

Foreign Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Responsibility to Protect and Humanitarian Intervention, HC 1005

Tuesday 26 June 2018

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Members present: Tom Tugendhat (Chair); Ian Austin; Ann Clwyd; Mike Gapes; Stephen Gethins; Priti Patel; Andrew Rosindell; Mr Bob Seely; Royston Smith.

Questions 19 - 80

Witnesses

I: Dr Farouq al Habib, Director, Mayday Rescue Foundation; Laila Alodaat, Middle East and North Africa Director, Women's International League for Peace and Freedom; and Haid Haid, Research Fellow at the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, King's College London.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Dr al Habib, Laila Alodaat, and Haid Haid.

Chair: Welcome to this afternoon's session of the Foreign Affairs Committee. Thank you very much for coming, Ms Alodaat, Mr Haid and Dr al Habib. We will try to target questions to you as individuals. If there is something you particularly want to add to somebody else's answer, please do so, but do not feel that you have to repeat yourself if somebody else has already covered the area.

Q19 **Royston Smith:** Which regions of Syria currently have the greatest humanitarian needs? Which parties to the conflict are active in those areas?

Dr al Habib: As of today, the most strategic situation for us is in the south of Syria, in Daraa and Quneitra. The Russians and the regime have launched a new military campaign against the south, and they have just announced that the previous de-escalation agreement has ended. We are now dealing with tens of thousands of civilians being displaced while the Jordanian borders are closed. The shelling continues without any possibility of evacuating wounded people or providing protection for those who are stuck in those areas.

Haid Haid: To add to what my colleague Farouq mentioned, it is important to highlight that the humanitarian situation in Syria is quite fluid. What happens in different areas depends mainly on the military/security situation there. Farouq mentioned Daraa. That is the area where most of the attacks are happening. The situation is therefore complicated.

If you look at what has happened in other areas, a few months ago, for example, rural Damascus was the main area targeted by the regime. We are talking mainly about humanitarian needs being impacted by the military and security situation, but there are other needs that are more difficult to observe. For example, most of the people who live in regime-controlled areas have similar humanitarian needs. Their access to those needs depends mainly on where they live and to what extent the regime considers those people to be loyal or not.

Another issue relates to the legislation that the regime has been trying to use in order to consolidate its power not only over territories recently captured from other groups but also property in those territories. Many people have been talking about law No. 10, which allows the regime to confiscate property over which the owners fail to prove ownership. This is another humanitarian issue that is not widely reported.

In general, the situation in Daraa is quite complicated. On the other side, in northern Syria, during the first three months of 2018, around 1 million people were displaced to that area from other regions. The situation there is complicated, but we do not hear about it in the news because there are



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no attacks there right now, although the situation might change after Daraa if the regime decides to carry out similar attacks in other areas.

Q20 Royston Smith: This is a follow-up question to Dr al Habib. Has the work of the White Helmets changed since they were formed in 2013?

Dr al Habib: As my colleague Haid said, the situation in Syria is fluid. The context is different from one region to another, and that affects the type of activities that the White Helmets have to conduct in each area. In areas where the regime and its allies focus their attacks, the first priority for the teams of White Helmets is search and rescue and firefighting to save the lives of the people. In other areas, where there is no shelling or a lower level of shelling, they focus on providing services to local communities and doing area recovery activities.

The main challenges that the White Helmets face are related, first, to the deliberate targeting of medical teams in general, and the White Helmets in particular, through double-tap attacks, when the regime bombs the same area again and again when rescue workers arrive. There is also the disinformation campaign, led mainly by Russian propaganda, to undermine the credibility and legitimacy of the White Helmets and all civil society groups proposing a different narrative in Syria.

Of course, the chemical attacks have a very damaging impact on the spirits of the people. It is a weapon of fear. People tend to hide in basements, for example, so the regime uses tactical chlorine bombs. As you know, chlorine is heavier than air, so it affects people who are hiding down in basements. They have to run away. That was the most effective tactic by the regime to clear neighbourhoods when its ground forces were not able to take over.

Q21 Mr Seely: I understand that some hospitals were hit in Daraa on Sunday. Is that correct?

Dr al Habib: Yes.

Q22 Mr Seely: Was it just one hospital?

Dr al Habib: One hospital in Busra Al Hariri plus two White Helmet centres. Today, we lost our colleague Abdulhadi al Hariri, who was killed this morning. He was in the White Helmets team. Two days ago, we also lost another colleague, Saif al Qaderi. It is obvious to everybody that it is deliberate targeting.

Q23 Mr Seely: Of hospitals and the White Helmets?

Dr al Habib: Of hospitals and the White Helmets teams.

Q24 Mr Seely: Hospitals are clearly being targeted because they are centres for humanitarian support. Are they being hit by Syrian barrel bombs, or is it the Russian air force?

Dr al Habib: Both. It depends on the situation. We have witnessed and documented many incidents of bombing hospitals in northern Syria and in



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the south. Some of them were random shelling by barrel bombs as a kind of collective punishment. It was obvious that some of them were deliberately targeted. At least one of them was targeted by Russian air strikes in northern Hama.

Q25 Mr Seely: Was that the one where David Nott's Skype call to the doctors was intercepted at both ends, and they used the Skype call to location-find a hospital underground, or was that at another location?

Dr al Habib: I am not sure.

Q26 Priti Patel: I have a series of questions about the humanitarian situation. In the light of what you have just told us about the tactics used within the regime, which we know about, the suffering they are imposing and the level of displacement that is taking place, is there any organisation or country in the world that has a full assessment of the humanitarian needs in terms of the level of suffering? We see all sorts of numbers. The United Nations says that it needs \$3.51 billion to fund the humanitarian response plan for this year. As of this month it has only received something like 27% of that. Who is co-ordinating the humanitarian response? How is humanitarian aid and support being co-ordinated to get into some of these really challenging areas?

I also want to ask about the neighbouring countries. You mentioned Jordan. The border of Jordan is closed. We famously know about the berm. What is going on there? Are neighbouring countries stepping up in the way countries such as the United Kingdom have funded them to step up and provide the humanitarian support that they should be providing?

