

Foreign Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: [Kurdish Aspirations and the Interests of the UK, HC 518](#)

Tuesday 9 January 2018

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 9 January 2018.

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Tom Tugendhat (Chair); Ian Austin; Chris Bryant; Ann Clwyd; Mike Gapes; Stephen Gethins; Ms Nusrat Ghani; Andrew Rosindell; Royston Smith; Nadhim Zahawi.

Questions 124-202

Witnesses

I: Rt Hon. Alistair Burt MP, Minister of State for International Development and Minister of State for the Middle East, and Amy Clemitshaw, Head of Eastern Mediterranean Department, Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [Foreign and Commonwealth Office submission](#)

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Rt Hon. Alistair Burt MP and Amy Clemitshaw.

Chair: I welcome the Minister, Alistair Burt, and Ms Clemitshaw. Thank you for coming this afternoon and happy new year; it is very good to see you.

Alistair Burt: Thank you.

Chair: If I may, we will go straight into questions. I invite Nadhim Zahawi to kick off.

Nadhim Zahawi: Welcome, Minister and Ms Clemitshaw—congratulations, Minister, on being reappointed to your role.

Alistair Burt: Thank you.

Q124 **Nadhim Zahawi:** The UK has provided significant military and political support to the Iraqi Kurds, especially after 1991, and including during the war against Daesh. Was that support to uphold UK values or to protect UK interests, or both?

Alistair Burt: Thank you, Chairman, and thank you for the question, Mr Zahawi. I appreciate the chance to come here. Most of what you will ask me is in my portfolio area, but one or two things are slightly outside it. If I need to get information from behind me, I hope you will forgive me. I would rather put the right information before the Committee than try to bluff you—I cannot bluff the Committee, so I will not. Thank you for the welcome and the opportunity.

Mr Zahawi, it is a mixture, really. The relationship with the Kurdish community in northern Iraq goes back a long time. Within my political lifetime and memory, there was John Major's work to provide cover and protection for them many years ago. The indignities and atrocities suffered under Saddam Hussein have given us a long relationship with that Kurdish community.

The Kurdish regional area shares our values: a belief in democracy, tolerance and liberal values, diversity, and preventing extremism—so there are good reasons why we have a long relationship. In recent times, that fight against Daesh has amplified all of these, giving us something we have shared in common, which we have needed to resist. They were in the frontline in relation to that resistance. If our common interest is the defeat of extremism and terrorism and seeking to encourage the very best of values in a region, I think these are absolutely mutual interests. It is quite hard to work out where ours stop and somebody else's begin in something like this.

Q125 **Ann Clwyd:** Do you think there has been a tendency to idealise the Kurds, overlooking matters such as factionalism and corruption?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Alistair Burt: It depends on who you ask and how deeply you want to go into it. As far as the Foreign and Commonwealth Office is concerned, and Government in general, no. We are realistic in terms of what is happening there. It is tempting from the outside, of course—we talk about “the Kurdish people” and “the Kurds”—to give a sense that this is a unified group of people living in a region that crosses national boundaries and, therefore, that there is a commonality in all sorts of areas, in terms of politics, values, interests and so on. This Committee will know, however—I know that a number of its members know the community very well—that nothing is ever that simple. So, no, there is no sense of idealism.

These are people who have different interests—competing interests—and, on occasion, come to war with each other over protecting their own interests. It would be wrong for the UK Government to idealise any group at all. Our relationship with them is realistic.

I spoke earlier of the values that we share. When people move away from those values, you would expect the United Kingdom to be clear in its advice or, on occasion, condemnation. We have that relationship, so, no, it is not looking at anything that might be wrong but recognising that, in the main, the politicians with whom we have dealt over 20 years have aspired to the sort of things that we would wish to support, in terms of their care for their people.

Q126 **Ann Clwyd:** Can I ask you about the recent suppression of peaceful demonstration? I think about eight people were killed and others were injured. The only independent television channel owner was captured and imprisoned—he has now been released. Does the Foreign Office have any view on that?

Alistair Burt: Recognising that in recent months—in the run-up to the referendum and certainly after it—a lot of information has come out of the region and not all of it has been evidence based and fact based, there is a limit as to what the Government can comment upon. Various sides are trying to get their point over on various things. You are describing an internal situation. The United Kingdom has not, as far I am aware, expressed a view beyond supporting, as we always do, the right of peaceful protest within the law, calling on all sides to make sure that they avoid violence and that any detention or arrest is within the law, so that justice can be followed, and followed transparently. We would apply that to the circumstances you have just described.

Q127 **Ann Clwyd:** Is the Foreign Office aware of what sparked off the demonstrations? What were the issues that got them to go out on the streets?

Alistair Burt: Different things have sparked things, particularly since the referendum. The referendum and its aftermath brought to the surface a number of tensions that I think had been concealed in the process running up to the referendum. The referendum gave people a clear political focus point and covered up some things that were maybe underlying issues and



HOUSE OF COMMONS

tensions, and, to a certain extent, that has all come out more into the open after the referendum.

There have been confrontations between different factions, but there have also been underlying economic pressures. This region has the opportunity through oil resources to be a more than viable economic unit, liberal in its economics and looking for expansion and good relationships outside, but much depends on the relationship with Baghdad and the finances and budget.

Recent financial constraints and the non-payment of wages have led to some of the concerns that sparked the protests on the streets in the region, not unadjacent to other problems seen across the border in other places. It was economic pressures there. So it is a combination of economic and political issues in the area that can bring people out on to the streets in terms of conflict. That is why the rule of law, which the UK is so keen to raise with people for the protection of minority groups and those protesting, is so important to encourage in these areas.

Q128 Ann Clwyd: Can I ask you about non-payment of wages? Is it non-payment of wages by the KRG or the Iraqi Government?

Alistair Burt: I understand that, in this particular instance, it was related to KRG payments, but you are getting into a very internal issue, and I am not sure there is very much more I can add to it.

Q129 Ann Clwyd: I am just pressing on this because the reasons for the demonstrations are important. Who is responsible for the non-payment of wages? It is either the KRG, or it is about that—or is it both?

Alistair Burt: Of course, you often get an expression of concern from KRG about the budget difficulties which they believe are sometimes caused by Baghdad. The non-payment of key revenues has been a long-running issue between the region and Baghdad over many years, and budgetary constraints can be put down either to difficulties in choices that people make or an absence of funds coming in in the first place. Amy, on this particular issue?

Amy Clemitshaw: There is nothing that I would add, Minister. I think that covers it.

Alistair Burt: As far as I am aware, the recent protests in Sulaymaniyah were protests against the regional government, KRG. That is where I understand the problems to have been directed towards, but that is just one of the underlying tensions in the area.

Q130 Andrew Rosindell: Good afternoon, Minister. Clearly, the people of Iraq and the people of the Kurdistan region of Iraq have been great friends and allies to the United Kingdom in recent years, so we owe them a great deal. However, some of the Iraqi contributors to our inquiry have expressed the view that on the issue of the independence referendum, they feel that the UK has rather let them down. In fact, one described it as feeling betrayed by the UK Government's attitude towards that



HOUSE OF COMMONS

referendum. Can you clarify once and for all whether the UK is opposed to independence for Iraqi Kurdistan as a matter of principle, or is it just a question of timing and method?

