



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Foreign Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Work of the Minister of State for the Middle East, HC 1360

Tuesday 3 July 2018

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

Questions 1-74

Witnesses

I: Rt Hon Alistair Burt MP, Minister of State for the Middle East, Foreign and Commonwealth Office; and Martin Longden, Head of Near East Department, and UK Special Representative for Syria, Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Rt Hon Alistair Burt MP, Minister of State for the Middle East, Foreign and Commonwealth Office; and Martin Longden, Head of Near East Department, and UK Special Representative for Syria, Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Chair: Welcome to this afternoon's session of the Foreign Affairs Committee. We will start straightaway. Minister Burt will be facing most of the questioning. Mr Longden, welcome. Stephen, you wanted to start.

Q1 **Stephen Gethins:** It is good to see you, Minister. I wanted to start on Yemen. Will you set out in general terms what the UK is doing to seek conclusion of the conflict in Yemen, and perhaps set out why it is in our broader national interest to do so?

Alistair Burt: Okay. The conflict in Yemen has now been going on for about three years, with significant humanitarian consequences, as we all know. The politics are that a Houthi-led insurgency sought to topple the legitimate Government of Yemen and, after an appeal for support, coalition parties led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE acted in defence of a legitimate Government and are seeking to remove the insurgents.

To cut a long story short, we have now reached a situation in which the United Kingdom can see no military solution to the issue—it has to be settled politically. Accordingly, we are taking the view that the pause in the conflict around the city and port of Hodeidah has provided an opportunity for UN envoy Martin Griffiths to get to work to seek to conclude some negotiation between the Houthi and the coalition. That work is ongoing.

We believe that it is in the UK's interest to give maximum support to the work of the UN envoy in order to see this conflict concluded by negotiation. We hope that whatever is happening on the ground militarily will translate into a political solution.

Q2 **Stephen Gethins:** Thank you, Minister. I note that you mention that there is no military solution to be found to this particular conflict. As we know, and as you have highlighted yourself in the Chamber and elsewhere, we are facing one of the worst man-made humanitarian crises in Yemen, so in the face of that potential mass civilian starvation, do you think that the United Kingdom has a responsibility to protect? What do you think that should include at this time?

Alistair Burt: I started with the background to the conflict, but I am happy to say more about it—

Stephen Gethins: But on the specific question—

Alistair Burt: There has been a tendency to see this only through one particular prism—that is, through the actions of the coalition. I make the



point that it is impossible to do so and to neglect the activities of the Houthis—what they have done and what they continue to do to the people of Yemen—because the consequence of their authority over areas where they have restricted access to food and medicines is significantly to worsen the humanitarian situation. We should understand the coalition's determination to remove this, which is imperilling the people of Yemen.

We are very conscious of the humanitarian situation. We are working through DFID and through international agencies to relieve that as much as possible, but we have said that, for all the work that we are doing on providing humanitarian relief, that is only the sticking plaster; the wound is the conflict itself, which must come to an end.

- Q3 **Stephen Gethins:** Given that you are saying that there is no military solution, and therefore that there must be a political solution—I take your point about seeing it from both sides, although I didn't specifically ask about that—and given that the UK is the penholder, what contribution do you think is provided to that political solution by continuing arms sales to one particular party to this conflict?

Alistair Burt: I say to you, as I say to others, that to believe that the restriction of arms sales to one party would end this conflict is, in my view, mistaken—it would not. It would change the perception of the United Kingdom significantly in the region. It would damage a relationship with an important ally, who sees its work as removing not only an insurgency from Yemen, but an insurgency that has accepted outside help and that has directed missiles against it. For the United Kingdom to say to that ally, "We're not supporting you in the manner in which we have done," would have a detrimental effect on the United Kingdom's position in the region and be of no assistance whatever in ending the conflict.

- Q4 **Stephen Gethins:** What can the UK do, then, to find a political solution?

Alistair Burt: The UK can do what it is doing. The best way of using the UN at present is through the envoy. Again, it is always tempting to believe that a presidential statement or a resolution by the UN would sort it—it won't. The best use of the UN at the moment is through the envoy; giving him maximum support and encouraging those negotiations is the best use of the UN. We have been tireless in support of those efforts through the previous special envoy, and now through Martin Griffiths. That is the best use of the UN.

- Q5 **Stephen Gethins:** Just a final question. Minister, as the penholder for the United Nations, do you really think that the UK can be seen as an honest broker in the conflict while it continues arms sales to one particular side? I am not asking you to talk about the rights or the wrongs, but in terms of trying to find a political solution to this conflict, do you think that the UK can act as a mediator while it continues to do that?

Alistair Burt: The United Kingdom is not acting as the mediator. The mediator is the special envoy, who is working between both parties—

Stephen Gethins: But the UK is the penholder.



Alistair Burt: The UK is the penholder, but the mediator is the UN special envoy, and we are providing support to the UN. From all our contacts with all parties who are involved in this, and who are talking to each other, I am not aware that the United Kingdom's position has been adversely influenced in relation to that. I would also say that I am not sure of the moral equivalence between the Houthi insurgency and the Saudi-led coalition in trying to deal with this difficult issue that has done such damage to the people of Yemen, which was started by the insurgency and was kept going by the Houthi insurgency.

Q6 **Mr Seely:** Can I just ask a few follow-up questions? Where is the geographical focus of your efforts in Yemen?

Alistair Burt: We have no geographical force, because the United Kingdom is not involved as a party to the conflict. Our efforts are directed at diplomacy and at protecting Saudi Arabia from the risk of missile attack.

Q7 **Mr Seely:** I ask because, as well as a Houthi insurgency, there is an AQ and ISIS problem in southern and eastern Yemen. What are we doing about that?

Alistair Burt: That has been there for some time. Some years ago this used to come up in the question, what do we do about ungoverned space? The risk always was that Yemen, as the Committee knows well, has been the most difficult political issue for some time—run by warlords with little apparent concern for the people. An opportunity in 2011, following the fall of Ali Abdullah Saleh, to create something new did not work out.

Part of the activity of the national dialogue to create a new Government of Yemen was also to recognise the risk that Yemen was running by having areas of ungoverned space, which were being used by AQ and others. The United Kingdom has always been conscious of this, our intelligence work clearly recognises this, and, of course, there have been actions in the past in relation to individuals who were being harboured in Yemen.

The best solution, both for the people of Yemen and to deal with the ungoverned space, is for a political agreement at the end of this conflict to create a new structure of politics and power in Yemen and ensure that there is what there is not at the moment and what there has not been for too long—a Government of Yemen that is able to command and control the rule of law throughout Yemen, and a political solution that encompasses all the various elements, ethnic groups and sectarian groups within Yemen to make it work in a functioning manner.

Q8 **Mr Seely:** Two more brief questions, if I may. We have had conversations about the tribes in the east of Yemen. Do you think that they have a role at all, especially when it comes to the smuggling routes from Oman, which go up to northern Yemen?

Alistair Burt: Well, I am not sure that I am in the best position to discuss any potential smuggling routes. It is clear that weaponry has been brought into Yemen and been used by the Houthi against Saudi Arabia in particular.



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On the earlier part of your question, in relation to the tribes, while it is not for the United Kingdom in any way to dictate what the future politics of Yemen should be, yes, there is a sense that, of course, the tribes are going to be involved, and that the dialogue that was interrupted in 2015 will certainly have to include all parties in Yemen. Indeed, the political work that the envoy is doing now is to look for what role will be played by the Houthis in relation to this. Their history is of course complex and not a straightforward issue either.

As we all know—perhaps I could direct the Committee to the paper that I led on at Chatham House recently, from the stabilisation unit, which looked at ways to end conflict—and accepting that some of the difficulties of ending conflict are in who you do not talk to rather than who you do, a negotiated future for Yemen clearly has got to include some acknowledgment of Houthi terms and conditions. Therefore, the sooner they come to a negotiation, the better.

- Q9 **Mr Seely:** Finally, briefly, I totally understand your sentiment about there being no military solution but, to play devil's advocate, a military solution would be to defeat the Houthi or force them to seriously engage in talks. It is all very well saying, "There is no military solution," but as long as the Houthi are doing pretty well, they have no need to come to the negotiating table. That is why the Saudis are bombing them in the first place. Correct me if I am wrong.

Alistair Burt: You and certainly the Chair—there may be others round the table—have more military experience than me. There is military pressure that can be applied and that can make a difference to a negotiating position. We have to assume that the Saudi-led coalition is in a situation where it clearly believes that applying this sort of military pressure on the Houthi, through its attack on the port and the implications for the immediate future, produces a consequence in terms of a different approach to negotiations. Of course, others would say that this only stiffens people's resolve, etc.

The United Kingdom's position is that to envisage a solution in which Yemen is in some way conquered seems very unlikely. The history of Yemen does not seem to lend itself to that idea, and no one is suggesting that that is a way in which there would be an immediate outcome, a medium outcome or one that would certainly be long lasting. But there is no doubt that we live in a world in which the application of force and pressure—as well as judicial force and pressure—produces consequences, and they are not all bad in terms of seeking to bring something to an end. One can be pretty clear that that is the view being taken by the coalition in trying to exercise pressure here to bring a negotiated end to the conflict sooner than it would have ended otherwise and, in consequence, saving lives and improving the conditions of the people of Yemen.