Dr al Habib: Everybody agrees that the volume of the humanitarian crisis in Syria is now so huge and so big that it is far beyond the capacity of any region, country or local organisation to meet or handle. In principle, all the neighbouring countries state that they are not able to host more refugees and they do not have enough resources to provide more assistance. They call for more aid from the UK, from the US and from other Governments to support them in handling the refugee crisis. Some of those countries deal with refugees with dignity and protect their lives. Others put huge pressures on them to force them to go back and face greater threats inside Syria.

Regarding assessment, excuse me, but I have to say this. We, as Syrians, feel so frustrated by the many requests for assessments. We believe that the catastrophe is obvious to everybody, no matter how much time we spend on the bureaucratic systems of the UN and international NGOs, filling in questionnaires for them and doing surveys on the ground with people to assess their needs, and following policies that change all the time and the number of IDPs in each area, who move all the time.

This just tends to be a big machine that wastes the time and effort of people who are exhausted. We look to our friends and Governments, especially the UK, to deal with the roots of the problem in order to end



the catastrophe in Syria. It does not matter how many millions of pounds you spend of your taxpayers' money, it will not end if you do not deal with the roots of the problem. As long as there is bombing of people and as long as there is a regime that uses collective punishment and starvation as a weapon of war, the humanitarian crisis will continue. You will keep paying money without solving it.

Haid Haid: The challenges in assessing needs on the ground are limited to two main issues. The first is that most of the humanitarian organisations and actors do not have direct access to people on the ground, although some of them are based in Damascus. For example, the regime does not allow them to cross to rebel-controlled areas to assess the situation on the ground.

In rebel-controlled areas, the security situation does not allow many organisations to send staff there, even from the neighbouring countries, because there is a high risk of one of them getting killed. This is why they mainly depend on a network of local groups and activists who are trying to the best of their ability to assess the situation, but they are not professional.

The second main factor is that the situation on the ground keeps changing all the time. As I mentioned earlier, in a matter of three months around 1 million new IDPs moved to northern Syria. By the time the previous report was submitted, it was already outdated because there was a new crisis, and that new crisis is not well reported.

Q27 **Priti Patel:** I have a final question on assessments and support, for want of a better term. If there are assessments being endlessly requested, I am assuming there is very little flexibility in the aid co-ordination and the people requesting the information to fully understand changing needs, and the speed at which the needs and requirements of people on the ground are changing too.

Dr al Habib: There is too much bureaucracy. I can give you an example. Five or six weeks ago, the regime took over northern Homs in the centre of Syria, which was an area under siege for almost five years. After Eastern Ghouta, the regime focused its efforts on it and the opposition troops there surrendered. Some people were displaced and some people had to hide.

We know many local Syrian NGOs who were working in those besieged areas. They were funded by DFID and other humanitarian funds through international NGOs. Those international NGOs have a bureaucratic system of different hubs—an office in Beirut working in the centre, an office in Amman working in the south and an office in Turkey, in Gaziantep, working in the north.

Imagine an emergency situation where many of the people from those besieged areas were displaced, including many humanitarian workers who were displaced as well. The funding that was pledged to the



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community through field teams was not flexible because of the internal bureaucracy in big international NGOs. They could not respond to the needs of IDPs who were displaced to the north. It takes several months of new proposals and co-ordination mechanisms. In the end, people did not get assistance at the time of the emergency, despite its being an emergency fund from DFID.

Q28 **Priti Patel:** Is the aid getting through?

Dr al Habib: Yes, some. It depends on the area. In areas close to borders, if the Government at the other side of the border is co-operative, it will allow aid. In other cases, it does not happen. Some areas that received UN aid through the coastline operation from Damascus faced huge difficulties. In all documented cases by the UN, medical equipment and medicine was taken at the regime's checkpoint. There are still difficulties with access, but it is relatively better in the areas close to the Turkish or Jordanian borders.

Q29 **Mr Seely:** The problem with UN or international aid is that it has become very politicised, hasn't it? In opposition areas, the aid is effectively getting stripped out by the Assad regime and what is meant for opposition areas does not get delivered. Is that correct?

Dr al Habib: In many cases, the UN aid is used as a weapon of war. The regime cut supplies and prevented the convoys for a long time. Later on, you might think it accepts because of pressure from the Security Council, but at the same time the Russians send their committees to negotiate with the people. They tell the Security Council that they now allow humanitarian convoys to enter, but at the same time they negotiate with the people and blackmail them. For example, to allow food to enter, they force them to raise the flag of the Syrian regime or a picture of Bashar al-Assad.

Q30 **Mr Seely:** You either starve or you accept the Syrian regime.

Dr al Habib: Yes. They starve people before they allow the UN convoys to go in. When they allow them, they use them to get political gains.

Haid Haid: The system inside Syria is flawed. For any international humanitarian organisation to be able to operate inside Syria, the regime imposes restrictions on, first of all, who they are able to work through. They have to work through vetted local partners who are mostly loyal to the regime. Some of them are even affiliated with armed military groups such as the Al-Bustan organisation, which is owned by a cousin of Bashar al-Assad, the President.

The other restriction is not to allow those actors to provide aid to rebel-controlled areas. The regime are able to control who they work with. They are able to control who the recipients of the aid are, and they are able to restrict the number of areas where they can operate. All those restrictions are why many Syrian and other humanitarian organisations and observers have been saying from the beginning that UN aid in Syria



is being politicised. In one way or another, it is being mobilised to empower the regime and allow it to sustain itself for a long time.

Q31 **Mr Seely:** Laila, are women disproportionately impacted by this conflict, and, if so, how?

Laila Alodaat: Definitely. WILPF—the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom—has done some research. We have worked with Syrian women’s organisations to look at how the armed conflict is impacting them and how to address it. Our findings are in three areas.

The first is that the proliferation of arms and the failure of the rule of law had a huge impact on women. Their spaces and their ability to move have been limited. Any rights they have are severely impacted by the availability of arms, by the use of arms and what spaces are left to them in this situation. That is not changing.

