boycotted the referendum. Turkmen and Arab leaders did not vote to hold the referendum in Kirkuk.



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I went to what we were told were mixed areas but I think they were primarily Turkmen areas. I would say the turnout was about 30%. We went to polling stations at the beginning and at the end of the day and counted the votes. We stood in one of the polling stations for an hour towards the end of the voting day and nobody came in during that hour.

If you went to the Kurdish parts of Kirkuk, it looked like 90% turnout and, obviously, there was great enthusiasm as well. It was a tale of two cities really. If you look at local elections that have taken place in Kirkuk, because Kirkuk is excluded from federal elections in Iraq, the Kurdish parties get about half of the vote. My guess is that about half of Kirkuk would vote. Kirkuk is the city and the area around; it is the province, in effect. Probably about half of it would vote for independence. Kurds will vote for independence; they won't vote against it; they might abstain because they are upset with Barzani, or because there has not been much campaigning or they feel they have been neglected by Erbil, but they will vote for independence. The issue in places such as Kirkuk is not really Kurds; it is much more the Turkmen and the Arabs who are alienated.

Q96 Ian Austin: Would you say that the referendum was free and fair? Were the turnout figures accurate?

Bill Park: I did have a couple of meetings with the guy who headed up the electoral commission. The main impression I got was a certain amount of chaos. I do not particularly blame the organisers; the referendum was called quite late in the day. Remember, it was called in a disputed area where the Turkmen and Arab parties were boycotting the referendum, as well as in Kurdistan proper. The elections were also extended to refugee camps, so there was a quite a lot of chaos. I covered a number of instances of that, if you want me to enlarge on them.

We found in Kirkuk, for example, that unlike in Kurdistan proper, where the votes were counted in the local balloting stations—that is normal in quite a lot of countries; I was with a Dutch colleague who said that is what happens in Holland—the votes were collected and taken to a central counting station. When I asked the head of the Kurdistan Electoral Commission what had happened, he said, “I didn’t know about that. The governor of Kirkuk probably ordered it for security reasons,” which is plausible. However, the fact that the head of the commission didn’t know that had happened suggests a certain amount of chaos and confusion.

In a polling station in a Turkmen area, but opposite a military base, we counted that about 600 people had voted. We then found that on the box with all the ballots in, at the end of the day there were 1,600 votes. We said, “Where did the other 1,000 votes come from?” We were told that the Peshmerga had turned up and voted. We said, “How can that happen?” When I saw the head of the Electoral Commission one or two days after the referendum, he said, “Because we had moved so many Peshmerga into Kirkuk and other insecure areas, we gave them the right to vote outside their base areas and in the areas that they had been redeployed to.”



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That is a plausible explanation, but it suggests a certain amount of chaos and confusion, and not the kind of centralised organisation that we might expect. I do not entirely blame the organisers for that very difficult situation, but that is what we found.

- Q97 **Ian Austin:** I went to eight or 10 polling stations and I was quite impressed. There was a register of electors and proper security checks; people were queuing up and had to show who they were. The polling station inside looked very much like a polling station would in Britain. You were not able to vote until you had inked your finger, so that you could not vote twice. I thought that it looked pretty robust, democratic and well organised. The only chaotic moment—well, not chaotic—was when Talabani's wife turned up to vote, but that was about the media and not the administration of the poll. I thought that it was pretty robust.

Bill Park: I didn't go to refugee camps. I am talking about colleagues who went there and told me how chaotic it was. People were told, "You can't vote here; you have to go somewhere else," or, "You can't vote at all," or whatever. There were a lot of disputes about the entitlement to vote and where votes should be cast. I agree entirely with what you just said about the Kurdish areas. The issue was in the disputed areas.

I have about half a dozen photographs that I took—you would have about 10 names on a page of voters, as you will have seen, and if somebody was illiterate, they would have a thumbprint. So in the polling stations where the turnout was perhaps 30%, you would get, on average, one, two or three voters on each page, but I have photographs of whole pages where everyone has voted, and you would have one page with one signature, another page with another signature, and so on.