- Q10 **Chris Bryant:** Is this coalition still using cluster munitions, whether British or not?



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Alistair Burt: I am not aware of that, to be honest. I do not know because they are certainly not using British ones, as we know. I am not aware of any recent reports of that. My honest answer is that I do not know, but I do not believe so.

Q11 **Chair:** Do you think that a unitary state will emerge out of the Yemeni conflict?

Alistair Burt: Again, it is not for the United Kingdom to say.

Q12 **Chair:** Indeed, but you have got a lot of experts in. Our former ambassador in Yemen, Simon Shercliff, is an expert on the region—now that he is in a new role in the Foreign Office, you may see more of him. What is the Foreign Office opinion?

Alistair Burt: It could go either way. Plainly, those in the south who for some time have sought a solution in Yemen in which there is an independent south, are clearly still there advocating that political position. There are others who believe that greater autonomy for the south, which was certainly on the cards through the national dialogue, would be a better answer.

The United Kingdom clearly cannot determine this, and I am genuinely not sure which way these arguments will go. Perhaps it depends on how quickly the conflict can be brought to an end and in what circumstances.

Q13 **Chair:** Even under Ali Abdullah Saleh, the moment you left Sana'a and went not even 20 miles outside the capital, you were in, effectively, states that were so federal, if you like, and so remote from the central Government, that the central Government had no writ in real terms, and that was when the country was "the most united" it has been since—well, certainly for a long time.

Alistair Burt: Clearly, your knowledge is the same as mine. This is a difficult-to-govern area, in which tribal loyalty—clan loyalty—is desperately strong, in which patronage rules and there is no central structure of the state in a way that is seen elsewhere. Accordingly, history and experience teach us that there isn't one model, and the best thing will be for people themselves to come to the conclusion.

The difficulty, of course, is that this is being considered at a time when external actors are involved. As with many conflicts in the area, as we all know very well, there is an interest for those outside the state, who have vested interests and want to see a particular sort of outcome. Here, it is clear that the people of Yemen have been ill served in the past. They are having an unbelievably wretched time at the moment. They need the conflict to end so that both humanitarian and commercial shipping can come through and give them the food, fuel and water that they need. The sooner the conflict comes to an end, the better, and then a better process of government has to emerge from that. The negotiation process now to bring the conflict to an end has to lead into longer term conflict resolution, to make sure that the seeds of a new conflict are not created by the way in which this one comes to an end.

- Q14 Mr Seely:** May I come in quickly on that point? If I understand correctly, the UAE is flirting with the idea of supporting the southern independence movement. Do you have an opinion on that?

Alistair Burt: No. I hear all sorts of rumours about different interests. From our dealings with the UAE, it is clear that their major concern at the moment is for the conflict to come to an end and for the people of Yemen to begin the constitutional process that will lead to a proper political settlement.

- Q15 Royston Smith:** Minister, we have talked about external actors, the UAE being one of them and Saudi Arabia another. To what extent does the UK have leverage over Saudi Arabia in the conflict, and how is that leverage being used to prevent a deepening humanitarian crisis?

Alistair Burt: I think "leverage" is the wrong word. We have a relationship with Saudi Arabia that is complex and many-layered. It certainly has a security and intelligence element, which has led to the saving of a number of British lives over recent years, so that is an important factor in all this. It is not leverage; it is very much a partnership. As was seen in the visit of the Crown Prince last year, this relationship goes across the board, well beyond defence and security issues, to trade, culture and a variety of things, bearing in mind the changes coming over Saudi Arabia. So I think "leverage" is the wrong word.

In this particular instance, the United Kingdom is clearly a state that has a relationship with Saudi Arabia and has offered advice, when it has been sought, on a variety of things. Our influence can most clearly be seen in what we have sought to do to protect Saudi Arabia against attack. We were instrumental in creating the UNVIM process, as Saudi Arabia feared that there were entry points into Yemen for either the missiles, or parts of the missiles, that were being used against them. Following a missile attack on Riyadh, they, effectively, closed the ports, or severely restricted Hodeidah. The United Kingdom was instrumental in trying to reassure Saudi Arabia that someone was taking account of that risk and seeking to protect them by better inspection of vessels, and, in doing so, was ensuring the reopening of the port to get more humanitarian access. Both our arguments and our direct action in that particular case led to a beneficial impact on the situation and to the improvement of the humanitarian situation as a result, so that was one clear area.

In terms of the military action, as I said, we are not a party to that. The coalition will listen to the United Kingdom's views on it, but clearly acts entirely independently. But I think the relationship is strong and good, and certainly, at the moment, we are actively involved, as we have been right the way through, in seeking to suggest what might be the right outcome in something like this. We believe this is clearly leading towards a determination to create the background for a successful negotiated outcome, and we have put all our emphasis on that.

- Q16 Royston Smith:** Again, talking about external actors and the region in



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general, how dangerous would further escalation of the conflict in Yemen be for the broader region?

Alistair Burt: It depends how Yemen is seen. One of the particular difficulties of this is it has been described in various places in the media as the “forgotten war” and so on, but it is absolutely not forgotten. It is the world’s largest humanitarian crisis. However, perhaps there has been a tendency to look at the other states in the region and then say, “and Yemen”. Yemen has been a country in difficulty for a lengthy period of time, and some would argue, given the past three years, that the consequences of the war in Yemen are effectively confined to Yemen. Certainly, the humanitarian crisis is on a different scale to that in Syria, where the export of people because of the terror has been extraordinary throughout the region. Yemen is different to that, but the impact on it has been dreadful, as has the impact on the region in terms of regional sensibilities between the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and the influence of Iran in the area. I don’t think the United Kingdom could ever say there is a situation where the escalation of a conflict would not be deleterious.

Every time there is an escalation there is a risk. As I have said before, and as the Committee will know, ballistic missiles are being fired by the Houthis. They do not have the ability to manufacture those missiles, so they must be coming in from elsewhere. If one of those missiles lands on a significant target in Riyadh, such as the international airport or a royal palace, and that missile is traced to being of Iranian origin—the UN has already declared that missiles have had that origin—the Committee can imagine the impact that such an escalation would have on the region: it would be dramatic. That is why we have appealed to those who may know something about the transfer of ballistic missiles to Yemen, that such missiles should not be sent. We have been direct with the Houthi that those missiles should not be fired, because the risk of that escalation would be to change the nature of conflict in the region quite markedly.

Chair: We are going to move on to Syria now.

Q17 **Andrew Rosindell:** Minister, what difference can the UK realistically expect to make in Syria while the conflict is ongoing?

Alistair Burt: Not a great deal. Syria is a tragedy of epic proportions—again, this Committee will know the history as well as I do, so I do not intend to go back over all that. The conduct of the civil war against his own people—it was started by Assad, and there was an opportunity to reform right at the beginning in 2011—has been dreadful. Half a million people have been killed, and millions displaced. In that process, the influence of the United Kingdom has plainly been low, partly because of decisions taken by the House in 2013. People talk about non-intervention, but there has been intervention in Syria by Russia and Iran, and that has been very effective on behalf of the Syrian regime. Accordingly, we are rightly engaged in diplomatic efforts to seek a solution, including strong support for Staffan de Mistura as he works on the difficult process of talks.

The truth is that the ultimate destiny of Syria will be decided by what is happening on the ground, and the people who have skin in the game are



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those who have taken part in direct action. That will ultimately be the determinant of the political process that will go forward. We will continue to work as hard as we can on the diplomatic process. Where the United Kingdom has been very effective in Syria, and where there might still be a chance of influence, is in our response to chemical weapons. It was clear that the United Kingdom was one of the leaders of those who said that chemical weapons had been used by the regime, took through the appropriate resolution in relation to that and made it clear that the world needs a mechanism of accountability for chemical weapons not to become the norm—for so long, they were not. We have had an impact there. We hope that all nations will recognise that chemical weapons should not be part of a conflict.

- Q18 **Andrew Rosindell:** Our involvement is purely on a humanitarian basis. Are the Government also attempting to use influence elsewhere, through other partner countries or stronger diplomatic discussions?

Alistair Burt: On the humanitarian side, which I didn't get round to, it has been the United Kingdom's largest humanitarian effort. Some £2.8 billion has been spent in support of Syrian refugees in Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, as well as Syria itself. That has been an extraordinary response from the British people, to try to help deal with the misery caused. The practical impact on the politics and the war has been less than helping on that humanitarian impact. So, yes, I think it is important to work with any partners on the ground.

The United States is still engaged. We have close contact with Jordan, which also has an engagement there. Through the UN mechanism, we seek to influence those who maybe have more direct leverage on the regime. We have also stayed in close contact with moderate opposition parties and spokesmen, many of whom have been very brave in representing the cause of reform, but we have drawn a distinction between those and terrorists who came into the space created by the conflict. We recognise the damage that that has done, and we don't have any contact there.

- Q19 **Andrew Rosindell:** Is the use of airstrikes purely to defend innocent people who may be under attack from the regime, or is there still a feeling that we should try to influence a change of regime in that country?

Alistair Burt: My understanding—maybe I can bring Martin in at this stage—is that United Kingdom airstrikes were directed against Daesh and principally used against them. That threat has significantly receded. The airstrikes that were handled subsequently were in response to the chemical weapons attack and designed to be both a deterrent and to seek to degrade facilities that might be available for further attacks. I don't think there is any other kinetic involvement at this stage.