The second issue is the techniques used in the conflict. Farouq mentioned some of them: systematic targeting of healthcare and educational facilities, and extensive use of explosive weapons in highly populated areas. All of those have a particularly gendered impact. I have a few examples. Women’s inability to reach healthcare facilities has an extra impact on them.

Q32 **Mr Seely:** Is that because they are looking after their children?

Laila Alodaat: Not all. Some of it is to do with their reproductive functions. If women could make it to healthcare facilities, 80% of deaths through pregnancy and delivery could be prevented. They are blocked by being targeted or by the use of explosive weapons that deny them access to the facilities. When there is so much load on healthcare facilities, usually the maternity wards are the first to be closed down. There is an assumption that they are not needed and that the more active war injuries should take priority.

The third thing is that the length and exacerbation of violence has had an impact on pre-existing inequalities, both legal and in practice. For example, the huge displacement meant that Syrian women who are not allowed to pass their nationality ended up in dire situations because they needed to flee violence and go to another country. Sometimes they and their children have different nationalities and different visa requirements. The ability to flee to a country is very different for them, which has sometimes meant that they could not pass and so on.

Their ability to get documentation in refugee-hosting countries and in displacement becomes a serious issue. Sometimes, because of pre-existing inequalities in guardianship and so on, they do not have much authority over themselves or their families. This has become huge in the conflict situation.

Q33 **Ian Austin:** I would like to ask for your views on what happened in 2013. What effect did the failure to respond to the first use of chemical



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weapons in Syria in 2013 have on the conflict in Syria?

Haid Haid: The first obvious impact is that it allowed the regime not only to continue to use chemical attacks but to increase the frequency and amplify the scale of those attacks. That has been quite clear in different reports, and a recent one, published by Human Rights Watch in April this year, mentioned that of the attacks they were able to verify between August 2013—the big attack that took place that year—and March 2018 they were able to count 85 attacks. The regime is responsible for the vast majority of those attacks. Other attacks were carried out by ISIS, and the perpetrators for the remaining attacks are still unidentified, but clearly the regime is responsible for the vast majority of attacks.

That is only on the chemical attack level. In other types of attack, the regime has been able to use different types of conventional and unconventional weapons to increase the suffering of civilians in different places, and to use unconventional weapons such as starvation and systematic targeting of civilian facilities to force civilians to submit. It allows the regime to increase the level and scale of violence in different areas and to use that with impunity.

It also allowed radical groups to use chemical attacks as a recruiting tool. They say that Assad used a prohibited weapon that America and many others say was a red line that they would react to when it happened. When it happened, they did not react to it, and the groups say, "That means they do not care about you; we are the only ones who are able to protect you." The capacity of radical groups inside Syria increased dramatically after 2013. That was a turning point.

Q34 **Ian Austin:** Did you say there was recruitment by radical groups?

Haid Haid: Yes. Even for civilians, it was a disappointing moment. I was in Syria after that attack took place. I was there when President Obama was still saying, "We will carry out strikes in Syria." During the time I spent there, it was clear that the regime was terrified. The regime stopped many of its air strikes. It had to move most of its weapons from one area to another. Many of its military officers left their positions and went to the countryside. They were terrified in general, and that led to a significant decrease in the level of attacks by the regime on civilians. People were quite hopeful. Then when the Americans decided not to attack, the regime immediately increased its attacks on civilians. That is when people felt that the international community in general, and the Americans in particular, had abandoned them.

Q35 **Mr Seely:** This is very important. The price of inaction at that point was twofold; it was to increase the regime's willingness to kill civilians and to increase the attractiveness of radical groups.

Haid Haid: Exactly. It also allowed the regime's allies to increase their level of participation and involvement inside and outside Syria. For example, the Russians intervened in Syria in September 2015. The Iranians dramatically increased their involvement and their support for



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foreign militias fighting alongside the regime after that. It impacted on the willingness of the regime's supporters to become more involved.

Q36 **Mr Seely:** It made it more attractive and less dangerous.

Haid Haid: Exactly.

Q37 **Mr Seely:** The reason I ask is that the price of inaction is something that is not factored in. I am aware that our Chairman has written on that as well, which is why I raise it now as a specific issue. The price of inaction was significant, and you think severe, to the conflict in Syria.

Haid Haid: Exactly.

Dr al Habib: I would like to highlight two points. First, we believe that the impact of inaction goes beyond Syria. It is not only inside Syria. It encouraged Russia to interfere in Ukraine. It will encourage all autocrats and dictators all over the world to feel impunity and that they can do whatever they want, even using chemical weapons and committing all kinds of atrocities, without any consequences. This is damaging to the whole human rights system all over the world, not only in Syria.

The driving and fuelling factor in extremism in the region is the continuous bloodshed and killing by the regime itself. The second factor is the failure of the international community, especially countries that have responsibility to protect civilians, to honour their commitments. Crossing the red line in 2013 was a key message to the extremists in Syria, as is the failure of the de-escalation agreement in south Syrian now. The extremists always accuse the moderate groups inside Syria of being agents of the west or betrayers, or that they listen to the advice of western countries more than listening to the voices of their people who suffer.

On all occasions, moderate groups who want to distance themselves from the extremist groups face that argument. What happens is that the extremist groups use that failure and that inaction to say to the people, "Look, those who listen to the liberal world will fail you. We are the only ones who will stay and try to protect you." That is how the extremists work.

Q38 **Priti Patel:** You have just outlined three consequences of failure and inaction. To take your point a bit further, do you think, looking back at 2013, that inaction led, effectively, to a breakdown in the international community and the United Nations around the whole principle of the responsibility to protect? Clearly, extremism and expansionism flourished afterwards and the international community did not intervene, and has since just been focused on humanitarian aid.

Dr al Habib: Yes, of course; plus hundreds, maybe millions, of refugees would not have been displaced if something had been done in 2013. Many lives were lost.



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Laila Alodaat: I want to add something on the use of chemical weapons and what can actually be done. Haid mentioned the 85 attacks that have happened since 2013. That research has been collected by seven resources, many of them related to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons and the joint investigation mission with the UN. Unfortunately in 2017, the mandate of the mission was stopped due to a veto.