If you looked at the birth dates you could see that some people would be quite young and therefore probably—or surely—literate. Some older people might be not literate, but not using their thumbprint. When we questioned people on that, they told us, "Well, there were illiterate people and we signed it for them." Why were there 10 illiterate people on one page, one name after another?

I don't think that was systematic. I genuinely, honestly don't think it made much difference to the overall vote. I think this happened in a mixed—of Turkmen and Arab, but mainly Turkmen—area, but it did happen. As for the Kurdish areas, which are pretty much all of Kurdistan proper and big chunks of the disputed areas, I agree entirely with you. There were issues in those disputed areas where the vote was being boycotted.

- Q98 **Ann Clwyd:** I have observed two elections in Iraq in the past. Was there any evidence in this election of intimidation?

Bill Park: I was told by the head of the Electoral Commission that one of the problems they had had in disputed areas was that Turkmen and Arab citizens who had volunteered to man polling stations had been intimidated and had withdrawn at the last minute. That is plausible. That is intimidation not by Kurds but by those political groupings that sought to boycott the election.



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Of intimidation by Kurds of Kurds I saw no evidence. I would not have expected to see it. It would not have been necessary because, as I say, very few Kurds would vote against independence. There were low turnouts in some areas, but very few would vote against independence, so there would be no particular need for intimidation. But I did hear, as I say, that Turkmen and Arab citizens, having volunteered to man polling stations, had been frightened off by their communities. That is probably to be expected.

Q99 Ann Clwyd: To what extent would you describe the KRG as being democratic?

Bill Park: I personally am uneasy with the way we throw that word around, even when it applies to ourselves. I have to put that context in order to answer the question. The KRG has elections and the three main parties are elected. There is very little evidence that there has been much manipulation, corruption or intimidation of that voting in the past. In that sense, I would say it is democratic.

But if you then ask what happens after elections, Kurdistan is basically run by patronage networks. There is fairly complete division of power, which applies to the Peshmerga as well. Jobs and contracts are handed out according to those patronage networks. Both Erbil and Baghdad—probably Baghdad more so—play fast and loose with the ideas of rule of law and constitutional provision.

So we could, if we wanted, say that Kurdistan is not especially democratic. On the other hand, compared with most of the rest of Iraq and most of the rest of the region, it is not so bad. So if you like, it is democratic in its own way. Elections certainly take place and there is not much evidence that they are anything other than reasonably free and reasonably fair.

Q100 Royston Smith: Written evidence to our inquiry has said that the UK was involved in a project to unify the Kurdish Peshmerga and overcome its divided political loyalties. How successful do you think that has been?

Bill Park: I think it is necessary to try, so it is the proper kind of approach to take, and I would apply it not only to the Peshmerga but to administration and governance in Kurdistan generally. There needs to be unification of the KDP and the PUK elements, but most importantly in the Peshmerga. The problem is, in a sense, the one that I already stated: Kurdistan works via patronage networks. You could say “via tribalism”. That is a bit of an over-simplification; patronage is the better explanation. It works via regions as well, to a large degree.

You can take, let’s say, a PUK brigade and allocate it to a unified Ministry of Peshmerga, but you cannot be sure that that brigade is ultimately going to take its orders from anybody other than the head of its patronage network. When it comes down to it, I think that those PUK elements of the Peshmerga that have been allocated to the unified Peshmerga will be primarily loyal to the PUK and those elements of KDP Peshmerga that are allocated to the unified Peshmerga will ultimately be loyal to the KDP—not



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on every issue: if the KDP and PUK were united against a common enemy, I guess they would fight in a united way.