- Q20 **Andrew Rosindell:** Are there any diplomatic links with Syria at all? I know there are not official links, but are there any discussions? Are there any routes into having some kind of dialogue with members of the regime



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in Syria, or is that completely out of the question?

Alistair Burt: There is no direct contact. There is contact through the UN process—the Geneva process—where Staffan de Mistura has been seeking to bring the regime, effectively, around the table, rather than just have their presence there, but not taking part, which has been the case recently. But the United Kingdom has no direct linkages with the regime. As in almost any situation, people talk to people, but we have no direct contact with the Syrian regime.

- Q21 **Mike Gapes:** Can I go back to what you said earlier? Was not the real problem the decision that Parliament made in 2013 in relation to the chemical so-called red line, but that made in 2011 and 2012, when we failed to impose a no-fly zone and humanitarian corridors? That was before the Russians were involved and the Assad regime could have been put under great pressure at that time. The United States, our Government and many others failed to do action at that point. That is the real failing, isn't it?

Alistair Burt: Well, those of us with memories could spend all afternoon on this. From my own knowledge and memory of being involved at that time, there was discussion about no-fly zones and, particularly, whether we could find a way to stop the helicopters that were dropping the barrel bombs. I wish we had. It was the most common plea we had from the Syrian opposition—if we could stop the helicopters that drop the barrel bombs. That was before they were dropping chemical weapons. The impact of those on civilian areas was just dreadful. They would have to have been physically knocked out of the sky, but the Syrian air defences were considered to be significant and there was a risk of a clash. The argument was over whether lives should be risked in those circumstances, and whether there was some other way to do it.

- Q22 **Chair:** Was there not a bit more to it than that? The Syrian air defences were actually Russian.

Alistair Burt: There was that as well.

- Q23 **Chair:** And therefore to remove Syrian air defences would have required killing Russians.

Alistair Burt: For whatever reason. Mr Gapes is of course right. Hindsight is a wonderful thing. We can look back and think "If only a number of things had been done". But let us be quite clear: if only Assad had responded to appeals for reform by reform, instead of torturing and killing children, life would be different. Let us be very clear where the responsibility for this lies. It is not with those who sought to prevent it but those who perpetrated it.

Mike Gapes: Can I take you to Russia's role?

Chair: Mike, can you let Ian in very briefly?

- Q24 **Ian Austin:** On that point, we were told by witnesses last week that the failure to act in 2013 had emboldened Assad and the Russians and had



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resulted in the continued use of chemical weapons. In hindsight, do you think the failure to act and to uphold those red lines in 2013—I do not blame the Government for that—made the situation in Syria worse?

Alistair Burt: Yes. I have always believed that. When I came out of office shortly after that incident, I wrote about it in a letter to newspapers and was quite up front about it. What it told Assad was that, providing he didn't use chemical weapons—again, the Russians came in and said that they would deal with that aspect—there was effectively a green light to carry on with killing in other ways, and that nobody would do anything about it. That has proved to be the case.

Q25 **Ian Austin:** But the fact that they have used chemical weapons since shows that the agreement was meaningless and that the Russians couldn't be trusted.

Alistair Burt: Yes, they have; time has gone on. There you go. If the determination after that had been to remove chemical weapons— I must say that it looked all too convenient at the time. We will not know whether Assad hid chemical weapons from Russia or whether Russia was aware of them. Whatever happened, he kept sufficient numbers.

However, that was never the point. Assad was killing far more people through conventional methods than with chemical weapons. The failure to observe the red line suggested that he could go on and that no one else would intervene. That left the way open for both Russia and Iran to be effective at crucial times when there could have been a change in the nature of the conflict. But that is history.

Q26 **Ian Austin:** I agree with all of that. The consequences of acting are clear; we have had lengthy inquiries, such as Chilcot in relation to Iraq. What can we do to get people to understand more clearly the potential results of failing to act in these situations as well? What more could you or the Government do to get across more widely the sort of arguments that you have just enunciated?

Alistair Burt: I was also always very clear post '13 that I did not know what the consequences of acting would have been. As those of us who were there at the time remember, the overwhelming postbag we had from our constituents was to not do anything and telling us not to intervene. People were saying that there would be dire consequences—look at everything else.

None of us know what would have been the consequences if the red lines had been upheld by the United States and its allies, including us. What we know is what happened since, because we didn't. The most honest we can be is to say, "Look what has happened since. We don't know what the consequences would have been had we done anything else, but we certainly know what the consequences are now." We should ask people to take that into account when they weigh up similar dilemmas in the future.

Q27 **Chair:** Minister, in exactly the same way as we had an inquiry into the consequences of action in Iraq, should we not have an inquiry into the



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consequences of inaction in Syria?

Alistair Burt: That lies in the hands of the Committee.

Q28 **Chair:** No, a Government inquiry, like Chilcot. We had a serious national soul searching as to the cost of action in Iraq. Should we not have a serious national soul searching as to the cost of inaction in Syria?

Alistair Burt: Well, at least we can pinpoint the moment at which that possibility of action was removed. Maybe it should be a parliamentary inquiry into Parliament's own actions. Without offering blame in what was a very difficult situation, the truth is that we still do not know the consequences of acting. I still get letters from people who say, "You're a warmonger. If we had done that it would have been 10 times worse", but I find it very difficult to believe that it would be 10 times worse than it is now. As I said earlier, it is not that there was no intervention—there was, but it wasn't by us, and that is what made the difference afterwards. There are no vacuums in foreign policy or military action. If you are not there, somebody else is.

Q29 **Mike Gapes:** Can I get back to what is happening today? The attack, the bombing by Russia and Assad on Daraa, with hundreds of thousands of people fleeing towards the border with Israel, has the potential to create far more refugees in the south, as opposed to the north where the focus has so far been. That potentially is also destabilising to Jordan, which already has lots of problems because of wider issues, including the Trump Administration's bullying of Jordan, and the Middle East peace process so-called initiative of the United States. How stable is Jordan, given all the pressures that it faces from Syria, and potentially from the failure of the Palestinian-Israeli process?

Alistair Burt: I would like Martin to offer a view on that because he is very up on that. To back up what you said right at the beginning, our latest figures show how sustained hostilities since 17 June have led to the displacement of an estimated 271,800 individuals. You are right—the effect of that in the south is pushing people towards the borders of Jordan, and potentially Israel, exacerbating an already difficult situation. We are alert to the issues in Jordan, but perhaps the director can say a little more at this stage.

Martin Longden: You are absolutely right, Mr Gapes, and the situation is deeply concerning and very destabilising. One of the few successes that we have had recently in Syria had been the encouragement of de-escalation areas, to try to quieten down the war and allow for humanitarian relief. What we have seen most recently, including because of actions that the Russian Government have taken, is a systematic erosion of those de-escalation areas. What we have seen most recently is very sobering indeed, and a real resiling from commitments that we thought had been reached between powers.

Q30 **Mike Gapes:** Would it be fair to say that the Russians have lied and cheated, and are now carrying out atrocities against civilian people in the south of Syria?



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Martin Longden: The operation that we now see in the south is largely led, we believe, by the Russians, and directed by them, and you see Moscow's hand very much in that. They are also engaged in a parallel political process—there is fighting while there is talking—to try to restore a degree of calm and stability. Yes, it is a deeply unhelpful intervention.

- Q31 **Mike Gapes:** And the people they are attacking are the Syrian democratic forces, in many senses, who were the allies—they are trying to squeeze out any opposition from that area, to give Assad a victory in this conflict.

Martin Longden: The narrative that we hear from Moscow, which suggests that they are focused entirely against extremists and terrorist targets, is not one that we would judge credible.

- Q32 **Mike Gapes:** Right. Can I then ask about Russia's role? We, collectively, have allowed Russia basically to be the indispensable arbiter of what happens in Syria. Would you agree with that?

Alistair Burt: I think the de facto situation is that without the support of Russia and Iran the regime might well not have survived, and the practicalities are that both Russia and Iran exercise significant influence with the regime.

- Q33 **Mike Gapes:** What about the impact that this is having on Russia's role in the region more generally? Is this, in effect, a return to the period before the collapse of the Soviet Union, when the Soviet Union had a major presence within the Middle East and in the Arab world generally, which then went? Would it be, basically, that the old Soviet-style influence is back—not as the Soviet Union, but some of the actors are similar because they learned their careers in the intelligence services of the Soviet Union?

Alistair Burt: Let me offer a view on that. Firstly, no one should mistake the longevity of the relationship between Syria and Russia anyway. Syria was a partner of Russia for some significant time, and their forces trained together, so Russia is not a new actor on the Syrian scene. As we all know, Russia see the narrative of this situation very differently. They see a legitimate Government under attack from those that they brand as entirely terrorists.

We know from the actions that have taken place since 2012, 2013, Russia's involvement has not been entirely directed towards Daesh or obvious terrorists. There are plenty of examples of where others were targeted, rather than known terrorists. Indeed there are all sorts of allegations that the regime itself was completely complicit in this. Assad used terror—the terrorists—for the creation of his own narrative in order to deal with his own opposition. What Russia gets out of this is a sense that if you are Russia's partner it stands by you. It gets that in the context of an area where people have become unsure about whether the United States, for example, is equally consistent and constant.