Alistair Burt: We made it clear to the KRG that we did not believe a unilateral referendum in relation to independence was in the interests of Iraq, of stability and of the continuing fight against Daesh. We said consistently that any process that was to lead to a referendum and possible independence had to be part of an agreement with Iraq. We stand for a strong, stable, unified Iraq, able to stand up for its own interests in the region, not divided along sectarian lines.

In relation to the referendum, we formed a view very early that we did not believe it was in the interests of the region or those who were advocating it in order to press it. We gave this advice consistently, and as the Committee will know, we were not alone in this. It was not a view in relation to independence. If there are ultimately movements for independence in the area, that must be settled by people in the region; it will not be settled by the United Kingdom.

Again, as the Committee will know, with the different Kurdish groups operating within the area, between Turkey, Syria, Iran and Iraq, all sorts of issues have been raised for decades. We are clear that if these issues are to work towards independence, that can only be done through political agreement and consent, and we did not believe that a unilateral referendum was likely to produce the answer. We were consistent in relation to that. We do not feel that it is a matter of betrayal by the United Kingdom to offer honest advice, and we do not think it is a matter of betrayal by the United Kingdom if we simply disagree with those who take a contrary view, no matter how deeply or passionately they hold it. We were not alone in the views that we held.

Q131 **Andrew Rosindell:** So it is not a matter of principle. Ultimately, if there can be some agreement, you are not objecting to it in principle; it is about it being done in the context of a stable Iraq and by consent of the people.

Alistair Burt: If there is ultimate agreement by the Government of Iraq about an independent Kurdish region, that is a matter for Iraq and the Kurdish and Iraqi people.

Q132 **Andrew Rosindell:** And have you clearly communicated this view to the Iraqi Kurds, some of whom have actually said to this Committee that they saw the UK's policies as a tacit endorsement of a path towards independence?

Alistair Burt: I think we've been very clear. We have certainly been clear in my time. When the referendum came up, I went and worked with Frank Baker, our ambassador there at the time, and we worked with other ambassadors. I do not think that there could have been anything clearer from the United Kingdom over a period of time than to say that politically the aspirations of the Kurdish people are not going to be met unless it is



HOUSE OF COMMONS

done by agreement within the constitutional processes that the Iraqi constitution allows.

Right up to the very end, there was the possibility of a negotiated agreement between the two sides that left open all the options for the future. I know that was the case. That was a course that President Barzani did not feel he was able to take, but I am quite sure that we were very clear in our views on this, and that that would be known be those with whom we were dealing.

Q133 Andrew Rosindell: Some of the Kurdish witnesses have said that the referendum was not about achieving independence, at least not for the time being. They described it as a bargaining tactic through which the Kurds sought leverage to negotiate with Baghdad over internal matters. Have you come across that particular view?

Alistair Burt: Yes.

Q134 Andrew Rosindell: Do you agree that that was the real intention of the referendum?

Alistair Burt: I think what I said in relation to that argument was that these things have unexpected consequences. Just because one side believes that it was to flag up an intention or to improve a bargaining position does not necessarily mean that everybody else saw it in the same way. A referendum is a referendum; it means what it says. Again, we advised the KRG that just because they saw it as a bargaining chip, that did not necessarily mean that that was how it was seen in Baghdad by those who may not take the same benevolent view that we would want to take towards people's aspirations. We warned of consequences.

Also, once the referendum had taken place and the result was there, no one could quite control what then happened, as has been seen. We had our concerns, and we think that that advice has been proved to be correct, but you do not know what is going to happen the next day. You do not know who is going to say, "Hold on—this was a vote for independence. This is what we now demand", and so on. We felt that the better bargaining chip was to make it very clear that a referendum was on the cards. The outcome of the referendum was never in doubt, but you can only have that referendum once within a lengthy period of time. Once you have had the referendum, you cannot threaten to have it again and it cannot be used as a bargaining chip again.

We felt that it was quite clear from our conversations in Baghdad that Baghdad was worried about the impact of the referendum. It did provide an opportunity for concentrated discussion on the future of the Kurdish region and for dealing with some of the grievances that had been outstanding for so long. It was providing opportunity for movement towards a resolution. The threat of the referendum was very real. I think that we felt that that was doing its job, and that it would perhaps have been better to have found a way not to hold it, but to accept the gains that the process of moving towards a referendum had allowed, and then work on those.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

We felt that the bargaining chip was the threat of the referendum, not the result itself. Plainly, that is a matter for political agreement or disagreement, but that was the view that we took—so yes, I had heard that argument, but it was an argument that the United Kingdom did not agree with.

Q135 **Mike Gapes:** Just to follow up on your first answer to Mr Rosindell, you said that you came to your view about the referendum very early. When was that?

Alistair Burt: Forgive me, I cannot give you a timeline, but I know that as soon as the referendum date was mooted—from memory, a couple of months before it happened; it was not a very long process—we came to the decision fairly quickly that we felt uncomfortable with it.

Q136 **Mike Gapes:** So we are talking about April?

Alistair Burt: I would have thought that it was later than that.

Q137 **Mike Gapes:** Later than that—June?

Alistair Burt: I can find out.

Q138 **Mike Gapes:** This is quite important, because there is a discussion, as you know—perhaps other questions will come on to this—about whether we were slow. I will leave it there.

Alistair Burt: We can do so.

Q139 **Ms Ghani:** Maybe I can help—I have it written down here, if you don't mind. It would help. The Foreign Secretary dated the announcement of the referendum to be April 2017 and said that the Foreign Office responded after that, but President Barzani said in 2014 that there would be an independence referendum. So the Foreign Office seems to have been very slow to see the referendum coming—or not?

Alistair Burt: Well, hold on. Let's think about what was happening in the region at the time. The possibility of a referendum has, of course, always been there; it was the narrowing down to a date and saying, "We are actually going to do this." I think the view of the United Kingdom has always been clear that a unilateral declaration of independence, or unilateral moves, were not likely to be the answer to the problems and issues that Iraq had as a whole. I am pretty sure that it was only when a date was formalised that it became necessary for the United Kingdom to formalise its own position.

You can talk about something in theory and offer comments about it. I do not think that there was anything during that period that would have given any indication that if a date was formalised, the British would come in behind it. I do not think there is any evidence to suggest that at all, but certainly it was only, to my memory, when the date was announced that it became necessary to make sure that policy was clear and soundly based. I do not think that there was any doubt about that, but in 2014 we were dealing with a completely different situation on the ground. I suspect that



HOUSE OF COMMONS

political aspirations were the last thing on people's minds as they dealt with the horror of the Daesh advance and what was to come.

The idea of a referendum and Kurdish independence has always been there—we know that. It was only when the date was formalised that it became necessary for the UK to be clear about what it thought. I have absolutely no doubt about the clarity of that view in the run-up to the referendum.

Q140 Ms Ghani: We have a KRG quote as well about how prepared the Foreign Office was, but just to clarify, prior to April 2017, I just want to get on the record whether you know what the Foreign Office or your Department were doing to prepare, or are you saying that you were just waiting, that close to a deadline?

