

Defence Committee

Oral evidence: Global Islamist Terrorism, HC 735

Tuesday 15 Jan 2019

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[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Dr Julian Lewis (Chair); Graham P. Jones; Johnny Mercer; Mrs Madeleine Moon; Gavin Robinson; Ruth Smeeth; John Spellar; Phil Wilson.

Questions 1-53

Witnesses

I: David Patrikarakos, Oxford Research Group, Emily Knowles, Oxford Research Group and Chris Woods, Airwars.

Written evidence from witnesses:

[Emily Knowles](#)

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: David Patrikarakos, Emily Knowles and Chris Woods.

Chair: Good morning, and welcome to the first evidence session of the Defence Committee's global Islamist terrorism inquiry. In this inquiry, we set out to examine the role that UK defence plays in countering Islamist terrorism and how effective it is.

In this session, the Committee will examine how social media in particular has changed the battlefield, and the role played by building partner capacity and offering air support to partners in the UK's counter-terrorism strategy. We have three expert witnesses and, as usual, I will ask each of them to say a few words by way of introduction for the record. I will then hand over to John Spellar to start our questioning.

Emily Knowles: Thank you for inviting us to speak today. I am Emily Knowles and I head the Oxford Research Group's remote warfare programme. We are a small research and policy team examining changes in military engagement, with a focus on the shift towards remote warfare, so we have a big focus on building partner capacity and the current fights against ISIS, al-Shabaab and Al Qa'ida.

David Patrikarakos: I am David Patrikarakos. I am an author and an analyst. Most recently, I am the author of "War in 140 characters: How Social Media Is Reshaping Conflict in the Twenty-First Century", which is quite apt. I am also a Poynter fellow at Yale and an associate fellow of the School of Iranian Studies at St Andrews.

Chris Woods: I am Chris Woods. I am the director of Airwars, which is a UK-based international NGO. We monitor reported civilian harm from the battlefield. I primarily focus on Iraq, Syria and Libya at the moment, mostly listening to what local communities themselves are reporting out. We then engage, where we can, with militaries to help them to better understand where the harm is occurring, with the aim of getting those casualties down wherever we can.

Q1 **John Spellar:** A more general question to start with. Is Islamist terrorism, in your view, an—or the—existential threat to the UK?

Emily Knowles: A tough question to start off with. It is certainly something that continues to challenge Governments. If you look at the political will for large boots-on-the-ground style deployments post Iraq and Afghanistan, you can see that there has been a real shift in Government willingness to have the same style of large military intervention overseas. At the same time, you have this continuing threat from terrorist groups, which tend to be operating in areas where there is enduring weakness in local partners on the ground; it is not as though these groups are operating in areas where there are strong local militaries that can provide security.



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That is where things such as the 2011 Building Stability Overseas Strategy really came in, to say that it is important for the UK, and for the UK's security, to be building the capacity of those partners on the ground now, so that in the future they can provide better security for their own countries and regions, so that we are not locked into an endless cycle of international military intervention.

I know that Russia and other threats have been much more in the news recently, but this is something that lends itself to a more preventative long-term approach. That can make it seem less threatening, but it is absolutely in the UK's long-term interest to get it right.

David Patrikarakos: Emily is absolutely spot-on. It is not an existential threat, security-wise, in that the UK is not going to fall anytime soon as a result of Islamist or jihadist terror, but the long-term threat is very real.

I would like to point out to the Committee that we now have millions—literally—of young Muslims growing up in refugee camps because of Syria. They have no work and no chance of employment. Those camps are going to be breeding grounds for terrorism. That is a threat that no one seems to have really taken into account, but it is going to produce a lot more Islamist terror.

As Emily rightly said, we focus on Russia, which is a different form of threat, but I would say that ISIS, or Daesh, was a game-changer in that regard. It was a game-changer because it was the first essentially digital terror group. That is going to be the norm from now on; all terror groups have picked up on that. The threat is very much going to increase over the long term, I would imagine.

Chris Woods: On the question of existential, I think probably not. Do they still represent a threat to the United Kingdom? Yes, they do. Where terror groups become a significant problem is when they transition over into territorial holding entities, which has been the major challenge, particularly in fighting the so-called Islamic State or Daesh.