As I said a moment ago, there are no vacuums, and the concern about the drift of United States policy towards the Middle East during the previous presidency was a concern as to whether or not this was leaving a vacuum.



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The United States had their own reason for trying to pursue a different policy and, of course, they have always been present throughout the region, but in a difficult situation where conflict was started Russia has demonstrated an ability to be a partner which, of course, has had terrifying consequences.

Everyone notices these things and if you look carefully Russia is talking to many parties in the area, who certainly did not take Assad's side at the beginning of the conflict and do not take Assad's side now; but Russia—I am not a Russian expert, but would say about the Middle East: is Russia back in the Middle East? The short answer to that must be yes. Martin, is there anything incorrect about that?

Martin Longden: No, there isn't, Minister, but I would add one nuance, which is that at the moment Russia is operating in a paradigm which plays to its strengths. It is a conflict situation and they are dropping bombs. What we have found is Russia finds it more difficult when trying to convene a political process. You will have seen the Astana group, for example, has not really been able to get the traction on the politics and has lacked the legitimacy that the Geneva process, whatever its flaws, has got. I think as this conflict ends, as it must eventually do, and we move into a phase of reconstruction and a kind of post-conflict paradigm, Russia does not have many of the levers to stabilise Syria and achieve the objectives that it wants, so it may find it more difficult.

Q34 **Chair:** Is there not an extra complexity here? Although Russia is trying to demonstrate—in fact Russia and the Assad regime are demonstrating—that those who say there is only a political solution are not being entirely frank, as some of our witnesses only last week made very clear, there is an alternative to the political solution. It is called murder. That is the solution that is being pursued at the moment, and it is being pursued rather successfully. The Assad regime is murdering its opponents, and those who stand aside—those who watch it happen and say nothing, those who allow Russia and Iran to continue, those who arm the Syrian regime—are indeed facilitating that solution, which is, as I say, called murder. That is the way that the solution is being progressed. Are the Russians not, however, approaching a position where their interests are about to clash and, indeed, in many ways have already begun to clash, with their partners in crime, the Iranian regime? Are we not already seeing a friction between Russia's air force and its militias, unbadged, and the Revolutionary Guard who are fighting so much on the ground alongside Hezbollah? Are we not beginning to find in a way, if you like, the second wave of the civil war starting, this time not between Syrians but between two foreign actors—one Russia, and one Iran?

Alistair Burt: Well, there is plenty of discussion in what you say. It would appear that the aims of the parties here are not always in line. Clearly, both Russia and Iran have a vested interest in the Syrian regime staying in place and continuing.

Chair: That's about it.



Alistair Burt: And that seems now to be a likely outcome. Beyond that, why is Iran in Syria? Is Iran in Syria because, again, they were a partner? Are they looking to protect other interests? Are they looking to have a forward position as a diversion from other things at home? Are they seeking to put extra pressure on Israel? To what extent does this align with Russia's interests, which would appear to be different? Russia would surely benefit from a situation in which the end of the conflict leads to a stable Syria, where conflict is not likely to reoccur, whereas there are clearly some in the Iranian system who believe a perpetual situation of conflict suits their interest, so that would be different.

What is the United Kingdom's position here? First, let's remember the Syrian people in all this. There is an argument about how many of them are going to return. This may be as much a question for the DFID Select Committee as yourselves, but let's think of this. We used to work on the basis that at the end of a conflict, people went back home and their Governments and countries welcomed them, and a new world was created. This does not seem to be likely in Syria, where the regime does not seem to be keen to take its people back. This has immense consequences for Lebanon and Jordan, as we see.

Chair: And Turkey.

Alistair Burt: And there is no chance, therefore, of stability in the future. So you are right that all these things have yet to be concluded. Our interest is with the humanitarian relief for those in Syria and working through the UN to get a political process that will align some of these difficult issues, but it will require some states to pull back from where they have been and to stop taking actions they are currently doing, if they want to see a stable situation in the future.

- Q35 **Mr Seely:** I have just a couple of quick questions. Can you say a little more about the de-escalation lines? Are you saying that there are de-escalation areas that have been negotiated, presumably with the Americans and the Turks, that the Russians are then thinning? Are they going right up to the edge of those de-escalation areas?

Alistair Burt: Martin is the de-escalation expert.

Martin Longden: The Committee will recall that three or four de-escalation areas were originally negotiated as part of the Astana agreement between the Russians, the Iranians and the Turks. They were around Hama and Homs; in the north-west, Idlib province; a special area, negotiated really bilaterally between the United States and Russia, in the south-west, which is the one that Mr Gapes was talking about—and then you have the north-east, which was not formally a de-escalation area but under the control of the Kurds and relatively quiescent, and eastern Ghouta of course. We have seen at least two of those fall, under Russian and regime pressure, and now we are seeing a third, down in the south-west.

Mr Seely: In Daraa.



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Martin Longden: Exactly right. So yes, I think that's right.

- Q36 **Mr Seely:** Have you made an assessment of what is likely to happen in the Idlib pocket this summer and autumn? I ask because there are 2.7 million civilians there, and that clearly has the potential to go very badly wrong.

Alistair Burt: Yes. Plainly, the concerns at present are what would happen if the regime turned its attention to Idlib and sought a solution as it has done elsewhere. Clearly, we will do everything we can to urge—

- Q37 **Mr Seely:** Which isn't much, as we admit. You said "do everything we can"—that is, in our limited powers.

Alistair Burt: Yes, limited. We will do everything we can, certainly as far as the humanitarian situation is concerned, to make sure, should the area be subject to siege, that there are adequate humanitarian considerations and stocks of fuel, supplies and things like that, but if there were to be an all-out assault on Idlib, it would be a disaster. But there are other interests there. The Turks are close by. Turkey has built observation towers and has a closer connection with Idlib. If there were to be a mass evacuation of people, they would probably go north, so Turkey has a vested interest in seeking to ensure that this does not happen. Perhaps there are some lessons that can be learned from the past and maybe there is a possibility of Idlib not being attacked and it being the start of a political resolution, but we do not know; we are not a party to that.

- Q38 **Mr Seely:** And in Idlib you have remnants of the Free Syrian Army—

Alistair Burt: Yes.

Mr Seely: You have pockets of AQ—

Alistair Burt: You have everything.

Mr Seely: Al-Nusra.

Alistair Burt: Correct.

Mr Seely: ISIS.

Alistair Burt: Correct.

Mr Seely: So you have a real mish-mash.

Alistair Burt: Yes, you have. You have real terrorist organisations that the United Kingdom would recognise as terrorist organisations, together with others who are not, but also, 60% of the population are IDPs, internally displaced people, who have moved from other parts of Syria and will have no connection whatsoever with any of the warring factions. This creates a massive humanitarian issue.

- Q39 **Chris Bryant:** You just mentioned Lebanon. What is your assessment of how refugees from Syria are getting on? You have already said that the prospect of their return is relatively minimal. How is Lebanon coping?



Alistair Burt: Like Jordan and Turkey, Lebanon has done remarkably with the refugees. A quarter of the population of Lebanon are Syrian refugees. I am sure someone can work that out in a British context. If we assume that something like 15 million people arrived on the south coast of England to live here for the next five years, we can imagine what the reaction would be.

Lebanon is coping with that. They do not have so many large camps and have tended to have refugees living closer to communities in smaller camps. I visited one last Friday in the northern part of Lebanon. It is not a comfortable existence. The accommodation is pretty rudimentary but people are safe, supported by UNICEF and DFID. They have access to water and food. Some people are able to work in Lebanon because they are able to do so. We have introduced a new cash programme, which is an efficient way to get resources to people and help the local economy.

But Lebanon is worried. As the Committee knows well, Lebanon is a delicate balance of different communities, reflected in its President, Speaker and Prime Minister. The addition of 1.5 million largely Sunni Muslims into a country with a delicate sectarian balance clearly is a local political issue. It is clear that in recent months, the concern of the Government has been how long this is going to go on and how long they can be expected to cope with it. There are local impacts from the refugee community, and that is part of quite a strong political discourse in Lebanon about what Lebanon can do and whether Lebanon has done its bit and it is time for people to go home.

There is a wider issue about how to designate safe areas, who has the right to say whether an area is sufficiently safe for people to go back to, and whether a host state must remain a host state as long as a refugee wants to stay. Now, there has to be a recalculation of this balance. One issue that the world has to face, as it looks at a new UN compact on refugees, is what happens if there is an area of conflict and someone shuts the doors straight away and says, "We've seen what happens in other places. If people come over the border for safety, they may be here for five or 10 years—if you are a Palestinian refugee, that could be 70 years." You have the individual context of Lebanon and Syria but then you have that magnified into a wider issue in terms of conflict areas, migration and refugees, which is exercising the world quite markedly.

For the time being, let's be clear, Lebanon has been generous. Its schools operate a double-shift system, where DFID—the UK taxpayer—helps Syrian children, being looked after by Lebanese teachers and the Lebanese community. We provide health support. We have done a great deal to support refugees there but, without the generosity of the Lebanese Government and people, that would not be possible.

Q40 Chair: I think we would all wish to extend our immense gratitude to the people of Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey. Could you briefly assure us, though this is not the specific role of the Committee, that the UK Government is doing everything it can to help the Governments of those three countries to ensure that they are looking after the people there? I



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know that is in your other brief, if you see what I mean.