Alistair Burt: I was not personally in office during that period, so I have no personal memory in relation to that. Again, I am well aware from my background in the region that the possibility of a referendum was always there. I have not come across anything that would have indicated the United Kingdom's position to be different from what it is, and given anyone the sense that there was any go-ahead from the UK for a unilateral action such as that. I would be very surprised if there was evidence in relation to that.

Amy Clemitchaw: We were urging the Baghdad authorities and the KRG to have a dialogue, and to resolve any differences of view within the framework of the Iraqi constitution.

Q141 Ms Ghani: We have taken evidence on this issue, and the KRG representative told the Committee that the UK's diplomatic proposal to avoid the referendum came two days before the vote. Would you argue that that is correct, and that you or the Department were slow to react, or would you say that that is not correct?

Alistair Burt: I am quite sure that the KRG representative could point to something as a formalised answer that late. What that was built on was weeks of discussion in the region, both with KRG and with Baghdad about putting together an alternative suggestion—a way out, which had been worked on for weeks. To say it was only formalised at a late stage—there might certainly have been a document pulled together as the culmination of a variety of discussions, because negotiations went on very late; right up to the hilt, because we still hoped that the referendum might be pulled—but to suggest that that late publication or the late availability of a document was the only representation we made to say, "You should call it off", is absolutely not correct. It is not a correct interpretation. There were weeks and weeks of personal discussions, personal negotiations saying, "We don't think this is right and we are working with Baghdad to try and get something that will be a reasonable basis for negotiation". The terms of that were known and discussed as time went on. It might have been framed at a late stage, but that was built on all the discussions that both sides were well aware of before then.

Q142 Ian Austin: Welcome, Minister. Both sides are now calling for the UK to



HOUSE OF COMMONS

mediate between Erbil and Baghdad. To what extent has this been happening? Is the UK acting in a mediating capacity?

Alistair Burt: Not mediating as such, because we do not necessarily think that we have that role. We have certainly been encouraging, as we have done for a long time, as Amy has just suggested, a better dialogue between the two. I think that there are legitimate reasons for concern in the Kurdish region that attempts to engage Baghdad over the years to resolve differences between them have fallen on ears that were deafer than they should have been; that was part of the process that led to the decision for the referendum. But we are one of a number of states that believe that the resolution of these difficulties will add to the stability of the area. I do not think it is for the United Kingdom to mediate. I do not think that is appropriate. We have not had an indication from both sides that that is the appropriate position, but that we still retain a very strong interest in Baghdad and Erbil reaching an agreement is clear. We continue when we visit Iraq to seek to see those in the KRG as well as Baghdad and, of course, various messages can be passed, but to term this mediation would not be correct.

Q143 **Ian Austin:** Almost all the Kurdish witnesses said that they hoped Britain would act in a mediating capacity. What do you think is the barrier to Britain doing that?

Alistair Burt: There are many disputes around the world where people would like the British to act in a mediating capacity and we can all think of a number—Kashmir comes to mind and places like that. This is not for the UK to do—

Ian Austin: It is not?

Alistair Burt: It is not—

Q144 **Ian Austin:** Why?

Alistair Burt: Because I have no indication from the Iraqi Government that that is a role they believe the United Kingdom should play. This is a sovereign matter for Iraq to deal with and I think that is what is important. It has to be an Iraqi-led solution, not something coming from the UK. I am not aware of any invitation from Baghdad, for example, that the United Kingdom should act as mediator. This cannot be done one-sided.

Q145 **Ian Austin:** The FCO submission said that the Kurds rejected mediation prior to the referendum. You seem to be suggesting now that it is Baghdad that is rejecting mediation.

Alistair Burt: I cannot recall—I do not think we have formally put mediation in this dispute to Baghdad. This is something that must be settled by Iraqis themselves. Each side knows the parameters that it has to work with. It has to deal with revenues, with budget, with borders, with internal autonomy. Each side knows this. There is no suggestion that an outside state or body should be given the responsibility to produce a deal, which, then, each party would agree to. This is a sovereign matter for



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Iraq. So I do not think it is a question of blaming one side or the other. I do not think it is appropriate for the British Government to approach Baghdad and say "We demand to be the mediator in this dispute", is it? We want to see it settled. Clearly, we worked with other states, with the EU, the US and other partners in the run-up to the referendum to try and get an agreement between the parties that would mean the referendum was not necessary and some of the long-standing issues between Baghdad and Erbil could be dealt with.

Q146 Ian Austin: *The Guardian* yesterday carried a story based on evidence to this Committee, which said: "Foreign Office Ministers inadvertently helped neutralise the Iraqi Kurds, one of Britain's most effective allies in efforts to limit Iranian influence in the Middle East". What is your response to that story? It is based on evidence from a former UK and NATO official to this Committee, which had been published.

Alistair Burt: I have not read the story. What is the quote based on? What is the evidence?

Q147 Ian Austin: It was in *The Guardian* yesterday. The quote was "Foreign Office Ministers inadvertently helped neutralise the Iraqi Kurds, one of Britain's most effective allies in efforts to limit Iranian influence in the Middle East".

Alistair Burt: Without having read the article or what the author would have used to substantiate that, I can only comment that I am not aware that we have taken such action that would have neutralised the Iraqi Kurds. I do not see the Iraqi Kurds as being a neutralised body anyway, to be quite frank.

Q148 Ian Austin: What is your response to evidence—again, submitted to the Committee—that confidential UK intelligence documents that have been "circulating in official departments since at least February 2016", showed Iran's 'high-level aim to create through Iraq and Syria an unbroken land corridor to the Middle East North Africa Region to further threaten Israel and Lebanon'?

Alistair Burt: First, as you know, I would never comment on any UK intelligence documents or anything like that. The overall aim of Iran to develop a land corridor is open source stuff that we all know, but I have no comment to make in terms of British intelligence reports.

Q149 Ian Austin: Given the hands-off approach you are advocating: it's not for Britain to mediate, we can't become involved in this, no one's going to listen to us anyway—

Alistair Burt: I am not sure I said all that, Mr Austin.

Q150 Ian Austin: I might be pushing it a bit, but contrast that with Iranian engagement in the Kurdistan region. The other side is pretty engaged, isn't it? And we are taking a step back.

Alistair Burt: Hold on. You could certainly never class the Iranian engagement as mediation, and there must be quite a spectrum of involvement.

Q151 **Ian Austin:** I wouldn't. I would say it is aggressive and I would say we are taking a step back.

Alistair Burt: Absolutely. I was raising it to dismiss it. My point was that there is a spectrum of engagement in the region and it would be wrong and unfair to characterise British engagement in the region over a lengthy period as hands-off. We have not been hands-off in terms of physical support to Peshmerga, support for training, active in relation to dealing with Daesh, pushing Daesh back and resisting pressures. In all those areas, we have been very hands-on; that hasn't been hands-off.

We have not been hands-off in relation to the politics of Iraq either. We have got very good relationships with both Baghdad and Erbil. Those relationships are built on patient work, many visits and many contacts both ways. But there are differences of opinion between Erbil and Baghdad as to their ultimate future. All I am saying is that it is not for the United Kingdom to determine what that ultimate future is. It is for the United Kingdom to take a view on what is most conducive to stability in the area, what is most likely to prevent the rise of Daesh again and instability. In terms of Iraq, the sectarian nature of the country, and the way in which its politics is built upon it, provides a constant risk and in a land of conflict, which has seen many people killed and displaced, that risk remains.