This is not personal experience, but someone with personal experience told me that they were with the unified Peshmerga, and if a KDP commander came into the room the KDP elements of the unified Peshmerga would stand to attention and the PUK elements would not, and vice versa: if a PUK commander walks into the room, the PUK elements of the Peshmerga stand to attention and the KDP elements do not.

That is a small insight into the continuation of these divisions between the networks. It is necessary to try and progress can be made—I dare say some progress has been made—but ultimately, allocation of those Peshmerga units is by the KDP and the PUK, and I would say the ultimate loyalty will be to the KDP and PUK bosses. Where does the money come from? Where do the jobs from?

Q101 Royston Smith: Do you know which units the UK has armed or trained, and whether those units have fought against Iraqi federal forces?

Bill Park: I work for King's, but I used to work in the Defence Academy, and we used to have Peshmerga officers from the unified Peshmerga on the staff course we taught there. As I understand it, when the British or others—the Americans and the Germans have become quite heavily involved in recent months and years—train the unified Peshmerga, they train the unified Peshmerga. They do not differentiate; to differentiate would be to destroy the purpose of the enterprise, so they treat them as a single unified Peshmerga, with no political preference. It would be silly from every point of view to have that, and I do not think it exists.

At the same time, you can arm people, train them, bring them up to a certain professional standard and create an organisational structure for a unified Peshmerga that looks like a unified military structure that might apply to the UK, Germany or the US, but in practice it might not work that way.

It is really hard to do much about that from outside. That is something that Iraqi Kurds themselves have to overcome. Can they soften the impact of patronage and political loyalty and enlarge the area of genuine unification? That would apply, as I say, not only to the Peshmerga but to Governments as well, across the whole piece. I think the British and others are quite fair and down the middle and unbiased in what they do with those elements of the Peshmerga that are allocated to the Ministry of Peshmerga.

Q102 Royston Smith: And have they been used, in your opinion, against Iraqi federal forces?

Bill Park: Oh, sorry. As I understand it, most of the fighting around Mosul was really by the PMU or Iraqi forces. What the Kurds did was basically to hold the eastern side of Mosul, because that was where the Kurds lived. The villages gradually peter out into majority Kurdish areas. I understand



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as well that there were elements of the unified Peshmerga down near Kirkuk. I am not sure that they put up much of a fight.

It is true that some Kurdish fighters lost their lives, but it is not clear who they were. It is much clearer that the PUK, KDP and unified Peshmerga elements left the scene in Kirkuk after the referendum. I don't think we are very clear yet about exactly what happened on the ground in Kirkuk, but there was no major fighting. Certainly, unified Peshmerga elements were down there; that is for sure.

Q103 Royston Smith: Do you think there is any risk of renewed violence? It is quieter now than it was, and it seems to have calmed down somewhat. Do you think there is any risk of renewed violence, and if so, why?

Bill Park: Between?

Q104 Royston Smith: Between Kurdish forces and Iraqis.

Bill Park: Absolutely, I do. At the moment you have a number of things going on. One is some degree of ethnic cleansing—I suppose that would be the emotive term, but it probably amounts to that—in Kirkuk, in Tuz Khurmatu and in other areas. Also, from Baghdad and from elements of the PMU, there is a degree of—I could say Iraqi, but maybe it is really Shi'a—triumphalism, or maybe Arab triumphalism, that is in a mood for revenge. It is there with Abadi; you heard the story about the German Foreign Minister: "If you want to visit Baghdad you can't also visit Erbil, and if you want to do that you can't come at all."

Those kinds of arguments about the budget, about whether Governments can represent themselves in Erbil—there is a lot of triumphalism coming out of Baghdad at the moment and that could turn nasty. The real red line is Kurdistan proper: what they used to call the green line, the three governorates that make up the undisputed part of Kurdistan. It does not look like Iraq is going to challenge that, and if they have done it, that probably keeps it lower key. But if ethnic cleansing continues and these arguments about budget and energy and all the rest of it continue, then one can see the scope for violence in the future.