Q39 **Mike Gapes:** By Russia.

Laila Alodaat: By the Russians. The trend in the Security Council now is that 12 resolutions on Syria have been vetoed by Russia. Ten of them were proposed by the UK, particularly on this investigation mission, which unfortunately means that we will not now be able to attribute the chemical weapons that have continued since 2017.

As we speak, 192 states are gathering in The Hague to look at the chemical weapons convention and what can be done, taking this failure into consideration.

Q40 **Chair:** You are aware that the Foreign Secretary is in The Hague at the moment arguing for the OPCW to name perpetrators.

Laila Alodaat: Exactly; to name perpetrators and to create alternative methods to face this failure. This is a very good opportunity, but it could be taken further, into other measures that are failing through lack of political will and international deadlock.

Q41 **Mike Gapes:** On that point, perhaps you are more up to date than I am. I saw a report earlier today that the Russians were in a very isolated position, and that only nine countries of the 192 you mentioned had lined up with them in the meeting. Is that correct?

Laila Alodaat: That is correct, but unfortunately it will not be reflected in the Security Council.

Q42 **Ann Clwyd:** Following up on that, when I took a group of Members of Parliament to see the Russian ambassador during the battle in Aleppo, I asked him why the Russians were bombing the hospitals. His answer was, "They weren't hospitals." I said, "What were they?" He said, "They were jihadist training camps." What would you say to that?

Laila Alodaat: So many bad things are happening in Syria. One particular characteristic of the Syrian conflict is the amount of documentation that took place. Despite the systematic denial of access to the commission of inquiry and other UN-mandated bodies and international organisations working on documentation, we have a huge body of documentation. There is a proven trend of systematic human rights violations and crimes against humanity. This work has pushed the UN to look at the commission of inquiry findings and now to look at the "IIIM," the new mechanism for identifying perpetrators.



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Such arguments are used all the time. We do not know who was behind every attack that happens in Syria because we are denied access. Most internationally mandated fact-finding missions are denied access, but we know there is enough to prove a trend. Hospitals have been targeted. They are targeted systematically and they are worsening the humanitarian situation, to the extent that it is creating one of the biggest displacements and refugee influxes for a very long time.

Haid Haid: It is important to highlight that Russian intervention in Syria did not only allow the regime to continue to target civilian facilities, such as hospitals, schools and markets; the Russians themselves did that. One clear example is what happened in my home town in November 2017. All the evidence points to the fact that the Russians were the ones who carried out three air attacks on a civilian market in my home town and killed around 69 civilians. There were no military bases there. The three attacks were at the beginning of the market, at the end of the market and in the middle of the market, to cause as many casualties among civilians as possible.

There is much proven evidence and many reports documenting that the Russians directly target civilian facilities. What we are missing so far is action on the reports we have been collecting for years and years, and to hold the Russians accountable for their actions, not only in Syria but elsewhere. The other issue that the UK and European countries can invest in is to start saying to them, "You always say that this attack was not done by you." Those countries have the capacity to provide intelligence information to human rights organisations and quickly conclude who is responsible for attacks. That kind of co-operation is not happening at the moment, and it is one of the areas that could be improved. The UK should be in a good position to lead such efforts.

Q43 Ian Austin: It is a really interesting issue. In the west, it is very clear to people what the impact is when western countries intervene, but the impact of not intervening is much less understood. People think, "It's nothing to do with us and it's a long way away." What is your view on that?

In the west, how well understood is the impact of not intervening? What is the cost of the failure to uphold the red lines that were established? Do you think that is well understood here? Do you think people pay sufficient attention to it? What more do you think could be done to draw it to people's understanding? When we intervened, we had a big Chilcot inquiry that lasted for years. When we do not intervene, we just walk away.

Haid Haid: First of all, decision makers in Government are well informed about the cost of their lack of action inside Syria. I have been meeting different decision makers in different countries for the past few years, and it is clear that they are well informed about the cost of their lack of action.



Q44 **Ian Austin:** The Governments?

Haid Haid: I am talking about the Government now. They say, "We cannot do anything about it," which is not true, but that is a different discussion. When it comes to the public in general, many of them are aware that the situation is getting worse inside Syria. It is easy to link the lack of action in protecting civilians on the ground and preventing the use of chemical attacks. All those incidents are clear indications that the situation is getting worse and not better because of lack of action, but not everybody is interested in saying, "Yes, we know that the situation got worse because we did not intervene." That means they have to confront the fact that they were able to do something about it but they did not, and they are still not willing to do anything about it right now.

As you know, it is a difficult position when people do not want to confront something they can do, and they are still doing nothing about it. In general, all the reports and all the news show that the situation is only getting worse because there is no one to stop Assad and the attacks and crime committed by Assad. In that sense, again they understand it, but the technicalities of how it might happen would be a different discussion.

Q45 **Ann Clwyd:** How would you describe the UN's role in alleviating the humanitarian situation on the ground?

Haid Haid: I have previously addressed this issue, but I will give a comprehensive analysis of the situation. For five years, I worked for UNHCR, the UN agency responsible for refugees in Syria, so I know about the way they function. I also know about the way they were allowed to function inside Syria, even before the conflict started there.

In general, the UN and other partners have been able to provide aid for almost 6 million people a day. That is a big number. They have been trying to provide as much help as possible, but that does not change the fact that the way they are doing it is wrong.

One clear issue is that they are allowing the regime to dictate who is eligible to receive aid and who is eligible to become a partner to the UN agency. Those are decisions that should not be dictated by a conflict party. To be neutral is the main aim of all humanitarian agencies, and to provide aid to all people despite their political views, religious views or background. The UN has failed to do that by allowing one party to the conflict to dictate how aid is being distributed and to whom.