Alistair Burt: Absolutely. I have been in both Lebanon and Jordan very recently and I was in Turkey a few months ago. We are. I think DFID has done a remarkable job through our partners there of doing our best to look after people. I don't think there is an acute shortage of stuff in any of these places but the issue is long term. A child who was just starting secondary school, if they fled in 2012, has now been through secondary school. What do they do next?

There are other social consequences. If a man becomes a refugee, he stops providing for his family. He feels changed and becomes different through that experience. If a woman and family have had to leave a man behind, or if a man or son has been killed, their lives are changed.

Although, understandably, we look at it in broader terms, when you get down to individual families and then multiply that by millions and millions, you see what damage it has done. The older you get, the more wretched you realise conflict is.

- Q41 **Ian Austin:** Very briefly, we heard from Syrian witnesses last week that UN aid was being politicised by the Assad regime, who are able to decide who receives the aid and who does not. Is the Government aware of that? Is that something that you have been told or picked up on? If so, is there anything that we could do to combat it?

Alistair Burt: There is regular debate about how you deal with the delivery of aid in conflict areas. The bottom line for the United Kingdom Government is that it has to go to people in need, and we recognise that there are people in need in regime-held areas, as in other areas. The UK Government does not have a blanket policy of saying, "In regime-held areas, we won't help people." We do everything we can locally, through distribution, to make it clear where aid is coming from—it is not coming from the regime; it is not the responsibility of the Government—but it would be naive to believe that a Government, a regime, was not using that completely differently in its own areas. The hard decision would have to be made to say, in Houthi areas for example, "We won't look after people in these areas because of who's controlling the territory." That does not seem to us to be the right thing to do, so we must make every effort to ensure that people understand where the aid is coming from.

- Q42 **Mr Seely:** May I follow up on Ian's question? I will play devil's advocate, because I would like to hear your answer on this.

Alistair Burt: You always do, Seely, don't you? You are making a habit of it.

Mr Seely: We are spending £2.8 billion. You have outlined very eloquently the moral good that is done with that cash, and I do not doubt that for one second, but we have bought no influence in the conflict for that money. We may have set an example, but arguably that money has gone on a moral purpose and delivered no power. You could make a worse case than that and say that because the Assad regime has stripped out aid to



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enemy-controlled or FSA and extremist-controlled areas, and has provided as little aid as possible, we have sort of been helping the Assad regime to play a very repugnant game with this aid, and have allowed the Russians and the Syrian regime to use aid as a weapon in their control and manipulation of that country's civil war. Now, these are complex moral issues and I am not saying there is a simple answer. Would you care to comment on that?

Alistair Burt: Yes, let me try. I think it is apples and pears. To expect the use of aid to buy influence in a military conflict confuses the purposes. The purpose of aid is to relieve need and humanitarian distress, and that is what it is used for. It is not conditional. Providing aid can get through to people in need, that is its purpose. If it has a moral impact and assists a process of negotiation, that is another thing.

Secondly, your question assumes that if the aid was not there, that would somehow assist a regime that has killed half a million people. I would venture to suggest that I do not think the provision of aid is the main thing on the mind of the regime. I think whether it was there or not would make very little difference. I do not think any provision of aid has kept it going. It has helped people to live who would not otherwise have lived. An awful lot of the aid is going to those who are already outside Syria being protected in other areas. You are assuming that the regime would care about people if they did not receive aid—I am not sure that is the case—and you are looking for influence through aid, which I am not sure is applied in the way you suggest.

- Q43 **Mr Seely:** No, I did say that I accept your moral case, but if you are looking at this as being about how the UK uses money for overseas policy, the return on it is moral rather than practical. That is the point I was making.

Alistair Burt: I think that has validity in its own way.

- Q44 **Mr Seely:** There was a discussion a few years ago, which I remember being vaguely part of, about whether we would try to force aid through into FSA territory and deal with non-Government and non-Government-approved actors in Syria. Clearly, that did not happen. There were strong reasons to do it, but also strong reasons not to. Do you now regret that decision, or do you reluctantly believe that it was right, because however much you disapprove of and dislike the Syrian regime, you had to recognise it as a legitimate regime, even if it was killing its own people?

Alistair Burt: When you say aid there, are you still talking about humanitarian aid, or different stuff?

Mr Seely: Yes. There was talk about military aid, which I presume we would not give to people such as the FSA, but there was also talk about humanitarian aid, and delivering it directly, not via the Government. The problem is that, especially via the UN, we have to deliver through the legitimate authority—or am I misunderstanding the case?

Alistair Burt: Martin's knowledge of this is deeper than mine.



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Martin Longden: So, Mr Seely, not entirely. In December, the Security Council passed resolution 2393, which allows for what we call cross-border aid. I think some 65% of DFID's humanitarian support for this year is going not via Damascus, but across from Jordan, Turkey or Iraq, directly into non-regime-held areas.

Q45 **Mr Seely:** That was quite late in the day, wasn't it?

Martin Longden: I am not sure when that began, but it's been a number of years now, I think.

Q46 **Ann Clwyd:** I think I have probably asked you this question before, Minister, but, as you know, the Assad family have very close connections with this country. Are they still able to come and visit their relatives? Is there any prohibition on their access here?

Alistair Burt: There are sanctions in place against certain members of the regime and those close to them. Offhand, I am not able to produce a list. I am aware that the father-in-law is certainly here and a UK citizen. I am not aware of prohibitions in relation to that. I am not sure I have anything more to say. I am not sure we go into great detail on this.

Q47 **Ann Clwyd:** Let me explain why I am asking you the question. At one time, it was said that Assad's father-in-law had quite a bit of influence over him. I am just wondering whether, formally or informally, any of these links have been explored. At one point, I was visiting two Members of Parliament in Syria who were in prison in Damascus. The officials reneged on the promise that they made to the Inter-Parliamentary Union. Although we went to Syria, we weren't allowed to visit them. I had conversation with Assad's father-in-law afterwards and I got the impression that the family come and go as they wish. That was over six years ago. Is that still the case?

Alistair Burt: Genuinely, I don't think the UK comments on individual movements such as that. I repeat only what I said before: we have no direct contact with the regime. I don't think I can say any more than that.

Martin Longden: With the EU, we have sanctioned 300 individuals and entities. One of the criteria for those sanctioned is those who are closest to the regime and to Assad himself.

Q48 **Ann Clwyd:** So that would include his immediate family?

Martin Longden: I couldn't be drawn in on which individuals are subject to sanctions.

Chair: We will leave Syria there, if that's alright, and move on briefly to Libya.

Q49 **Stephen Gethins:** You are in the position of having been the Minister with responsibility for the Middle East and North Africa in the aftermath of the conflict in Libya. You are now back in that position again. Given the conversations we are having about interventions and the aftermath of interventions, can you set out two things? First, do you think the UK has



a special responsibility to Libya? Secondly, what have we learnt?

Alistair Burt: I am not sure it is a special responsibility. Certainly, we have a relationship with Libya, which we never lost post-2011. There has been a lot said about it—there has been a Foreign Affairs Committee inquiry about it—but let me give you my view, as you have invited it. I know how hard the UK and our diplomats worked after the conflict to create a Libya that would be a success. There is this myth abroad that after the fall of Gaddafi we all just walked away. That is not true.

There were quite deliberately no boots on the ground, because, talking about lessons learned, one of the first things that people said to us was, “Don’t do an Iraq. Don’t send anyone there. The Libyans have removed their own leader. They need support and advice, but they must do it themselves. There are plenty of guns there. They don’t need any more weapons.” So a decision was taken, but it was at the request of the Libyan people, who said, “Don’t send us boots on the ground,” so we didn’t. We sent colleagues to work on stabilisation. Our diplomats worked tirelessly to create the background for a constitutional change to allow elections, which were held. There was a Government that was restored. There were then internal conflicts between the militias, those who held power, and those who believed that they had won the victory and did not want to see it taken by others, and the immense oil resource could now be shared out in a different way—all those things contrived towards the collapse of what had been created.

Q50 **Chair:** It is worth paying tribute to our then ambassador, Dominic Asquith, who is now our High Commissioner in India. His enormous courage in serving there—indeed, he was nearly killed by an attack on him—demonstrated the effort and courage that officials were willing to put in.

Alistair Burt: Thank you—that is kind. Whatever the arguments about the initial decision, to allow the view to be out there that we did nothing afterwards is genuinely wrong, and the evidence is there to support that. We tried. What we have learned—again, I refer to the excellent paper produced by the Stabilisation Unit, which considered the conflict and the end of the conflict. We tried to create a constitution and situation, but there was no base or pillars on which to build it. Gaddafi had left nothing, quite deliberately—there was 40 years of nothing. To go in with a sense of “Right, what people need are elections and a Parliament, and you can build it from scratch”—there is a timescale. People and communities have to be ready, and they weren’t.

What we now want to see, having learned those lessons, is the process now led by Ghassan Salamé, which we strongly support. Painstaking work is being done among diplomats, looking at the different centres of power in the East and the West. Can we find a way in which the acknowledged leaders of Libya, de facto, can produce a constitutional structure that will give overall legitimacy, and with sufficient engagement from the people so that they believe they will have a stake in it? Is there a responsibility? Yes.