Chair: Mike, you were going to come in.

Q105 Mike Gapes: Yes, I am going to switch focus to Syria. What is your assessment of the motivation of those who fight for the PYD?

Robert Lowe: I think there are a number of different groups we could identify. First, there would be the ideologues, the people who have supported the activities of the PKK for many years, and its later manifestation in Syria is the PYD. So they believe in the ideology of that movement and of Abdullah Öcalan and are very much part of that party complex and the goals of the wider PKK operation. More recently, especially since the outbreak of the war and the takeover of the territories in the north of Syria by the PYD, a number of other groups have signed up, if you like, to the project or joined the party or, perhaps in greater numbers, joined the military, the paramilitary and the YPG.



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This, again, is for a number of reasons. One would be a sense of Kurdish identity, even Kurdish nationalism. Currently, this party and this military are the only viable actor and offer on the ground. If you are a Kurd living in the north of Syria and you want to take part, this is where you would direct your energies if you wished to join the fight against IS and help secure a Kurdish-governed territory.

Linked to that there will be people who have been opportunistic because if you want to get on, if you want to advance, you need to be part of these new structures, this party and this paramilitary, or you don't have much chance of advancement. There are suggestions that there has been coercion. There is an element of conscription in the YPG military that is not entirely popular among all the population in the Kurdish areas.

Q106 **Mike Gapes:** Is that conscription of women as well as men?

Robert Lowe: I don't know whether women are conscripted too. I know that men have been; I would need to check about women.

Q107 **Mike Gapes:** Do they have any idea what they actually want after the war against Daesh?

Robert Lowe: Yes, they do have a vision; they have a plan. We heard from our colleague from PYD earlier, who outlined some of the ideas underlying the project, the political experiment, if we like, which is underway. It is all underpinned by Kurdish nationalism, but as we heard, there are also political, radical leftist ideas of democratic autonomy, democratic confederalism. I won't go into detail on these, partly because it is quite difficult to and I am not entirely qualified, but in essence, it is building a grassroots form of democracy from the bottom up through local councils, through local communes, and doing away with top-down state control.

Q108 **Mike Gapes:** Is this like a Maoist ideology? This was like in the '60s and '70s: some of the far-left groups in this country and elsewhere had the sense of what they called "stable base areas" in the centre of the imperialist heartlands. I remember the phrase. I'm sorry; I've had that kind of student history.

Robert Lowe: The PKK's origins are as a Marxist-Leninist organisation but it has evolved over the years and its ideology now, as espoused by Abdullah Öcalan, is largely based on the thinking of an American thinker, Murray Bookchin, and his ideas.

Q109 **Mike Gapes:** Sorry, the name?

Robert Lowe: Murray Bookchin is the US thinker whose work underpins some of their ideas.

To set that to one side, I think they also have a clear vision now of what practical political structure they want to put in place in northern Syria—the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, as it is now called, rather than Rojava per se—and some idea as to the geographic borders of that



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territory and the political, social and economic structures they wish to create within it.

Q110 Mike Gapes: Would those geographic borders include within them areas currently occupied by Turkish troops?

Robert Lowe: If they could, they would. Before the Turkish army crossed the border into the corridor of northern Syria where they are currently still present, which is between two of the Kurdish-majority districts, it is clear that the YPG were about to take that territory and had every intention of joining up two of the Kurdish cantons to create a contiguous strip of territory all along the northern Syrian border. Turkey's actions prevented that.

I think if the Turks did withdraw, the YPG would be likely to try to take that territory, but there is a problem for them, in that the westernmost canton, Afrin, is cut off from the other Kurdish districts and from the rest of Northern Syria/Rojava. It is of course very difficult to co-ordinate and support that Kurdish district because it is so isolated.