I think it is entirely proper for the United Kingdom to be engaged in that process and to use our efforts to urge all the parties to ensure that they do not take actions that make it likely for conflict either to continue or restart. That is the nature of engagement. That is not mediation but it is a long way from being hands-off.

There are others involved in the area with different interests that we are well aware of. We know about the activities of those in PMF and Hashd, who take their orders from outside the country. We are well aware of those. Our determination, therefore, is to give Iraq the confidence to make its own decisions, not to be dependent on those from outside, not to be influenced by external actors, and to support the political parties and building of the political institutions that will give strength and independence to a unified Iraq, so that it can make its relationships without needing to look over its shoulder all the time at those who mean it harm.

In a recent times we have seen a relatively new bridge to Iraq from Saudi Arabia, for the first time for a long time, trying to give Iraq a sense of its Arab relationships as well as those from its closest neighbours, who may have different aims.

That is my sense in a nutshell of where we should be. It is proper engagement. It is not mediation or hands-off and it is being very clear-eyed about the activities of others in the region.

Q152 **Chair:** I know we will all congratulate the new Minister for Education, Mr Zahawi, who asked the first question.

Alistair Burt: Oh, great.

Chris Bryant: Oh my God.

Alistair Burt: The bard of Stratford-on-Avon.

Chair: There you go—appropriate for education. He will be teaching Shakespeare to them like it is going out of fashion. Stephen, did you want to say something?

Stephen Gethins: I add my congratulations to the team, on what is a devolved issue.

Chris Bryant: And in Wales, too.

Q153 **Stephen Gethins:** Yes, and in Wales. I am sure he'll do an excellent job for people in England.

Thanks for coming to join us today, Minister. Could you set out any recent changes to the levels of funding and staffing in the FCO's Erbil consulate, please?

Alistair Burt: I don't think there has been any dramatic change, as far as I am aware, no.

Q154 **Stephen Gethins:** No changes to either funding or staffing? No changes proposed over the next little while?

Alistair Burt: No, not as far as I am aware.

Q155 **Stephen Gethins:** That's helpful to establish. In November 2017, the consulate changed its name on Facebook to remove the words "Iraqi-Kurdistan region". I think there was a mention that that was to save space but do you think the timing was best in terms of changing the name on the Facebook page, given the referendum?

Alistair Burt: I don't think that was a matter of timing. It was a practical issue. I have a note if you will let me read it, because this is an important thing. In terms of current footprint—just to establish how important Erbil is—a permanent consulate general in Erbil consists of FCO diplomatic staff, defence adviser from the MOD, adviser to the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs and DFID staff working on humanitarian response and stabilisation efforts. We also offer a consular service. That is what we provide in Erbil.

The British consulate-general in Erbil has not changed its name. Its Facebook page was recently changed from English only to English and Kurdish. The name on the site was subsequently shortened as the previous title exceeded the maximum allowed characters. The British consulate-general in Erbil has informed local media and officials of the change.

I am sorry if the nature of the change caused any consternation but it really should not. I am pleased to make clear that the representation has not changed.

Stephen Gethins: Reading out that statement was very helpful. Could I pick up on two different parts of that? One is the number of staff and the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

other is the Facebook changes. With the number of staff you set out, how many is that in total? How many is that versus locally recruited staff? Has that gone up or down in recent times?

Alistair Burt: Remarkably, I have the figures to hand.

Stephen Gethins: That's a very effective operation.

Alistair Burt: There are roughly eight UK-based and eight local staff. I am not aware of those numbers changing remarkably in recent times.

Q156 **Stephen Gethins:** In terms of the Facebook changes, what kind of feedback did you get from the local authorities in Erbil about them, if any?

Alistair Burt: As far as I am aware, once people had noticed the name, there was no particularly adverse reaction. People were fine about it. They are pleased at our representation and regard Facebook information as perfectly straightforward, as far as I am aware.

Q157 **Ann Clwyd:** The speaker of the KRG's parliament told us that the FCO's engagement in the region was far too focused on leaders and elites, to the detriment of—in his words—"democratic political institutions and civil society". Do you agree with that?

Alistair Burt: I am obviously interested in his Excellency's representations. I would be surprised. It is the hallmark of our diplomatic staff abroad that they gain their information by being engaged throughout a community, and throughout a region. Without being aware of a list of organisations with whom our consul general would be in contact, although I could supply it, it is not the way in which we work.

Certainly, Ministers, if they are on visits, then, yes, inevitably you are drawn towards the properly elected representatives and the political representatives; I have certainly tended to go and see those. But I am well aware that both ambassador and consul general make sure they keep in touch with elements of civil society because they give very valuable information.

I am happy to go back, check and make sure that, if that is a criticism, we meet it. It is only by keeping ears to the ground that you pick up what you need to pick up. This is an extremely voluble society, where people want to talk, to represent their various groups and make sure that they are heard. I have met business groups and others while I have been there in the past. I have certainly also met civil society representatives while I have been there. But I will check and make sure that we don't leave a gap in our armour if that is a worry that people have there.

Q158 **Ann Clwyd:** Thank you, Minister. I think it would be quite useful to know which institutions they have engaged with. I know that civil society sometimes feels that it is not properly engaged.

Alistair Burt: Okay. If you wish, Chair, perhaps I could write to the Committee as a follow-up and just say, "I have spoken to Consul General, this is his regular round and this is what our local and UK-based staff do in



HOUSE OF COMMONS

order to make sure they are fully informed from all sections of the community”—happy to do that.

Ann Clwyd: Are you worried that Baghdad is punishing the Kurds rather than talking to them? Has a blockade been placed on the KRG, and how is that affecting the prospects for a diplomatic solution? Are elements in the Iraqi state, particularly the popular mobilisation forces, behaving in sectarian or ethnically chauvinistic ways towards the Kurds?

Alistair Burt: I am very glad we reached that question and that you wanted to ask it because it is really important. Our sense is that, in the immediate aftermath of the referendum when the situation was extremely febrile, all sorts of difficult possibilities were open. Certainly, the risk of a clash between Iraqi forces and Kurdish forces was very real.

We believe that the way in which those difficulties were handled in the short period after the referendum gave rise to a great deal of hope. There wasn't, in fact, the sort of clash that there might have been. There were some limited exchanges, which we know, but the risk of a substantial clash—which would have resulted from significant resistance on a point on the map and resistance to Iraqi forces recovering disputed areas—was avoided. That was avoided because people looked into the abyss and said, "We don't want to do this." We take from that that it requires understanding from those on both sides. It needs a sense of no triumphalism and a recognition that in the painful aftermath of the referendum, both sides had to continue to make concessions to each other.

We are therefore extremely keen that Baghdad, having achieved the recovery of disputed territory in the manner in which it did, is able to continue its political relationship in a similar way: understanding what needs to be done; making concessions; working on the long-term relationship; as I say clearly, dealing with some of the things that weren't dealt with for many years; and not being in any way vindictive towards those in the Kurdish region. It is essential that that happens.