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Are we seeking to exercise it? Yes. Have we learned lessons? Yes, I hope so.

- Q51 **Stephen Gethins:** You said that you are not sure whether we have a special responsibility. Do you think the fact that the UK intervened militarily means that we have a special responsibility in terms of the aftermath?

Alistair Burt: Yes, but so did others. Perhaps I should say that it is not a unique responsibility, but one exercised with others. The United Kingdom did not take action in Libya on its own; it was asked to do so by the Arab League and the UN.

- Q52 **Stephen Gethins:** You said that the UK went in at the request of the Libyan people. Given that these lessons may have to be applied in the future, how did you assess that request from the Libyan people?

Alistair Burt: No, I did not say we went in at the request of the Libyan people; I said that one of the requests of the Libyan people was not to have boots on the ground afterwards. If you look at how decisions were taken, if memory serves me right—this has not been part of today's pack—it was the Arab League that first said that something had to stop that potential horror. The UN acted—again, as we all know, there is interest in that UN resolution. There are those who believe that the resolution was ambiguous, and did not give the opportunity that was taken by those who wished to stop the bloodbath in Benghazi. The invitation came through a UN resolution, and the Arab League saying “You have to stop this murder in Benghazi”, and David Cameron—in my view rightly—decided to act in concert with others to prevent that.

- Q53 **Stephen Gethins:** Can you set out the UK-funded activities to promote peace and stability in Libya? How do you assess the success of those activities, and how do they differ from six years ago?

Alistair Burt: What has happened in the intervening time is that, after a period of conflict and fighting, there is a de facto resolution. There is a Parliament in the east and a Government in Tripoli, and there are still a series of discussions about how that rule will be consolidated. That was not the original situation some years ago, because there was just too much confusion. There were individual militias in Sirte, Misrata and areas like that. As I said, the overwhelming sense at first was, “We have won this victory, and therefore the spoils should be ours. We are not prepared to endorse people in suits—our local politicians—who will take away our victory.” There was a great deal of fear in one area about another, because Gaddafi had ruled that way and set his people against each other. There was no basis of trust, even though we and others in the international community tried to create a base of trust. You will remember the attempts to create a national army—people coming to the United Kingdom, and the United Kingdom offering training opportunities. To break down the sense that people owed their allegiance only to the militias rather than to a wider body, there had to be training and some attempt to do that. We tried. In the intervening years, clearly, that was not successful.



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What you have got now is a different situation. I think I would point to the activities of both Peter Millett, the former ambassador, and Frank Baker now, to encourage the parties to take the steps they need to take. There is no reason why this should not be done. The oil has started to flow; there was an attack last week, which will do significant damage to the oil flow and restrict resources to the Libyan people. There was the conference in Paris recently, convened by President Macron, where, for the first time, the four most important military figures in Libya came together. There is something on which people are working.

In terms of what success there will be, we still have to wait, but there is a process and people are talking to each other. We are playing a part, and we will continue to play a part with our stabilisation, our support for that and our support for the political process.

- Q54 **Stephen Gethins:** Just a final question. Can I firstly pay tribute? I was in the previous Committee, and we met your ambassador and the team who are working on this, as well as other actors, like the British Council, who I think are doing fantastic work in what is an extraordinarily difficult situation.

Alistair Burt: Yes, and the British Council never left—they never left at all. This is amazing.

Stephen Gethins: They are just doing extraordinary work, and I think you are right to highlight that. You will also be aware that the previous Committee were critical of the Government, in terms of not having learned the lessons of Iraq, in the aftermath of the conflict in Libya. How confident are you that—of course you can never have the full answer to this—some of those lessons have now been learned in terms of the application of the work the FCO is doing?

Alistair Burt: My sense is that the biggest lesson we have learned—and again it is covered in this recent policy-creating tool that we have produced—is patience. Let me say something that you may have heard me say before, but I think it is very relevant. Our processes here inevitably push for evidence, action, reaction, decision—everything. We assume things can be done within a particular timescale—a Minister's timescale, a Parliament's timescale. Working in the Middle East and North Africa, you find that just is not the case. Sometimes we assume that we can say and do things and encourage a timetable which just is not where the people are locally. Without a full understanding of the different component parts of a conflict, and without the understanding that sometimes they need more time than we would consider to be reasonable, you don't get anywhere.

I think, certainly as far as I am concerned, I have learned a lot about timescale, in holding this role over a period of time. I think one of the mistakes we made before was to assume that you could make quick decisions—they were so blindingly, self-obviously right that everybody would follow—and you missed things. You missed the implications of local actors, so I think we have learned that.



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The downside of all that is it means that conflict and uncertain situations may go on longer, and your constituents, mine and others will say, "Well, why is this not sorted? You have been there so many years. Why have you failed?" They may just not be the right questions. I think that a Committee such as your own, that has the chance to look more in depth at these things and work closely with our colleagues, can maybe help in that process of helping people understand that there are things you must do immediately, like stopping violence, but that their resolution sometimes takes longer.

Chair: May we move on, Minister, to Israel and Palestine? Again, all of these questions can take a while, so we are going to try and keep them short, as you have been very generous with your time already.

Ian Murray: I don't envy your portfolio.

Alistair Burt: You should. It is extraordinary. I am fortunate.

Q55 **Ian Murray:** Let's move on to Israel-Palestine. You said in the House during an urgent question on 15 May, in response to the massacre on the border between Gaza and Israel, that the UK would do everything it could to get some kind of journey towards a peace process started. What has the FCO or your Ministry done since 15 May to try to get some sort of peace process moving?

Alistair Burt: Thank you for the question. I hoped that the Middle East peace process would come up. Again, as colleagues know, I am passionate about this. I am one of the optimists in relation to this.

When I went to Gaza and Israel a couple of weeks later, my sense was that there was significant shock about the events, particularly of 14 May, the day of the highest number of deaths and wounded. I think that shocked the Israeli system, who were very alert and aware of criticism about the use of live fire.

I think it shocked those who had exploited the protests and been very deliberate. We know what Hamas did. I think there was shock in Gaza about what had happened. The demonstration of that was the next day, which was a Friday, when there were very few people. Orders are given, and people respond to orders. Don't be under any illusions any other way. So, I think there was shock to the system.

In going there, there was also a sense that Gaza could not just go on as it was. I said in answer to questions in the debate in Westminster Hall last week about Gaza that any objective assessment of policy on Gaza would say it had failed, whoever you were. If you were Israel and had looked to squeeze the politics in Gaza for the past 10 or 12 years, it has not worked: Hamas is still there, Gaza is still as it is, and there are still threats to people on the border. So, that has not worked.

If you are Hamas, it has not worked: Israel has not disappeared—there is no political gain for you. If you are the people of Gaza, it has been a disaster. No one looking at Gaza would think anything other than, "We



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have got to do something different.” That has to protect Israel’s security, but it has got to provide humanitarian relief and a change in the nature of life for Gaza.

There is determination at the UN, through special envoy Nickolay Mladenov and his medium and longer term plans. I think there is some recognition in Israel from those responsible, both COGAT and the Minister for Planning, that more needs to be done.

Into all that, what the UK has injected—and I have injected at all times—is that you cannot sort this unless there is the overall agreement, because you can’t look at Gaza on its own. You can only seriously resolve Gaza if you are prepared to look at the two-state solution and to start once again the efforts to bring a political conclusion to this. That can only be done by waiting for the moment the envoys produce their proposals and then we all pile in on this. There has never been a better time to do this. I think the incidents of Gaza have provided one element—one catalyst—to this process, and we have been vociferous in making that case ever since.

Q56 Ian Murray: And still making the case at the UN, bilaterally, with the Israelis and the Palestinians?

Alistair Burt: Yes. I would go there at the drop of a hat any time. We are in contact with all the respective parties. We know that the two envoys are talking to people in the region. We know that Mr Kushner and Mr Greenblatt have been there recently. It is a very active conversation, and everyone is expectant.

We urge the PA to get back into a relationship with the United States, because that fell away after the Jerusalem decision. We understand the feelings of sentiment there by the PA, but it is important that the United States stay engaged, because they must be part of the proposals when they come forward.

The proposals have got to be timed right, and they have got to be workable. They may not be the answer on their own, but they have got to allow a number of other parties—ourselves and EU colleagues—to get in there to support the process, because ultimately it has got to be a negotiation between Israel and Palestinian representatives. It cannot be imposed on anybody, but there is a better chance now, and we should all seek to take it.

Q57 Ian Murray: In your view and that of the FCO, do you still see the US as being an honest broker, given the Trump Administration? More importantly, do the people on the ground still see the US as an honest broker?

Alistair Burt: The US’s role as broker has been damaged by the decision on Jerusalem, as we said at the time. I can’t see that it is the sole broker any more, if it had ever been. Is it involved, though? Absolutely. It must be, because it is the most significant link with Israel, and that’s why we urge the PA to get involved. But it’s also why others have got a real opportunity to help in this process, including, of course, Arab states, which



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will not forget Jerusalem at all, but want to see a just solution—a solution that recognises security for Israel as well—perhaps in a way that has not been evident for some time.

- Q58 **Ian Murray:** I don't want to take the Bob Seely route of hypotheticals and playing devil's advocate, but I asked a former Foreign Secretary—Lord Hague—on at least a dozen occasions through the 2010-2015 Parliament the same question about a two-state solution. The answer was always similar, namely that the window for opportunity for achieving it was closing. I think I have asked you similar questions directly on a number of occasions in the House.