Q111 Mike Gapes: We heard earlier from Mr Semo that they had no desire to initiate conflict with the Assad regime, but that there were examples of where there had been fighting. Is it your assessment that, in general, they have tried to avoid conflict and fighting with Assad and concentrated mainly on fighting against Daesh or other Islamist groups?

Robert Lowe: Yes, that is fair to say—that is accurate. The most pressing threat has been that of IS and other Islamist groups. The Kurds were in a fairly perilous position back in 2013-14. It was very serious around the siege of Kobanî, the town that did survive when the US and others helped intervene.

Both the Kurds and the Assad regime have had far graver, far more serious and far more urgent and immediate threats to deal with first, and they have been able to set aside the question of their own slightly fractious, difficult relationship and how that will look one day when there is finally a settlement. Pragmatically, it has suited them both that they have not been fighting. Neither has needed another front. They have both had to deal with IS in the first instance. When that is all settled, if it ever is, they may look to each other.

Q112 Mike Gapes: This is the final question from me. As I understand it—I am not particularly good with the geography—there were different Kurdish forces fighting in the area of Mount Sinjar to liberate it and to protect the Yazidis and others, and that included some co-operation between Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga, PKK people and PYD people. Is that correct?

Robert Lowe: Yes, that's correct. The Peshmerga were there initially. They were struggling. The PKK and YPG together crossed over and joined the fight and were largely instrumental, ultimately, in rescuing the Yazidis and taking Mount Sinjar. They have remained there and they are still operational in that area. That is another question, which relates to the relationship of northern Syria/Rojava to the Kurdistan region of Iraq and



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the Kurdistan Democratic Party. The presence is still there. There has been a PKK presence in Kurdistan in Iraq for many years, but of course that is another part; their intervention there means that they have a foothold in that part of Iraq also.

Bill Park: The Yazidis are quite interesting. Some Yazidis have joined the PKK/YPG, but some have joined the Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga, some have formed PMUs and some have formed purely Yazidi defence forces.

The Yazidis have become quite fragmented. I do not know how deep those fragmentations are. It might be, as you say, a sort of opportunism—where does the power lie in your immediate locality?—but it is quite an interesting aftermath of this struggle that Bob was talking about. The Yazidis themselves have become quite split between different Kurdish elements as well as, if you like, non-Kurdish elements.

Q113 **Ann Clwyd:** Can I ask you about the Yazidis? At the time, I was following quite closely what was going on—at least I thought so. To begin with, the reports were that the Yazidis had all been rescued and that everything was going to be okay. Suddenly things turned, and we heard that Yazidis were not safe. There were several confusing reports about what actually happened at various stages. Can you enlighten me on that?

Robert Lowe: Bill is perhaps better placed than I am.

Bill Park: Yes. First of all, we do not know what happened to all those Yazidis, and still mass graves are being found. One of the problems about whether they were all liberated is whether the question is, are all those who are still alive liberated? How do we account for those we have not yet located?

You still find mass graves, and they are the responsibility of IS. Bear in mind that the Yazidis are quite scattered. We talk about Mount Sinjar, which is the main, purest concentration of Yazidis, but they are scattered down towards the Nineveh plains and so on. We have a patchier picture of different parts of the Yazidi-populated areas.

It is the mess on the ground. People will have lost contact with their families and neighbours, and this is not only Yazidis; it is Kurds, Arabs and so on. People might report someone as missing because they genuinely think they are missing and have not been found, but they might be somewhere else. They might have washed up in a refugee camp or across the border somewhere.

It is genuinely quite difficult to get a proper sense, in the whole of this area we are talking about, of who is where and who is surviving. You will probably find in five years' time that people suddenly reconnect with each other and find that the other side of the family survived when they did not think it did. You've got a lot of chaos on the ground, and it is very difficult to get an accurate picture. My guess is that there are still people we have not accounted for. Whether they are still alive but somewhere we have not yet identified, or whether we will find a mass grave at some point, we do not know.