There is no future if Baghdad politics are influenced by a determination from those who wish to see the Kurdish region punished and who wish to see political advantage from doing so. The Committee will be well aware of the politics of Baghdad and the way in which the Prime Minister has to navigate between different groups, each with different aims, which might be urging the Government to be less conciliatory than we think it ought to be. It is very important that the forces of moderation and of conciliation win the day. That needs both sides to be receptive, but it is really important that that happens. Our sense at the moment is that that is still the case, but we would be deeply concerned if there was strong evidence that electoral success in Baghdad was being created at the expense of damage to the Kurdish region because that is highly risky and will not lead to the resolution and the non-sectarian future of Iraq that Iraq's leaders aspire to when they talk about the future of the country, even though electoral bases are often very sectarian-based.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

So there should not be punishment, and Baghdad and Erbil should continue the progress they made when they drew back from what could have been a terrible confrontation, and to make sure that politics doesn't now create the situation in which a confrontation might re-arise.

Q159 Ian Austin: I understand your desire to smooth things over and all that, but I am concerned that you are downplaying Baghdad's aggression. It is my understanding that nearly 100 Peshmerga were killed in Kirkuk, and that there were substantial clashes on at least two other occasions on the borders of the KRG area, with troops facing each other. Would you agree that the closure of the two airports, extended now for another two months, is a harsh reaction designed to punish the Kurds? It has a particularly severe impact on people who want to see their families or seek medical attention. They have to go through Baghdad, which is obviously much more difficult. My worry about all this is that the lack of criticism from the UK and others may convince Baghdad that it can do anything it likes without censure, and that that leaves the Kurds sort of swinging in the wind, particularly when it seems that the default Baghdad position is centralisation and aggression.

Alistair Burt: We made very clear from the closure of the airports and the border issues that it had to be one of the first things sorted out between the respected parties and we have continued to make that clear right the way through. We call on both sides to find a way to reopen the airports and sort the border problem out as a step forward. It isn't something that is helpful in the area at all and we have been very clear and very public about that. But as far as the ultimate aim—

Q160 Ian Austin: But it is designed purely to punish the Kurds, isn't it? There is no other justification for it.

Alistair Burt: That is a matter for the Iraqi authorities, but it is part of the overall dispute between the two that desperately needs to be settled.

Q161 Ian Austin: Is it something that the UK Government condemns?

Alistair Burt: It is something that the UK Government has suggested needs to be dealt with, to both sides. It is not helpful to the situation that this continues and it should be one of the first things that gets sorted out. It is important to do so.

On the characterisation you went on with after that, to say that Baghdad's intent is a centralised state without autonomy and the like does not reflect the reality, which we wish to see continue, of what the autonomous KRG region has been. This is a matter for Iraqi politics. We would urge, and have urged, Baghdad and Erbil to work on the constitutional relationships within the current constitution and find their way to the resolution of the difficulties between them. It is a matter for them.

We try to highlight the things that are likely to cause damage and conflict. Experience in the region, as we all know, is that if you leave undealt with long-standing grievances and one side takes action against the other that perpetuates or accentuates the grievances—for instance, if the Sunni



HOUSE OF COMMONS

community feel in the future that they are excluded by a Government, as they were some years ago—we all know what the result is of that. People there are living with the results of sectarian bias and difficulties without being engaged in the process of government. People feel excluded and we do not have to do much pointing to the damage that causes. Accordingly, making very clear what the feeling and expression was in the Kurdish region, as exemplified by the referendum—the people there do not need any explanation of how important that is—everything points to a constitutional and political process that seeks to resolve such difficulties and warns of the danger of undue pressure, of actions likely to stir up unrest and cause conflict, and everything militating towards dealing with that. That is the role of outside friends of both sides, to try to encourage people to move away from the things that would cause conflict in the future. We can see the risks and the danger. That is why I answered Ms Clwyd as I did and why we feel our role is to work with both sides, to avoid the sort of issues that have caused such damage in the past.

Q162 Ian Austin: I could understand that if the response from Baghdad to the referendum had been, “Look, here are the benefits of being part of Iraq. We are stronger together,” but that wasn’t the response, was it? The response from Baghdad was to send troops in, close the airport and impose a blockade. So it is difficult to see how the Government can be confident that its approach is going to bear fruit. It seems to me that Baghdad is working hard to justify the Kurdish view that Iraq can never work for the Kurds, even if they have to stay for now.

Alistair Burt: It’s a process. You will know as well as I do that there are many different voices impacting on the Government in Baghdad. There are many who would want Baghdad to take a much harsher approach to the Kurdish region than we have seen. Sadly, there are always those who see advantage in conflict, who see politics as a zero-sum game: you can prove your strength, your ability to command and your authority only if you punish X. We have seen, in the region, the consequences of that. All we can do is warn, and work with those who want to prevent such a thing, but that is not done overnight.

There may be a tendency to see the referendum from just one side here. The Kurdish region put it forward. It did not go the way they planned. They seem to be the aggrieved party. It had a considerable impact in Baghdad as well. They see it as something they warned against, to which they offered an alternative—they offered a way out that was not accepted. That is their interpretation. That is for them to decide. Accordingly, those who feel rebuffed want to make sure it does not happen again. They have a different approach to this. We are very clear: unless people are prepared to put to one side and move on from the referendum, make something of the lack of confrontation afterwards and look towards the unity that Iraq badly needs, which has been so difficult to achieve, then these sectarian conflicts will continue. That is our job. But there are other voices impacting on those in Baghdad. There are people who see an advantage in conflict, disruption and everything else. They are strong voices and the Baghdad Government are aware of this. They have got a path to navigate. It is too



soon. The elections are coming within a matter of months. We all know the pressures that an election causes on all of us, as we get a position to put in place, and everything else; that has got to be recognised too. So, this is a process. I would not expect all the issues between Baghdad and Erbil to have been settled in the handful of weeks since the referendum. They are not going to be; but our advice has got to be consistent and to work. There were opportunities before the referendum. Baghdad offered negotiations and there were chances to move away from it. For whatever reason, they were not taken; but that is done now. Now, how do we make sure that conflict doesn't return, and build on those who want to see a greater degree of consensus? It will not happen overnight, but our view on it should be consistent—and it is.

Q163 Mike Gapes: Let me turn to Syria and the related question of Turkey. The UK Government and Turkey have very different views about the relationships between the Syrian/Kurdish PYD-YPG and the Turkish PKK. We were told by the Foreign Secretary that "we don't share the perspective of the Turkish Government on this matter". The Foreign Office's submission to us says that "developments in Syria will also undoubtedly play into the thinking of the Turkish authorities regarding the possibility of a return to negotiations with the PKK". If we do not share the perspective of the Turkish Government, why should that be the case?

Alistair Burt: The links and the relationships across this area—you will be well aware, as I am—are deep and complex. Countering the PKK is a key driver of Turkish policy at home and abroad. They are very clear. We share condemnation of the PKK: I must make that absolutely clear. Turkey is a key partner on counter-terrorism and we want to work with them. There is no difference of opinion in terms of describing the PKK as a terrorist group from which the Turkish Government face a severe security threat. There was dialogue between them; it ended in 2015. It is the United Kingdom's view that we would like to see that dialogue recommence. That would be a matter for Turkey. Again, if there is to be any solution in the region people have got to find a way back to dialogue, because there can be greater threats in the region, as we have seen, from the combined efforts in relation to fighting Daesh.