I am not only talking about cases that are difficult to explain or research. I am talking about clear local partners owned by the cousin of President Bashar al-Assad himself; the Al-Bustan organisation is directly affiliated to an armed group that has the same title. Why would the UN allow that to happen? Why will the UN not use its leverage in Syria and its principles and values to say, "We don't want to do this; we have a mandate and we will do that despite the restrictions imposed by you"? They have big leverage in Syria. The only problem is that they are not willing to use that



leverage. They always say, "We are in a very difficult situation and we are afraid that if we say no the regime will kick us out of the country." There is a broad spectrum of options between saying no and saying yes.

Q46 Mr Seely: Are we not calling out the human rights abuses because Russia is a UN Security Council power? It is almost like it is riding so roughshod over international norms that we do not really know how to deal with it? That is my take on this.

Haid Haid: Yes, that is true. The first thing we should do is to identify the problem, and then start thinking about a solution to that problem. I have been talking to different Governments and different UN agencies. They keep repeating the same answer. "This is the only way to operate inside Syria," which is not true. Until now they have failed, first of all, to admit that the way they are operating inside Syria is wrong and that it is politicised. The second thing is that they fail to admit that the way the Security Council is functioning right now is not getting the job done. It is not upholding the values and principles that humanity shares, and that they should share and implement together.

That should be another reason for the Governments involved, and other Governments, to say that the way things are happening right now is not leading anywhere. They are only making the situation worse. We should start looking for alternatives. What happened in Rwanda and in other countries in the 1990s pushed the UN to start thinking about other ways to react. That is when they came up with the right to protect principles.

Syria presents an even more complicated crisis that should draw us together in saying that we should change the way we are behaving and act collectively. If we do not change, we are only set to see history being repeated over and over without being able to do anything about it. Unfortunately, the willingness of individual countries to act outside the Security Council is not there any more. Unless we reform it, we will not be able to do anything.

Q47 Mike Gapes: You talked about 2013 and the failure to act. What is your assessment of the impact that the symbolic airstrike by the United States in 2017, and the US, UK and French airstrikes on 14 April following the attack and the use of chemical weapons in Douma, have had, if any, on the humanitarian situation on the ground?

Haid Haid: Unfortunately, anticipation of the attack had more impact than the attack itself. That applied not only to 2013 but to 2017 and 2016. As you mentioned, the attacks were quite symbolic. They did not really lead to pressuring the regime to change its behaviour, and stop the chemical attacks, especially the 2017 one. In 2017 alone, there were 10 attacks. In 2018, there have been five attacks. They were all documented by Human Rights Watch in the report I mentioned.



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That shows, first of all, that they failed to prevent chemical attacks from happening in the future. Then they did not try to use that momentum to push the political process forward. That was a big mistake.

The third and most important thing—I will end on this—is that the thinking process behind the strikes was only concerned with the means being used to kill Syrians rather than the principle of killing civilians. That has led to big impacts on Syria, and it is why the regime has been able to increase different types of attacks and not use chemicals on a larger scale.

- Q48 **Mike Gapes:** Ms Alodaat, the justification for the use of airstrikes has been slightly different in the UK, France and the United States. The UK Government said at one point that it was for humanitarian reasons, whereas other countries have said it was to do with the use of chemical weapons. I understand that you are an expert in these kinds of areas. What is your assessment of the justification? How could it have been justified?

Laila Alodaat: The problem with using differences in justification is, unfortunately, that the responsibility to protect doctrine is still new. It has not been used for long enough and there have not been enough legal precedents to allow us to make a thorough legal assessment.

The reality is that, with a very narrow definition of R2P, the humanitarian intervention—or any military intervention—needs a chapter 7 UN Security Council resolution.

- Q49 **Mike Gapes:** Which Russia will not give you.

Laila Alodaat: Which is blocked. There are two things. I assume we are speaking about the third pillar. First, we need to look at the third pillar in a wider space, to make the best of everything in the third pillar other than the humanitarian intervention that has been blocked. There is much to be done in that area.

I can give you a few examples of things that fall under the third pillar, which unfortunately has been used interchangeably with military intervention. There is work to be done on taking part in political dialogue, in criminal investigation and so on. The UK has unfortunately pulled back from taking an active role in the political dialogue that could bear results.

Another example is the shifting of the political dialogue from Geneva, which has been going on for years, into Astana and other military-based conversations that are taking place only between military actors and are not taking civil society, the general public in Syria or any others into consideration. It becomes a conversation about who is going to control which territory and so on. We need more active steps by individual countries to push political dialogue into what it is supposed to be, and what it has been hoped to be.



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A point was raised about Russia saying that they are not hospitals but military camps. Very good; let's have more investigation missions to go and see. Let us have the ICRC there and the commission of inquiry. That is at the core of the third pillar of R2P.

Lastly, sanctions are one of the most active pacifist ways of dealing with grave human rights violations and atrocities. They have been used in a very limited way in Syria, and we would like them to be used more widely and actively. Unfortunately, even the sanctions that are in place are being reconsidered. The UK has a unilateral role on sanctions, and it is perfectly legal, unfortunately, for the UK to be a safe haven and an investment opportunity for many war criminals in Syria. This is one thing to be taken forward.

The protection of refugees and IDPs, and all the support being given to them, is at the core of the R2P doctrine, and that has to be pushed. We should not give up on the doctrine yet, because military intervention is blocked.

Q50 Stephen Gethins: I was interested in the points you were raising. What do you think the UK could specifically be doing? Obviously there is a problem with one member of the Security Council. You mentioned the UK as a safe haven and you mentioned sanctions. Could you say a little bit more about that, please?

Laila Alodaat: Yes. There has been universal misunderstanding on sanctions in Syria. Unfortunately, the arguments that get used against the imposition of sanctions is that they are bad for the people, they would block food. That was the argument used about sanctions against Iraq in the 1990s.

The sanctions imposed in Syria are against individuals who have been involved in atrocities that have been proven by UN-mandated bodies. There are EU and UN sanctions. We have lists of names of people who are sanctioned, and it has made a lot of difference because it makes the financial transactions and the funding of military operations much more difficult. We would like that to be taken further.