Can you see how sceptical people could be, given that that is the answer from the UK Government's position, in terms of the window of opportunity closing for a two-state solution, but that it seems that nothing is being done to try to get Israel to abide by the UN resolutions to stop building illegal settlements? How many illegal settlements have not been built or constructed, or been halted, as a result of UK pressure, either at the UN or bilaterally with Israel?

Alistair Burt: The answer to your second question is "significant". We know that our concerns about settlements probably assist in a slowing of process, but it's impossible to say. I think our resolute position on settlements—that includes a very strong UN resolution, I think in 2014—has been noted in Israel. However, Israel's policy on settlements goes on, as we know, and our position on that is very clear.

I think you have to separate, in a very complex situation, this issue from restarting the Middle East peace process talks. We are clear that the longer the settlement process goes on, the more difficult, but not impossible, it becomes to do the land swaps that we still believe will form the basis of a land settlement that will enable the final agreement between Israel and the Palestinians to go ahead.

We can understand the scepticism, but the question I have to throw back is: well, if it's not this, what is it? Is it a continuation of where we are now? I think that's a disaster, and I've said so. All that happens if things carry on as they are now is they get worse: Gaza gets worse, and the sense of hopelessness in the West Bank gets worse.

For those, like the PA, who have accepted the existence of the state of Israel, recognised Israel, worked with Israel on security concerns, and turned away from violence, what do they have to show for it? How long can they go on like that? And if those in Israel who push and work for a two-state solution as well see the land dropping away and then, "Well, if it's not two-state, it's one-state", how does that work?

I have to be an optimist, because I can't see another road here. That's why, despite the scepticism, and despite the fact that it hasn't happened yet, there are still as many good reasons for it to happen as there originally were, and we have to believe that.



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The support for the existence of the state of Israel and its security is absolutely fundamental to the United Kingdom and will not change, but we just believe with a passion that that security is enhanced by an agreement and by the creation of a viable state of Palestine to go with it. And we'll continue to do that, because I cannot see an alternative that delivers both justice and security for Israel.

- Q59 **Mike Gapes:** You talked about Arab interests. My impression is that the UAE and Saudi Arabia might be interested in a solution to this issue, but their energy is very much on their own concerns about Iran and on the dispute of the Gulf Co-operation Council with Qatar. Realistically, do they have enough weight to offset misjudgments coming from Washington, which could actually reduce the likelihood of a Palestinian state, as opposed to some kind of autonomous "associated with Jordan" Palestinian entity, which is certainly what some in the US are pressing for? Would you agree that that is a complete non-starter as far as the Palestinians are concerned? **Alistair Burt:** My sense has been that, after so long, the wish for statehood and the work that has been done in relation to that is overwhelming in terms of the Palestinian Authority, and must remain so. It has been the whole basis of the post-Oslo relationship between the PA and Israel, which has largely kept the peace on the west bank—sometimes in very difficult circumstances. I find it hard to envisage a solution in which there is a sort of non-state proposed and a belief that it would be accepted. I am sure that there must be a way to go back to where we have been for many years—the blueprints for a state are there—but that has to come with all the rest of it: the security concerns, a solution in Gaza, Hamas moving away from the murderous position it has adopted. All those things are vital. The terror, the threat of terror, and the threat of the ideological extinction of the state of Israel has all got to go as well. It only goes when there is a just solution, which comes at a price of compromise all round. I would hope that the Arab states would recognise that, but that is a matter for them.

Chair: May I stop you there and ask if we can move on to Iraq, a separate area of your brief?

- Q60 **Ann Clwyd:** May I ask you about the CSSF—the conflict stability and security fund?

Alistair Burt: You can ask Martin about CSSF. He is my CSSF man.

Ann Clwyd: How will it be used to stabilise Mosul and Nineveh?

Alistair Burt: I will just offer a quick comment on Mosul, as Martin puts together some facts. I have seen some of the work that has been done in Mosul, the Nineveh plains and elsewhere, and, again, it is a very good combination of cross-Whitehall work between DFID and the FCO in particular.

Mosul is a disaster on an extraordinary scale. Angelina Jolie was there just this week, and of course there was a lot of coverage of that. Just seeing the backdrop is horrific; a huge amount of work has to go on there. Basic



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stabilisation and trying to return people to the places they lived in are very important.

On the Nineveh plains, I have seen projects where displaced Christian families have returned to an area burned out by Daesh and returned to apartments. A new hospital is being built to serve a Christian community. Some projects are going on that are proving to be very effective, but Martin will have a bit more background.

Martin Longden: Apologies to the Committee, but I do not have the detail on the spending in Mosul. Suffice to say, we are conscious that the costs, scale and effort of that kind of reconstruction are huge, and there will need to be a sustained international effort for some time.

Q61 **Ann Clwyd:** The Secretary of State for Defence said on the Floor of the House today that “stabilising Iraq will require a good deal more than rooting out the remnants of Daesh. It will be about reconstructing Mosul and other affected areas.” The task is huge—from looking at the aerial photographs. Apart from meeting with NGOs, I was in Baghdad just a few weeks ago. The task is enormous. I am trying to grasp exactly what we are doing there.

Alistair Burt: My memory has come back to me now, and I can say that we are providing more than £30 million of support for UN stabilisation efforts.

Q62 **Ann Clwyd:** How much?

Alistair Burt: Some £30 million, but I will come on to bigger figures. We are providing £30 million of support for immediate stabilisation efforts: securing liberated areas, clearing Daesh explosives and supporting the renovation of water facilities, power networks, clinics and schools. We have committed more than £100 million in CSSF funding to Iraq in total. I took part in the recent Kuwait conference, where £30 billion was pledged by the international community to help the reconstruction of Iraq. Significant funds are going in from a whole series of donors, but our immediate work—

Q63 **Ann Clwyd:** Can I just ask you about what you are prioritising because, talking to people in other parts of Iraq, who are also recovering, the fact that they cannot get water and electricity on a regular basis is one of the big arguments going on at the moment in other parts of Iraq. Obviously, things like water and electricity restoration are going to be very important in places like Mosul.

Alistair Burt: When I mentioned the figure of £30 billion, I think that is a recognition of the reconstruction needs across Iraq. Our own priorities have been the most damaged areas, and the areas in most need, like Mosul, because there—for those who have been, and those who haven’t—they are still dealing with the booby traps, these very small Daesh tripwires that release an explosive, that are all over the place, which makes it impossible.



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You see an area of dereliction and say, "Right, send in the bulldozers, clear it out; rebuild." You can't. So our immediate priority is to get people back to areas they want to live, and to make sure they have water and power, and everything else. That is Mosul.

- Q64 **Ann Clwyd:** Some Mosul! I spoke to people who have been in the camps, some of whom have returned home and have found it is unsafe to be there and have gone back to the camps again.

Alistair Burt: Well, you raise a further issue and, again, going back to something I said earlier, Iraq is also a state where you have to assume that the writ of the Government does not necessarily run everywhere.

In the circumstances you are talking about, local militant groups who provide protection for one community, but maybe not another—at some stage that has to come to an end, because those providing security have got to provide security for all; but certain community groups who feel they have fled an area, whether they are Yazidi, whether they are Christian, whether they are either Sunni or Shi'a, depending on who has been the oppressed minority, find it difficult to return to an area where the stronger minority is running the militia—is running the so-called policing and protection mechanisms. In these areas part of the UK's influence and work, and part of the new Government of Iraq's work, is to create structures of local government which include all parts of every community, to allow a process to develop whereby people will be protected.

Again, as I mentioned earlier to Stephen, this is not something that you impose, and say "Look, this is what you should do" and people say "Right, we're going to do it." We are talking about years of mistrust and conflict and violence. It takes time to create these situations where everyone feels safe.

What I was saying in relation to the experience in Nineveh was, just as you will be able to find those in camps who are afraid to go back, you are now starting to find people who have returned. I think, if memory serves me right, about half of those who fled—were IDPs in the Nineveh plain—have now returned. It will leave over a million still not returned, but this is not something that is going to happen quickly, or overnight.

- Q65 **Ann Clwyd:** May I ask you about the treatment of women and children allegedly connected with Daesh fighters, some of whom are also foreign nationals, who continue to be detained in Iraq? What, ultimately, do you think the fate of those women and children will be, or should be? I found the large numbers of people in detention reminded me of Rwanda, and seeing people held in camps there; and of course in the end the justice system could not cope with the numbers of people in detention and I am just fearful that the same thing could happen here.

Alistair Burt: I think that is a very live concern, Ms Clwyd. Again, the context is that these are people who have been associated, in the minds of the people of Iraq, with those who have committed atrocities against them, and the risk of revenge is obviously very great.



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The United Kingdom plainly stands against any sort of reprisal. We are actively working with the Iraqi Government on how some of these detained are going to be treated. We know about them and they know we know about them, which is important, and they will not be forgotten, but there are certainly areas of camps which appear to have been exclusively available to those who are connected with former fighters.

Of course, there is a risk that if they left those areas and returned to areas where there would be fighting, those women and children might not be safe there either. How you cope with this issue of reprisal in a post-conflict situation is a significant human problem. We have people there, and we share the concerns that people should be treated justly, but it is easy to sit here and talk about this. It is quite different in a context where they are interacting with those who have been killed, sometimes in horrific circumstances, and where expectations may be very different.