Q164 Mike Gapes: How could developments in Syria lead to a return to negotiations with the PKK?

Alistair Burt: Amy—being closer to Turkey than I am.

Amy Clemitchaw: Turkey faces a serious terrorist threat from the PKK. Countering that threat is obviously a high priority for them. Looking across their borders and the instability that they face on their doorstep, clearly their domestic concern around the PKK will be part of their consideration, and legitimately so. That will inform their assessment of how to handle the threats they face.

Mike Gapes: I'm sorry, are you saying that a defeat of the PYD in Syria would be perceived as a weakening of the PKK and, therefore, there would



HOUSE OF COMMONS

be more chance of negotiations? Or that a victory or a strengthening of the PYD and the YPG would actually lead to a negotiation? I am not clear which it is.

Amy Clemitchaw: I do not want to speak for the Turkish Government; I know that you have taken evidence from them as well. All we would say is that Turkey looks at this challenge in a regional context.

Q165 **Mike Gapes:** I understand that, but I was quoting an FCO submission that said that. I was not quoting a Turkish Government document; I was quoting the position of our Government. Are you saying that both of those options would lead to the same outcome? I am unclear as to what you would regard as more likely to facilitate a negotiating position between the Turkish Government and the PKK.

Alistair Burt: An end to the conflict in Syria helps the resolution of all these issues. From what we see at the moment, a resolution that involves a complete victory for one side or the other seems unlikely. That is why we wish to support the efforts Staffan de Mistura is making to bring it to a negotiated end. There are areas controlled by different groups, of course; SDF with their supporters will continue to occupy territory at the moment. If we can get a negotiated end to the conflict, that will enable other issues to be dealt with, which we think will include the opportunity for Turkey to look back and have an opportunity of dialogue with PKK. The longer the conflict goes on, the more difficult that is. Clearly, the situation at the moment is that Turkey will not consider any concession or negotiations with PKK or those they see as affiliated to them while the conflict is going on. That is why a resolution of the conflict in Syria makes a difference to that possibility.

Q166 **Mike Gapes:** What is your assessment of the links of the PYD and YPG with the PKK? Are they ideological, financial, organisational?

Alistair Burt: We are very concerned about possible links. We do not seek any link with the PKK ourselves in any way. We are concerned about the links and we urge the PYD at all times to sever any links they might have with the PKK. Perhaps Amy can describe the nature of the links.

Amy Clemitchaw: Just to step back a bit, the counter-Daesh coalition is working with the Syrian Democratic Forces against Daesh in northern Syria, as the Committee knows and has heard from other witnesses. The YPG units form part of that, alongside Arab units. The YPG is the military wing of the PYD and, as the Minister has said, we are aware of reports of links between the PYD and the PKK. We do not have any contact with the PKK. They are a terrorist organisation; they are proscribed in the UK. We have only very infrequent contact with the PYD. I do not want to comment in detail on how either of those organisations works, given our—

Q167 **Mike Gapes:** We have had evidence given to us by many different witnesses. We have also had written submissions. You referred to reports. It is well known that PKK fighters have fought alongside other Kurds in other parts of the region. It is well known that Öcalan's photograph is displayed on demonstrations, in public spaces and so on.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

These are not just reports. There are links. My question was, what links does the PYD-YPG have with the PKK?

Amy Clemitchaw: As you say—

Mike Gapes: I am asking what your assessment is. Presumably you do an assessment of these things in the Foreign Office because the Turkish Government are constantly sending you, us and everybody else great big tomes of allegations about links. Presumably, when you receive that, you have to assess, “Is this true or untrue?”, and so on. I am asking a simple question. What ideological links are there? What financial links are there? What organisational links are there?

Amy Clemitchaw: Both organisations have a regard for the role of Abdullah Öcalan, as you pointed out. In terms of the existence of those links, it is not right for us to comment.

Q168 **Mike Gapes:** Why is it not right to comment?

Amy Clemitchaw: We are aware of the reports. You—

Q169 **Mike Gapes:** I do not understand why it is not right to comment. You must have a view. Ultimately, given that our NATO partner and ally Turkey takes a very robust position on this, and given that we designate the PKK as a terrorist organisation—the Minister has just repeated that—and the Turkish Government and others, including witnesses we have had, say that there are very close links between people within the YPG and the PKK, why is it not right for you to comment on it?

Alistair Burt: Let me help out. I am not sure quite where you are going with this. We have no contact with the PKK. We are aware of links, as you are aware of links. It is a dominant force in the Syrian Democratic Forces. We are not supplying any equipment or weapons to those forces. They get air support because they are engaged in conflict there that we support. When we talk to the PYD-YPG in relation to this, we say that they should sever links with the PKK. The practicalities are that they are probably not doing that, so those links are there. We know about that, but we do not have any contact with the PKK, and we raise it with the PYD all the time.

Q170 **Mike Gapes:** Sorry. Are there any organisational links between the PYD-YPG and the PKK?

Alistair Burt: They are not the same bodies.

Q171 **Mike Gapes:** I know they are not the same. Are there organisational links? Do they have the same international structure?

Alistair Burt: We will have to come back in more detail.

Q172 **Chair:** We have had several witnesses who have sat before us and said that they are so close as to be indistinguishable.

Alistair Burt: We regard them as separate, and we advise the PYD to sever links with the PKK.

Q173 **Chris Bryant:** Does that not imply that you think they have substantial



HOUSE OF COMMONS

enough links to worry about?

Alistair Burt: They have clearly got links. It is a messy situation on the ground.

Q174 **Mike Gapes:** Okay, let me try a few questions maybe looking at it in a different way. Do weapons and personnel pass between the PKK and the armed affiliates of the PYD?

Alistair Burt: I would be astonished if weapons used in the conflict were not passed between respective parties fighting on the same side, and it would be naïve to think anything different. We do not supply any weapons into this situation.

Q175 **Mike Gapes:** I am not asking whether you supply—

Alistair Burt: Do the weapons transfer between parties that are fighting the same enemy? Of course they do.

Q176 **Mike Gapes:** Turkey says that weapons provided by NATO countries are reaching the PKK, presumably from the other route. Do you agree with that view?

Amy Clemitchaw: We are aware of Turkey's concerns. I am not aware of any UK weapons that have been involved in that.

Q177 **Mike Gapes:** I am not asking you about UK weapons; I am asking about NATO countries' weapons. Weapons from the United States and other countries are given in considerable quantities to people who are fighting in Syria against Assad and Daesh.

Alistair Burt: I am not going to volunteer an answer that I do not know. If you want me to provide an answer to this, I will provide it by letter to the Chair afterwards.

Q178 **Mike Gapes:** All right. If there are connections between the PYD, the YPG and the PKK—you have said that there are connections—

Alistair Burt: We are concerned about links between them.

Q179 **Mike Gapes:** Why have we not designated it as a terrorist organisation?

Alistair Burt: Because we believe they are separate organisations. We have proscribed PKK, but we have not sought to do so with the other. We don't talk about those we don't proscribe; we have to give reasons for bodies that we proscribe, but we don't give reasons for those that we don't.