The UK itself has both a legal role and an executive role to play in relation to individuals who, in person or by proxy, either have access to this country or have property or ongoing investments in this country. There are mechanisms that have been tried in many other places. Identifying such people makes it much harder to make money out of conflict and to come and spend or invest it in the UK. Again, that is one of the ways that will make a huge difference. It does not need a Security Council resolution, and it can be done by the sole political will of the UK without any chance of being criticised for it.

Stephen Gethins: That is very interesting.

Q51 Mike Gapes: What has been the impact in Syria itself on the narrative and the approach to the conflict? Has it had any impact on the



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propaganda of the Syrian Government? Has it made them more aware that there might be consequences from airstrikes from the west, or is it something that they just dismiss? How has it been resolved since April this year?

Laila Alodaat: Do you mean the narrative of the Syrian regime?

Mike Gapes: Yes.

Laila Alodaat: I think Farouq is in a better place to speak about that.

Dr al Habib: In the beginning, for ordinary people it gave a message of hope that finally the international community would react. Of course, later on, they had disappointment. From the regime side, the regime was scared at the beginning because it was not able to anticipate what the limit of the operation would be. After it realised that it was very specific and limited, and that actually no one was killed by those airstrikes, it tried to use it in its propaganda towards the Syrian people as the regime being the victor.

Chair: We have to stop. We need to vote. We will be back in 15 minutes. My apologies, but we must vote.

Sitting suspended for Divisions in the House.

On resuming—

Chair: I apologise for the votes. We are quorate again, but please could we keep the questions and answers short. Thank you for waiting; I am very grateful.

Q52 **Mike Gapes:** You were talking about the impact of the airstrikes this year, and the reaction to them. You talked about the Syrian Government's reaction. What has been the perception of the public, the population? Is there any way of knowing?

Haid Haid: It is difficult, for sure, especially in areas that are not physically connected. That has been an intentional and systematic policy since the early days of the conflict. In general, when people give their opinion or make any assessment or assumption, it is mainly based on the people they are able to contact in different areas. There is no way to say that it is representative. Based on the people I was able to talk to, for example, after the airstrikes, it was similar to what Farouq mentioned earlier. Those who have been suffering for a long time from crimes committed by the regime, and which it is still committing, felt that at least the regime was paying a price, no matter how small, but they felt disappointed at the same time.

Q53 **Mike Gapes:** Because it was not larger.

Haid Haid: Not only because it was not larger, but because it did not change anything on the ground. The 2017 one did not prevent the regime from using it later on, and it did not prevent the killing of civilians on a daily basis.



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Q54 **Mike Gapes:** The airstrikes that were carried out in April have made no difference to the situation on the ground for the people and their suffering.

Haid Haid: Not on that level, but in a way they reduced the number of chemical attacks.

Q55 **Mike Gapes:** They acted as a deterrent to further chemical attacks.

Haid Haid: Exactly, but on the ground the daily killing and daily suffering of civilians did not change.

Dr al Habib: The main difference was the message to the Syrian people that, when western Governments want to act, they can act. For many years, there was the excuse that the US, the UK and France could not do anything because of the regime air defence or because of the Russians or the Israelis or whoever. That was the message. There were similar messages by the Americans in the eastern region of Syria. When Russian and Iranian mercenaries wanted to attack the oil fields, they bombed them immediately and of course there was no reaction from the other side. That was the key message.

Secondly, you started your questions by raising a point about confusing messages and confusing justifications. I am afraid that the repetition of the red line is becoming very destructive inside Syria. It is understood by a lot of people that it is actually a green light to the regime to use all other kinds of weapons to kill people. The regime has killed more than 500,000 Syrian people; maybe 2,000 or 3,000 of them were killed by chemical weapons, so when the superpowers of the world keep saying that there is a red line on chemical weapons and the regime continues slaughtering people and burning them with barrel bombs, cluster munitions and all kinds of other weapons, it is a very negative message to the people on the ground, who are being killed by those weapons every day.

Q56 **Mike Gapes:** That was also the case, wasn't it, with President Obama's red line? The original red line was from Obama.

Haid Haid: Yes.

Q57 **Mike Gapes:** And then he did nothing. It was implicit even at that time that it is okay to kill people with barrel bombs but not to use chemicals.

Dr al Habib: Yes, that was the green light.

Q58 **Ann Clwyd:** We touched briefly on the situation of women in conflict. We were told in evidence that many women refugees displaced by the conflict have been more or less forced into human trafficking. Can you tell us something about that?

Laila Alodaat: Sure. There are two aspects. One of them is the large number of refugees and the failure to provide them with adequate humanitarian support. There is also the failure of the legal doctrine in



refugee-hosting countries in the region. There are no camps where some sort of monitoring can take place. Many people are in urban areas with very few rights. They have no access to jobs. There is some support from the UN but it remains very limited. We are allowing all the elements that create human trafficking to take advantage of women, both in work and in their daily lives. It increases violence and decreases their chances to report violence. That is definitely happening in refugee-hosting countries in the region.

There is a lack of safe passage when people are trying to flee the region because they are in severe danger. Nobody would throw their children on a boat with a 50% chance of them surviving if it was not very dangerous for them to stay where they are. Unfortunately, the absence of safe passage has created a disproportionate impact on women. In Greece and in other countries where people are being processed on the way to their destination, there is no rule of law. There is a crack in the law where people are not nationals and not immigrants. They have no legal status to benefit from the rule of law in the countries they arrive in. This is very severe for women where the situation of detention, (when they are detained or the situation of where they are staying at, are) exacerbating sexual violence and intimate violence. The fact that traffickers get such a space means that women are in severe danger.

To address that, all countries should take their fair share of those who need resettlement, particularly those who are vulnerable or who need to be prioritised. That includes women who are subjected to violence.

Q59 Chair: What more can the UK and the international community do to deter prohibited weapons? Dr al Habib, I was hoping to push you on this. We have had a huge amount of debate in this country about it, as you know. What do you think about those who have stood in the way of action against these weapons?

Dr al Habib: First, we need the UK Government to help us to raise the awareness of the general public here to the price of inaction—what the results of the inaction were, and how it was more destructive and fuelled the refugee crisis and the extremist crisis.