- Q66 **Ann Clwyd:** The UN Secretary-General's annual report on children and armed conflict was published recently. The point was made that close UK allies—Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan and Nigeria, among others—were listed as violators of children's rights in conflict. What are we doing to engage and work with Iraq and Saudi Arabia in particular to bring those violations to an end, because they are going on?

Alistair Burt: The relationship we have with both Iraq and Saudi Arabia enables us to raise issues of potential breaches of international humanitarian law, and we do. I know from personal contacts with Ministers and officials in those countries that we raise these issues. We seek to ensure that those responsible for detentions and security situations understand international obligations. It is pertinent with both of them.

I am aware of the recent report by the UN Secretary-General, which is being studied, but the relationship is not such that we can automatically go in and stop these things. Where there are allegations against children, those have to be properly and fully investigated, because none of those are acceptable, but the relationship with both states allows us to raise those issues, express the United Kingdom's concerns and point to a different way.

- Q67 **Ann Clwyd:** What we are then doing actively to promote the rule of law as far as prosecuting these alleged fighters is concerned is under question. I met with the chief justice in Baghdad recently.

Alistair Burt: Lord Justice Gross?

- Q68 **Ann Clwyd:** Yes. He talked about his difficulties because of the sheer numbers that they have to deal with. What are we doing to promote or assist the rule of law?

Alistair Burt: Should the Committee have done with me by 5 o'clock, I will also be meeting the Lord Justice, because I have an appointment with him in the FCO to discuss just this. We are backing the various accountability mechanisms that have been set up, both in Syria and Iraq.

It is interesting that you met him in Baghdad, where he was given access by the Iraqi justice system. I met the Iraqi Justice Minister recently.

Again, we often make the assumption in shorthand that Governments work the same way as ours do and that there are structures and ministries and you press a button and things work and all that. It does not always work that way. There are people to be persuaded. There are people who have been through extraordinary circumstances.

Dealing with the rule of law and everything and getting people to think what they previously had not thought—it is a process, and it takes time. That a state recognises that the United Kingdom has something to offer here and wants to follow and support our practice and be guided is really significant.

I welcome the activities that Lord Justice Gross and his colleagues have followed in relationship to this, and we will give them every support and back-up. We have seen things change in Iraq over recent years, and I am quite sure the new Government intend to continue that.

- Q69 **Chair:** Can we move on to another area of your remit—Iran? We are all aware of the US withdrawal of the JCPOA. If I may, I will ask you for a brief update on where we as the United Kingdom in this process and where our regional allies are. That would be an extremely useful thing to do. If I may, I ask you to keep it brief, as you have a 5 o'clock meeting.

Alistair Burt: We are still engaged with the other partners to the treaty in working through how we can continue to deliver on our obligations under the treaty when it is not yet fully clear exactly what the impact of all the US sanctions will be.

We are looking at how we can make sure that economic mechanisms—banking and the like—can continue. The EU has already, I think, re-issued its blocking mechanism, which enables the EU to defend itself against charges that it is not working with US sanctions, if I have that technically right. All the EU countries, the E3, are working through what we hope we can deliver. Russia and China are involved as well, to see what they can keep open.

There has already been an impact. Certain companies have already withdrawn from Iran; they don't believe they will be able to keep working. We are obviously disappointed by that, because we see JCPOA and the economic responsibilities there as part of the process of dealing with the things that Iran has to deal with. We are not minimising those, but we want to deal with them within the JCPOA box.

There will be a further meeting later this week at which we will be able to see how far we have got in relation to this process, but we will continue to urge Iran to stick with this process, not to move away from it. The EU will be able to look at what progress we have made, in what is a difficult situation, to provide the economic background to the obligations we want to see delivered.



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Q70 **Chair:** And your co-operation with your French and German opposite numbers on this is close?

Alistair Burt: It is very good. We all absolutely agree that JCPOA is where we want to be. It is complex, but we feel that it is an absolutely essential part of the jigsaw in responding to Iran and dealing with Iran in future.

Q71 **Mike Gapes:** On Iran generally, there were mass demonstrations and protests around the end of last year, which were mainly among poorer, working-class trade union organisations. It is now clear that there is a recent spate of further protests, which—from what I have read—seem to be in the more affluent areas, and different people are engaged from before.

How stable is this regime in Iran, and is there a possibility that because of the failure to get the benefits of the lifting of the sanctions because of the current situation, the economic position that Iran is in will be deteriorating, leading to further protest?

Alistair Burt: Our assessment is that despite the protests, the Government in Iran are pretty stable. Yes, there have been protests, as you have indicated, but these are not uncommon in a range of countries in the Middle East, to express concern about economic considerations. I do not think I have seen anything to suggest that the Government are in significant trouble because of them. President Rouhani has acknowledged the economic pressures on Iran, and is looking to take measures to deal with this.

We hope, of course, that JCPOA and continuing trade will assist with that process, but then the determination is, “What are the Government of Iran going to do about the issues that it has with the rest of the world, where it needs to change course?” But if anyone is assuming that the recent protests that have been reported are somehow evidence of imminent collapse, we would not agree with that assessment.

Q72 **Mike Gapes:** There has been a feeling that the people of Iran have not received the benefits, but that the Iranian Government have been financing destabilisation in other countries—there is a big military spend related to Syria—and so there might be a question mark about whether the JCPOA is actually going to be benefiting, or whether it will encourage adverse behaviour by Iran in other areas. I say that as somebody who supports the JCPOA.

Alistair Burt: No, I understand that. There is a great deal in your question, not all of which it is possible to give an authoritative comment on, because there are different strands of opinion about how this is working. It would appear to be the case that elements of the protests that we have seen indicate a concern among some about Iran’s activities externally, and a suggestion that Iran would be better occupied doing something different and looking after its own people. That is a strand of the protests; there are other strands of the protests.

Our own assessment is that Iran has a diversionary foreign policy that takes it into different countries for reasons other than simply economic



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diffusion. One of the issues that the world has with Iran is to say that a return to the company of nations cannot happen while its activities—whether ballistic missile testing or interference in other regimes—cause the concern they do, and while Iran causes people to view what it considers to be defensive actions as essentially offensive actions. Unless there is a change, Iran will not be seen in a different way.

On the economic pressures, again there is more than one school of thought. On the one hand some people say, “Well, Iran got this massive economic boost and it gave all this money to other people”, but others say, “Look at its economic position. It is very precarious”—but it cannot be both at the same time. The truth is that Iran’s foreign policy is not necessarily related solely to its economic position; it is about an issue of principle, which we believe is fundamentally flawed. That is why we believe that Iran must look to its activities and change the way that it interacts. Otherwise it risks a very perilous course.

Equally, the economic condition of the people is acceptable in Iran—that is a domestic matter. There are different stands of opinion in Iran about how to handle that, and different opinions about where all this has come from. It is complex, but the United Kingdom’s position, as with other partners in the JCPOA, is this: economic benefits in Iran should work for the stability of Iran, but that does not in any way suggest an acceptance of its activities.

The JCPOA did not say, “Look after the nuclear issue, but you are then free to go off and do anything you wish because you are obeying the nuclear file”. Iran must understand that just dealing with that issue, and not dealing with other areas of pressure in other states, is not sufficient. That is what the discussion will continue to be with Iran.

Q73 Ian Murray: Briefly, Minister, what progress is being made to secure the release of UK nationals such as Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe? Please do not say what your Foreign Secretary said a year ago.

Alistair Burt: We think about the detained nationals every day, and we are continuing to do the best we can, and use whatever channels we have, to make the case for humanitarian release, particularly in Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe’s case.

There are other cases—some known to you and others not known—and this is a continual dialogue with the state of Iran. We do not believe it is in the best interests of detainees to be always in the public view—I know that must be difficult for the Committee, but I ask its members to be kind enough to accept that.

There is nothing further that we think we can do that we are not trying to do, and we are conscious of each and every one of those people—those known and unknown—and their families. It is a constant matter for us in the Foreign Office, and not a day goes by in which we are not thinking about them and seeing whether there is anything we can do to further their best interests.



Q74 Ian Murray: May I just ask a general question without specific reference to individuals? Do you feel today, as you sit here, closer to progress in having UK nationals released than you were three, six or 12 months ago, or when you held this post previously?

Alistair Burt: That is a very difficult question. We know that there are those in the Iranian system who wish to see detained UK and dual nationals released, and there are others who stick very closely to the letter of the law. This is a matter for them.

The more contact we have with the Iranian system—I mean contact that is open. When I speak to my contacts in Iran, I do not disguise the concerns that we have on issues where we are at serious odds, but I seek not to use those concerns as mechanisms to close everything else down. I do not think that is the way it works.

To answer your question, the longer we have the contact, the more we seek to understand what we agree with and what we do not agree with, and I feel that those conversations assist in the sort of relationship that might prove beneficial across the board.

Chair: Minister, thank you very much indeed. It has been a marathon session from you, particularly on this last point, and we are conscious that sometimes loose talk from various people has been unfortunate. There is no question that the responsibility lies with the Iranian Government, and it is for them to resolve this problem. We thank you and Dr Longden very much for your time, which has been gratefully received.