Mike Gapes: Okay. Final question. Your submission to us, and the questions we have just had, show that there are commonalities between what is happening in southern Turkey and northern Syria. Why do they not fall under one Department and one Minister inside the FCO? Why do we have separate Ministers dealing with that, given that we are dealing with a complex regional issue here?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Alistair Burt: You make a very wise point. Turkey is indeed handled in a different portfolio. I am hoping to go to Ankara quite soon, because the influence of Turkey in relation to Iraq, Iran and Syria is very clear. It is one of those areas that we have to share. It comes under “near east” inside the Department. I cover the middle east and north Africa region.

However, it is not siloed, and it shouldn’t be. I need to make sure that my contacts with Turkish officials and Ministers are clear, because there are areas where I obviously have to have a relationship with them, in terms of what is happening in Syria and the like.

Although you always have to have some lines for who is in charge of what, at the border areas there has to be easy access to information for both Ministers who have a responsibility. We will make sure that that is the case.

Q180 **Mike Gapes:** And the reshuffle hasn’t changed those responsibilities?

Alistair Burt: I’m not aware that Mark has shuffled Turkey over to me. It is a good point, but as I say, there are a number of places where you have to have contacts outside your portfolio. The portfolios are not that rigid.

There is no issue about me going to Ankara and talking to officials and Ministers there, or seeing them when they are; when any of us are at conferences to talk about the region, whether going to Geneva to talk about Syria or meeting representatives from other areas, you just do, ordinarily. The fact that they are in different portfolios in the FCO shouldn’t make a difference, and we should make sure that there are no artificial boundaries, and that we know enough of what we need to know to answer questions.

Q181 **Ann Clwyd:** Minister, since you will be going to Ankara, you will of course know that, until comparatively recently, the Turkish Government were talking to the PKK. It was only when, as I understand it, Erdoğan switched his attention elsewhere that the PKK was no longer somebody for the Turks to talk to. Will you be raising that issue with him?

Alistair Burt: We are quite clear about the nature of the PKK. Since the breakdown of the ceasefire, which lasted two and a half years, in July 2015, more than 1,000 Turkish security force personnel have been killed by the PKK, and more than 400 civilians have been killed in PKK bombings and clashes. We condemn unreservedly PKK violence.

Of course, we would urge the situation pre the breakdown in the dialogue. That is a matter very much for the Turkish Government. Of course, we would all like to see an opportunity reopen to try to settle the conflict between them, which has led to such loss of life, so it will certainly be raised. It is a matter for the Turkish Government, but we are very clear about the current position of the PKK, and clearly that has to change if there is to be meaningful dialogue and an end to the violence.

Q182 **Ann Clwyd:** I am sure you would agree that, whether we recognise it or not, an autonomous Kurdish-led region has emerged, de facto, in



HOUSE OF COMMONS

northern Syria. Will the UK engage with it, ignore it, or what?

Alistair Burt: We support Staffan de Mistura's work in the Geneva process, which is the only way forward of resolving these issues in Syria. We do not support bilateral opportunities for countries to start being engaged with different areas, and we support the territorial integrity of Syria after this desperate civil war and conflict perpetuated by President Assad, largely against his own people. The constitutional resolution of this has to be handled by just one body, and there has to be one process. That is the Geneva process that Staffan de Mistura follows, backed by UN Security Council resolutions, and that is what we shall support.

Q183 **Royston Smith:** Minister, has the PYD been intolerant of political opposition?

Alistair Burt: I don't know the answer to that question.

Amy Clemitchaw: The PYD is playing a role on the ground in northern Syria now, as the Committee knows, and what is important in the way that is done is that it does provide legitimate local governance. Obviously that needs to involve all the communities living in that region, and any contact we have with them through the coalition would be to urge that approach.

Alistair Burt: Are you talking in particular about Raqqa?

Q184 **Royston Smith:** In general. As to the answer just given by Miss Clemitchaw, do you get a sense that they are intolerant of political opposition, if we were opposed to them?

Alistair Burt: We want to see an inclusive political process in the region, and there are aspects of PYD activity that cause us concern in relation to that, yes.

Q185 **Royston Smith:** And that is PYD?

Alistair Burt: Yes.

Q186 **Royston Smith:** You have talked to PYD, although, you say, not a great deal. What other Kurdish groups in northern Syria does the FCO have a dialogue with?

Alistair Burt: PYD-PG is the main Kurdish actor on the ground. There is the Kurdish National Council as part of the moderate opposition. So it is predominantly them: PYD-YPG and the Kurdish National Council. There are a number of other actors.

Q187 **Royston Smith:** The FCO says that conversations are held about, presumably, the future of Syria. Can the future be successfully negotiated without the diplomatic inclusion of the PYD?

Alistair Burt: The process by which Staffan de Mistura gathers the voices that he needs at Geneva does include Kurdish representatives. They are included in the peace negotiations through the Kurdish National Council's participation in the High Negotiations Committee and then the Syrian



HOUSE OF COMMONS

negotiation committee. So the short answer to your question is no, there will not be a settlement in the region unless all voices are heard. I am quite sure that the UN envoy is clear about that.

Royston Smith: The PYD says that it has been excluded from the process.

Alistair Burt: Again, that is a matter for Staffan de Mistura to decide upon.

Q188 **Royston Smith:** From the FCO's point of view—the UK position—do you think that the PYD need to be involved in any diplomatic solution? They say they have been excluded. Is it then your submission that the FCO would be pushing for their inclusion in any future diplomatic conversations from which they currently feel excluded?

Alistair Burt: Two things: clearly, the FCO's position would be that you would want everyone that has an appropriate say to have that opportunity. But there have to be parameters, because there are people whose views are such that they cannot be included in peace negotiations. This has got to be a matter for Syrians to decide and for the UN to organise so they are aware of this. You spoke earlier about concerns about the intolerance of certain groups. If you are going to get a peace negotiation to work, then everybody has to be prepared to bring something to it. That will require a tolerance of others and a recognition of others. If that is not possible, then you cannot have the negotiations. We trust the UN envoy to have the same relation to this, bearing in mind all the information that is available to him about the respective views of the parties.

Q189 **Mike Gapes:** The Foreign Office submission to us says that the UK has provided "military support" for the Syrian democratic forces. It does not specify what that "military support" is. We know that the United States has been giving military hardware and a significant amount of support to the YPG. As you have already commented on, the YPG is the largest component of the Syrian democratic forces. What exactly is the "military support" that the UK has been giving and to whom have we been giving it?

Alistair Burt: The global coalition provides military air support to the Syrian democratic forces in the fight against Daesh. The US is leading international efforts to support the SDF, and they provide ammunition and other equipment. The UK does not provide weapons or ammunition to anyone in Syria, as I said earlier. So it is the air support provided by the global coalition—nothing more.

Q190 **Mike Gapes:** So we haven't provided any weaponry at all?

Alistair Burt: No.

Q191 **Mike Gapes:** I can recall in a previous Committee receiving various letters from the Foreign Office about equipment of some kind that was being given to opposition forces in Syria—



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Alistair Burt: I remember all this—non-lethal equipment.

Q192 **Mike Gapes:** I know it was non-lethal and it included various things like chemical protection outfits and some kind of medical assistance and tents—

Alistair Burt: IED protection and things like that.