Secondly, and practically, we expect more diplomatic pressure from the UK on Russia and Iran in all possible ways, and more sanctions on individuals and companies involved in the bloodshed in Syria. For example, we are surprised that all the arms companies who are still sending Russian weapons to the regime to kill more people still have functioning bank accounts, and still travel to attend fairs and conferences. They should be shamed for participating in killing people.

We expect the UK Government to use the huge aid and support it provides to ensure respect for humanitarian law, especially in Syria. When the UK funds the UN or international humanitarian organisations in Damascus, it is of course welcomed, because people there are our brothers and our people. We want them to get their needs met, but the

Comment [BH]: check



fundlers or the donors should put strict conditions on the UN and international agencies to respect international humanitarian law, and respect impartiality and neutrality in providing aid. They should ensure that the regime is not getting political credit for your taxpayers' money.

There should also be support for neighbouring countries. Jordan, for example, already has its own economic crisis, and has millions of refugees from Syria, Iraq, Libya and elsewhere. They need big support from the UK Government and other Governments to meet the needs of the refugees in their country. There are currently tens of thousands of people fleeing from the south because of the Russian escalation, and they need assistance.

Laila Alodaat: There are two things that the UK can do on prohibited weapons. There is long-standing universal acceptance that chemical weapons should be prohibited. Unfortunately, because of political developments, there is a real threat to that prohibition. The UK can play an active role in pursuing bodies other than the Security Council to address that. One of them could be the Secretary-General of the UN, who has some mandate to create bodies to address that at the General Assembly. The UK is perfectly situated to do that.

Another example is the use of explosive weapons in highly populated areas, which is unfortunately not prohibited but should be. The International Network on Explosive Weapons is doing particular work to create political commitment for the prohibition of explosive weapons. Syria is a case study for that.

There are the IHL doctrines, and indiscriminate weapons are prohibited, but unfortunately we are still trying to prove that the use of explosive weapons in populated areas is entirely disproportionate and should be outlawed. I encourage the UK to take an active role in that action and to set an example.

The last thing is the arms trade treaty. We are absolutely delighted that the UK has ratified the arms trade treaty. Now is a very good time to set an example by creating assessment mechanisms for arms being transported to countries, individuals or groups who are actively taking part in atrocities. It needs to be transparent and gendered, and should be done in consultation with civil society in the country and in countries impacted by it.

Q60 Chair: Let me be very specific. I wrote a report with Jo Cox, a colleague of ours who was murdered, called "The Cost of Doing Nothing". We wrote it together for the Policy Exchange. It was finished just over a year ago, sadly after she died. That report was written to counter the creeping non-interventionism of both parties, but particularly the hard left of the Labour party.

Could you say very, very clearly what is the cost of non-intervention and non-action? All three of you listed further war crimes in Syria; the



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invasion and annexation of Crimea; the murder of hundreds of people inside Syria; aggression from Iran; and the exploitation of the Iranian people off the back of this. Is there anything I am missing?

Laila Alodaat: One thing that could be added is the serious threat to long-standing legal doctrines that need to be kept.

Q61 **Chair:** The fundamental undermining of international rules.

Laila Alodaat: The fundamental undermining of international laws that are long standing, and the threat to those who are developing towards accountability. Unfortunately, we are withdrawing from accountability. It is a few steps behind where we were in 2011 and in 2005.

Q62 **Chair:** Would I be right in saying that the cost of doing nothing is most immediately obvious in Syria, and among the murdered in Syria, but actually it fundamentally undermines the security position of the British people and is a fundamental threat to the rules that we have relied on for 70 years to keep us safe?

Dr al Habib: Yes.

Laila Alodaat: It is fair to say that, yes.

Haid Haid: Yes.

Q63 **Chair:** All three of you agree with that.

Haid Haid: I have one last thing to add. It undermines the ability to reach a political settlement to the conflict in Syria. Inaction allowed the regime, with the help of Iran and Russia, to capture many areas. What we are seeing right now is a zero-sum game to recapture the rest of the country. There is nothing being done to prevent that.

Q64 **Chair:** Can I jump in again? You would say pretty clearly that those who say they are waiting for a political solution are actually waiting for the death of more civilians in order to find a solution. That is what they are actually doing.

Haid Haid: Yes, and waiting for more military action to happen.

Q65 **Chair:** The political solution that they claim to be waiting for is actually called murder.

Haid Haid: And the military one, yes.

Q66 **Mike Gapes:** We have talked about Iran and Russia. It is not just Iran; it is Hezbollah as well. Nobody has talked about Turkey. Turkey is now militarily involving itself quite significantly in occupying Syrian territory on its border. What has been the impact of that? Has it led to a significant increase in the humanitarian crisis and the movement of people?



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Dr al Habib: I will talk not from a political perspective but from a humanitarian perspective. We have to say it might be the only safe zone now in Syria.

Q67 **Mike Gapes:** Where the Turkish troops are.

Dr al Habib: Yes, because that area is not being bombed by anyone and there are no ISIS groups there.

Q68 **Mike Gapes:** Is that because the YPG withdrew and the Turkish troops went in?

Dr al Habib: Yes, of course. There is a Russian/Turkish agreement, so the regime does not bomb those areas. I am not saying that the humanitarian situation is perfect. Of course, there are many complications, but it is a safe zone and a no-bombing zone for Syrians.

Q69 **Mike Gapes:** Are Syrian people going there though?

Haid Haid: There are two areas of operation in which Turkey is involved inside Syria. The first is called the Euphrates Shield operation, which was mainly against ISIS groups and affiliated groups in areas such as Jarabulus and al-Bab. That improved the humanitarian situation, but it has many flaws; for example, Turkey has a monopoly of aid services in those areas. But it improved the situation for those who live there, and allowed others to return to the area.

In another area, there was the Olive Branch operation.

Q70 **Mike Gapes:** In Afrin.

Haid Haid: Exactly. It was mainly against Kurdish-led groups that were controlling the area. That led to catastrophic humanitarian situations. Many people were displaced and many violations were committed by local groups fighting alongside the Turkish forces in the area. Human Rights Watch recently published a report where it listed all the violations that were committed. That had a negative impact on the situation on the ground and led to the displacement of thousands of people, who are now outside their homes.