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Robert Lowe: I have colleagues at LSE who are demographers, and they are running a project documenting Yazidi victims. If that would be interesting, I can share some of that with you.

Q114 **Ann Clwyd:** Who took responsibility for them in the end? There were stories of women being sold as sex slaves, raped and held in camps, and then the issue seemed to disappear.

Robert Lowe: It perhaps received less media attention once the atrocities had ended, but it has obviously left a deeply traumatised, fractured and troubled population in the refugee camps and elsewhere. Indeed, there are a number in Europe as well who have made it over to Germany or elsewhere. There is a camp in the Greek mountains that is purely for Yazidis, which I know is a difficult place for them to be settled. They had to separate them from other refugees because they were being attacked. They got to Greece, so they have their own camp in northern Greece.

Bill Park: Some elements of IS have somehow freed themselves from Raqqa, Mosul and other areas. They have taken their entourage—their caravan—with them, and probably in there are Yazidi women who are still held captive, but they are still with IS elements that are in a field somewhere.

Q115 **Ann Clwyd:** So who was mainly responsible for rescuing the Yazidis? Was it a combination?

Bill Park: The PKK and the YPG—and Barzani thanked them.

Q116 **Ann Clwyd:** Has the PYD restricted political opposition in the territory under its control? If so, how has it done it?

Robert Lowe: The PYD talks very confidently about being tolerant and pluralist, and we heard earlier just how many parties there are operating. There has been a proliferation of political social activity in northern Syria since the regime pulled back. That said, there is a problem. The large, or what used to be a large, faction of Kurdish parties that were not of the PKK strain—indeed, they long predate the PYD and the PKK; their roots as Kurdish nationalist parties in Syria go back to the 1950s.

There were 18 or 19 of those parties at the outbreak of the war. They have struggled to operate. There are a number of incidents that are quite well documented of harassment, threats, intimidation and kidnapping. These parties now largely struggle to function in Rojava—northern Syria—unless they choose to sign up to the project.

If they join in the democratic self-administration, they are allowed to function. A number of them have gone over, because they see that it is the only way they can operate. Others, still loosely under an umbrella coalition called the Kurdish National Council—the KNC—have been seriously weakened; their leaders now tend to be in Erbil in Kurdish Iraq, or they are in London or elsewhere in Europe because they are not able to function.



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It is a difficult issue for the PYD to reconcile that inability of Kurdish political parties that do not support their project to function. The way they have operated with other ethnicities is, to many extents, impressive and commendable; they warmly welcomed Arabs, Turkmen and the Christian minorities into the project. The record does not look to be so good with other Kurdish parties, whom they have seen as a threat.

Chair: Mike, you wanted to come in briefly?

Q117 **Mike Gapes:** That confirms what I was told in a refugee camp in Iraq in 2013, when I spoke to some people who had come from Syria and clearly didn't feel comfortable in that environment.

Can I ask you about the relationships of the PKK and the PYD with the PUK? We have talked about the KDP area and the Sinjar, but there were non-PUK forces fighting to get Daesh out of Kirkuk. Did they come from Syria, or were they PKK from Turkey?

Robert Lowe: Sorry—there were non-PUK forces?

Q118 **Mike Gapes:** In Kirkuk, when the fighting there took place to drive out Daesh, I was told that there were PKK people who actually came and helped and died fighting with the Peshmerga there. I am interested to know whether they were Syrians or Turks.

Robert Lowe: Bill may wish to answer this, but the first point is, yes, the relationship between the PUK and the PKK, and indeed the PYD, is better than between the KDP and those parties. Historically, there has been less of a struggle between the PUK and the PKK than that between the KDP. To put it quite cheaply, it is between the followers of Barzani and the follows of Öcalan for who is going to be paramount as the leader of the Kurdish people of the region. That has been less of an issue for the PUK.

Q119 **Mike Gapes:** So Talabani did not have the same status there?