Q193 **Mike Gapes:** Can you be more detailed? Have we given that kind of material to the Syrian democratic forces?

Alistair Burt: I know we have not provided any military hardware or weapons. I do remember the conversations about this many years ago, because with the former Foreign Secretary, William Hague, we had a lot of conversations at the early stage of this process about what support could be given, and the Americans were more forward-leaning than we were. But we were very clear that we could not and should not provide weapons in this situation; we wouldn't have found it appropriate to do so and we got no sense from Parliament that that would be right. However, we did supply the hardware that you are talking about, in terms of the non-lethal equipment for protection. As far as I'm aware, in relation to the SDF we have not—not even the equipment you are talking about.

Q194 **Mike Gapes:** Have we given them any money—any funding?

Alistair Burt: No. It's global air support; it's not through finance or anything like that.

Q195 **Mike Gapes:** All right. The Foreign Office draws a clear distinction between the SDF and the YPG, but we have had numerous submissions from witnesses who have said to us that the YPG is the dominant force within the SDF. Why do you continue to make this distinction between them? Is it simply because of the problem that we have already discussed with regard to Turkey, or are there other reasons?

Alistair Burt: I think it's because we're aware of a number of—I mean, there are many groups operating, as the Committee knows very well. And we recognise the fact that the YPG has a significant presence in the SDF, but there are other groups involved as well. So, I think that's why we make the distinction. We don't regard the SDF as a YPG force, but we accept entirely what common sense tells us about the influence and significance that they have, although they are not the only people there.

Q196 **Mike Gapes:** But it is true that the YPG, through the SDF, are working in alliance with us as part of the international coalition—

Alistair Burt: That is right. As part of the international coalition, we support the SDF.

Q197 **Mike Gapes:** And that our air strikes and the air operations that you have already referred to do benefit, have benefited and are benefiting the YPG on the ground in their fight inside Syria.

Alistair Burt: If it is a fight against Daesh forces, then that is important, and important for the United Kingdom to support.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q198 Ian Austin: We talked about mediation before. Following on from this exchange, is the UK prepared to offer formal mediation between central Governments and Kurdish groups in the region more generally as a way of preventing future conflicts?

Alistair Burt: When you say “in the region more generally”, do you mean cross-border—

Ian Austin: With the other Kurdish groups, yes, and not just the KRG, who we talked about earlier, but other Kurdish groups. Are we prepared to offer mediation with them?

Alistair Burt: Again, I’m not sure that mediation is the right word. Mediation implies a position of difference between two different sides where there is middle ground to be sought and work to be done to create a process to resolve difficulties. If we are dealing with other sovereign Governments, again I am not sure that it is the place of the United Kingdom to offer that sort of mediation. I imagine that sovereign Governments would be quite resistant. If, however, it is a question of the United Kingdom using its diplomatic influence, as we have been trying to in the region for some time, to point to those areas where conflict might arise, and to offer advice about how conflict might be scaled back and about institution building, non-sectarianism and things that can be done to prevent communities feeling excluded or being pushed towards an area of conflict, absolutely. In future, I think that that will be a more important role in the region for the United Kingdom than anything else. When I look at the joint offer that DFID and the FCO can make, conflict resolution should be right up there. In Yemen, dealing on the one hand with those involved in the conflict and on the other hand with those who are the victims of the conflict, and supplying humanitarian aid, you would want to do everything you could to prevent the issue arising in the first place.

The Kurdish issue throughout the region is very live, obvious and clear, but almost each part of it has not only a series of interests held in common, such as the need to push back on Daesh and the like, but, because of the territorial nature of the place, individual issues—with Turkey, the Syrian regime, Iran, which we have spoken about very little, or Iraq—which are individual to them and, I imagine, fiercely protected by the various states. Probably, people in the area might be cautious about a linkage between all the various groups and about treating them in some way as acting together. Because of the nature of the relationship between the Kurdish groups themselves, I think there is also resistance among them—they have different interests and objectives.

Within the sense of these issues being unlikely to go away, accordingly, in what can be done—what states outside can do—to help people move towards resolving their conflicts, I would hope that the United Kingdom could indeed offer and play a part.

Chair: Are there any final points to make?

Q199 Chris Bryant: I want to ask one question. Minister, you talked earlier



HOUSE OF COMMONS

about visits that you were hoping to do to Ankara and so on. What is the pressure at the moment, bearing in mind the arithmetic in the Commons and the lack of co-operation between Whips Offices and stuff? What are the pressures like? Is it more difficult now than you have known previously, and is it hurting our ability—the FCO’s ability—to get the point across or not?

Alistair Burt: On behalf of colleagues, I would be grateful if there was a little more leeway. At present what we do is that we go out at the end of the week. Because we have managed to make Thursdays as far as possible one-liners, we can get out on a Thursday morning. In some countries of course, Friday is a non-day, so for me it is often going on a Friday and then using the Saturday and particularly the Sunday to be in a place, returning overnight for Monday. Is it impossible? No, it’s not. Is it more difficult than it was? Yes. If there were a little bit of flexibility all round for Ministers in the Foreign Office and the Department for International Development and other Ministers who need to travel abroad, that would help, but we can manage. I understand the parliamentary arithmetic and the fact that parties must do the jobs they are there to do, so I am not making a particular plea, but thank you for recognising it.

If there are specific conferences on particular days that we need to get to, and there are some on a Wednesday, I would want to be able to go without feeling that it was impossible to do so. For routine opportunities to see our counterparts, I do not mind using the weekends—I think that is part of our responsibility—but if on occasion there was something really important that we had to get to, I would like to feel that the relationship between the Whips Offices would allow a little bit of understanding, so that Ministers could go and attend to something vital in the UK’s interest. I am not aware that anything has been prevented in such a circumstance, but it is helpful that the Committee is aware of it.

Q200 **Chris Bryant:** I think Select Committees are having the same issues. It is a bit odd if the Foreign Affairs Committee can never actually be anywhere foreign.

Alistair Burt: As you have a nice balance, there ought to be a way.

Q201 **Chris Bryant:** No, it does not make any difference. I just wonder whether one of the things that Parliament could do, as other Parliaments have done, is have Committee weeks, which are weeks when there will not be votes. I just wonder whether that would be a means of—

Alistair Burt: This is beyond the remit of the office.

Chris Bryant: Go on. You’ve survived again!

Alistair Burt: Yes, I know. I welcome anything that makes it easier for us and our officials to do the job we need to do. If we need to go to certain places at key times, I hope we are able to do it one way or another. If there were set Committee weeks that made it easier for people to be abroad, of course that would help. We use half-terms and recesses for that: Ministers assume that if there is a break in the parliamentary



HOUSE OF COMMONS

proceedings for a recess, we do not stop. We always use that as travel time. The easier it is to do that in term time, the better, but the House has its pressures, particularly at the moment, and we understand that.

Q202 **Chair:** Is there anything further?

Alistair Burt: I'm sorry if, on part of this, my knowledge was less complete than I wanted it to be. We will go over the record and make sure that in places where I do not feel there was a sufficient response, we will write to you, Chair.

Chair: That is exactly what I was going to ask, so thank you very much for the offer. We are extremely grateful for your time and for the frankness with which you all answered, so thank you very much.