Dr al Habib: You mentioned Hezbollah. In Lebanon, the UK Government are providing big support to the Lebanese army to control the borders with Syria. What is actually happening is that your funding is being used to control the borders only from one side, to disallow Syrians who want to escape from Syria to go to Lebanon. At the same time, forces funded by you are facilitating the crossing of Hezbollah and its fighters from Lebanon to Syria to kill more Syrians.

Q71 **Mike Gapes:** Are you saying that the British Government are funding an operation, an unintended consequence of which is—

Dr al Habib: The UK Government are funding the Lebanese army with equipment and training to control the borders. What I am saying is that it is controlled only from one side, to disallow Syrians to cross. The



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extremist militias of Hezbollah are allowed by this army, funded by you, to cross to the other side and kill Syrians there. Without that flow to the regime of Hezbollah and Iranian militias, the regime would not be able to continue to kill such numbers of Syrians.

Q72 Mr Seely: I want to follow up more broadly a point that you were making. It seems from everything one has seen in Syria over the past few years that the responsibility to protect is more or less dead in the water. It has been killed by the Assad regime and a Security Council power. Does responsibility to protect actually mean anything? It seems to me that it does not.

Laila Alodaat: I have to disagree. I do not think that responsibility to protect and military intervention are interchangeable. Military intervention is all you have said; yes, it has been curbed and it seems currently not to be an option. I think R2P is a much bigger doctrine. Many of the things that are included in its third pillar have been used and have made a difference to civilians, including the protection of refugees, some bits of the political dialogue and criminal investigation and so on.

Yes, military intervention is not a possibility at the moment, but the doctrine is very important and it has protected a lot of Syrians.

Q73 Mr Seely: Has it saved life?

Laila Alodaat: Definitely, yes.

Q74 Mr Seely: I am sorry to interrupt, but 400,000 civilians have died. It is great that you say that it has saved life, but I just do not see how you are saying it. I am very happy to be proved wrong.

Laila Alodaat: I am not saying it has succeeded. You asked me if it has saved life, and it did. It definitely did. There is the fact that there is a commission of inquiry that has investigated crimes against humanity and other crimes. There is the fact that there have been policies to address refugees and there is the fact that the displaced population is being addressed. I am not saying that is the R2P population. It aims to protect civilians from atrocities, and that has not happened, so, no, it did not achieve its ultimate goals.

Did all those things protect civilians? Yes, they protected some civilians. It could have been much worse if no other acts were being done. What I am trying to say is that it is important not to equate taking action in Syria with military intervention, otherwise all the countries who cannot intervene will say, "Well, there is nothing to be done," and withdraw. We cannot afford that, because 22 million Syrians still need help and support. Much more can and should be done.

Q75 Mr Seely: Do you have the same opinions?

Haid Haid: When it comes to non-military intervention, I agree that some elements of the right to protect mechanisms have had a positive impact on the ground, but that impact is quite limited. In comparison



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with the larger scale of atrocities, it is quite insignificant. It would have allowed the right to protect civilians at large through military means, or at least willingness to use the threat of military means, even if you do not have to use them. The willingness to do that was missing, and that is why right to protect was not able to fulfil its mandate inside Syria.

Q76 **Mr Seely:** Dr al-Habib, do you agree?

Dr al Habib: I agree.

Q77 **Mr Seely:** Who do you agree with?

Dr al Habib: I agree with Haid.

Haid Haid: But I also agree with Laila.

Mr Seely: There are bits of it that work, but significant elements have not worked, because you have tens of thousands of dead civilians.

Q78 **Ann Clwyd:** Is there any form of UK intervention that would improve the humanitarian situation on the ground?

Haid Haid: I think there is, but the question is whether there is willingness to do it.

Q79 **Ann Clwyd:** What is it? Spell it out.

Haid Haid: I will mention a few options, but the problem is that since the beginning of peaceful demonstrations inside Syria there have been many options on the table. There were very concrete and clear options that different countries could have taken to change the course of the conflict. But there was no willingness to do it. I am afraid that the willingness has only decreased and has not increased, because of the complication of what we are seeing today, right now. Therefore, it is difficult to imagine any proposal that will lead to concrete actions if there is still no willingness in general to do it.

When it comes to what could be done in particular, Farouq mentioned that there were somehow three de facto no-fly zones in Syria, or no-bombing zones—the terms are a bit different. There were three main de facto no-bombing zones in Syria. One was established by the Americans in eastern Syria; one was established by the Turkish-led forces in northern Syria; and one was brokered by the Americans, the Jordanians and the Russians in southern Syria. Two of them are still holding—the ones in eastern and northern Syria. The one in southern Syria is not holding any more.

The US clearly said that they are not interested in maintaining that de-escalation zone any more. The UK and other partner countries could replace the efforts that were invested by the US in that area to maintain the de-escalation zone, whether they engage directly with the Russians or do it through the UN or whatever mechanism. There is a possibility of maintaining that de-escalation zone.



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If that does not happen, unfortunately, most likely, we will soon see the regime also start attacking northern Syria. That would create another humanitarian crisis. After that, it would be eastern Syria. The UK can try through political efforts to maintain the existing de-escalation agreement in southern and northern Syria, or they can agree with the Americans and the Turks to expand the scale of the no-bombing zone to include other areas.

Those are clear objectives and they do not involve any military intervention in Syria. The question again is whether there is willingness to do that or not. That is limited to Syria. Outside Syria, there are 1 million refugees, especially in the neighbouring countries. Many of them are now being forced to go back to Syria, so there is a lot to be done by the UK and those neighbouring countries to protect the rights of refugees in those countries and to prevent them from being sent back to die in Syria. That is another area.

Q80 **Chair:** Forgive us for having to break for two votes. I apologise, but, as you know, there is nothing we can do about it. Before we close, is there anything you wish to add that we may have left out?

Haid Haid: No.

Dr al Habib: No.

Laila Alodaat: No.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed for coming. We are extremely grateful for your insights and your help.