Robert Lowe: It wasn't quite part of the same overall master struggle, if you will, for the soul of the Kurdish nationalist movement in the region. It was more complex. It is perhaps also reflected by the rivalry between the PUK and the KDP, with the PUK choosing, at times, to be more open to the PKK. There was KDP-PKK fighting in the 1990s in the Qandil mountains.

On the suggestion that those fighters were PKK, if they were PKK in Kirkuk they could have been of Turkish or Syrian origin. A disproportionately large number of the PKK have always been Kurds from Syria—much larger than each population is in balance. They have always been heavily represented in the PKK.

It doesn't really matter, if you see what I mean—it is all part of the same complex, whether they are badged PKK or YPG or whether they are Kurds from Turkey or Kurds from Syria. If they follow the ideology, it is the same movement.

Mike Gapes: The essence of the issue is that there are Kurds who are prepared to go and fight and die to defend other Kurds—

Robert Lowe: Oh yes.

Q120 **Mike Gapes:** In areas that are many miles away from where they live and where their families were.

Robert Lowe: We know that there are Kurds from Iran, as well as from Turkey, who are fighting for the YPG in Syria. They are fighting to defend other Kurds, which is quite common.

Bill Park: There is a Turkish security analyst who calculates that about 30% of the PKK fighters actually have Syrian-Kurdish origins. I find that figure a little bit high, personally, but it reinforces the point that Bob made that a lot of what we think of in the PKK as the Turkish Kurds might actually have Syrian-Kurdish origin. Right now, in Rojava, it is the same the other way round.

Q121 **Mike Gapes:** So when the Turkish Government allege that the PYD are actually PKK, there is some truth in that?

Robert Lowe: You cannot separate the PYD from the PKK. The PYD would not exist if the PKK did not exist. It was founded out of the PKK party complex and structure. As we heard earlier, the PYD states that it is only ideologically linked to the PKK—it is a sister organisation; there is no operational control from the PKK. Others disagree. You could read Crisis Group's report from May this year. They do not even bother calling the party the PYD; they just call it "the PKK in Syria". That is how they see it.

I think there are subtle distinctions, even though, clearly, they are very close. Those distinctions largely come down to the context. The PYD is governing—it is having to run the local administration, services and a functioning economy in northern Syria. The PKK remains a guerrilla organisation in the mountains carrying out a disruptive armed campaign in Turkey. The PYD also needs the support of a large number of Kurds who are not traditionally PKK supporters, so it has to be a bit more open, tolerant and pluralist in how it operates.

Another distinction is that until 2012, the PYD—indeed, the whole Kurdish movement in Syria—had never taken up arms. That is an entirely new dimension to the Syrian-Kurdish movement in the struggle; it had not been violent before. Related to that, it is credible to back the PYD's view—or the YPG's view—that they are primarily a movement of self-defence. They have not been on the offensive; they have been protecting the peoples of northern Syria. Maybe that has changed a little bit now because they are pushing out into other areas.

It boils down to a critical question for the future of Rojava and indeed the PKK as a movement, which is: is it in control in northern Syria? Is it calling the shots? Or is it prepared to leave this political experiment to develop as a Syrian operation run largely by Syrian Kurds but with other Syrian ethnicities, and let them decide how to run their administration while retaining links to the PKK's larger structure?

Mike Gapes: Thank you.



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Q122 **Chair:** You have answered many questions. I have one for Mr Park, if I may, to tie up briefly: how many polling stations did you visit?

Bill Park: Half a dozen—six—in Kirkuk, roughly equally split between polling stations in primarily or entirely Kurdish areas and polling stations in what we were told were mixed areas, but which were all in Turkmen schools with Turkmen names.

Q123 **Chair:** So they were predominantly Turkmen, if not actually?

Bill Park: I would think they were predominantly Turkmen, but we were told there were Arabs there as well.

Chair: I have no further questions. Thank you both very much for your extremely full and succinct answers.