The war to defeat ISIS as a territorial entity is now almost four and a half years long—longer than world war one in duration, in fact. It is a very substantial conflict against a non-state actor behaving in the manner of a state actor and having to be engaged as a state actor, in terms of having to be removed from cities, towns, countries and so on. In terms of the threat that terror groups represent, it is when they make that switch that we should be particularly concerned.

Our focus at Airwars is obviously on civilian harm. There is an interesting question there about the ways that we engage these terrorist organisations. The military cost to the United Kingdom in defeating ISIS has been incredibly low, and that is to be welcomed. I would say that we have actually seen a significantly larger cost to British civilians. Many British civilians have been killed in ISIS terror attacks, not just here in the UK but in other nations as well. These conflicts can often see transfer of risks on to domestic civilian populations. That is certainly something that

ISIS and other terror groups will continue to strive to do. I think that is a significant ongoing concern, here in the UK as well.

Q2 John Spellar: You touched on the question of our response in your replies. What is your evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the UK's defence counter-terrorism strategy?

Emily Knowles: We do field research on the ground in places where the UK is carrying out counter-terrorism operations, as well as running roundtables here in London with the political and military communities. One of the things that really comes out is that the strategies themselves are good. I mentioned the Building Stability Overseas Strategy. That has been followed by many welcome efforts in strategic defence and security reviews, the Modernising Defence Programme and lately with the National Security Capability Review, which talks about fusion doctrine and the need for a whole-of-Government approach to this sort of problem. That really shows that the Government is good at understanding that this isn't a narrow military, counter-terrorism problem but it requires stabilisation, development and a broader range of Government activity.

The weakness is that there is a gap between the aspirations that we see the Government set out and the activities that are carried out on the ground. In the countries where we are working at the moment, building of partner capacity is taking place against a backdrop of ongoing and immediate security threats. Whether you are looking at ISIS, al-Shabaab, Boko Haram or Al Qa'ida, we are working with partners who are already actively engaged in a fight. That is lending a very short-term military counter-terrorism perspective to the activities that the UK is carrying out. You have military criteria being used to pick local partners, rather than political criteria, which is really what things like the Building Stability Overseas Strategy require. From the perspective of building these partners' capacity, success must look like you are building effective, accountable, legitimate security actors who are going to be able to provide security for the wider population, whereas what we see is that the activity stops at picking partners who are good for an immediate counter-terrorism fight.

I will pick one example from the field research we were doing in Iraq last year. We were out there in November 2017, so before victory against ISIS was officially declared but after the referendum on Kurdish independence in Iraq. We saw the legacy of supporting Kurdish groups or picking partners that would be good to counter ISIS, leading to a fracturing of the security sector in Iraq. We had parliamentary candidates in Iraq sitting down and saying to us, "The Kurds have had no role; they have had no role to play in the anti-ISIS fight at all." It really evaporated all the good will that we might otherwise have seen. From our interviews at the time, I know that the hope was that having one common threat might serve to unify partners rather than fragment them, whereas you saw an immediate evaporation of that with the independence referendum, which must be tracked to an increase in belief in the political bargaining power of the Kurds, throughout the anti-ISIS campaign.



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I know that we often talk about short-term/long-term trade-offs—that is a dilemma that policy makers will be very aware of—but we are not talking about long-term implications in the sense that these are unknown, unintended consequences that might occur in the next five to 10 years. These are direct, detrimental impacts that we are seeing now, on the ground. That short-term counter-terrorism approach is really dominating discussions around building partner capacity in all the countries we have been interviewing in, whether that's Mali, Kenya, Iraq, Afghanistan or Somalia. Success must be that this activity is leading to something bigger and broader in terms of stability, and we are not seeing that link-up.

To summarise, the strategies are good, but the activities that we are currently doing aren't doing justice to the strategies.

David Patrikarakos: I want to look at something slightly different in terms of the narrative—the messaging—and our strengths and weaknesses in that. This is where social media is key and this is where the 21st-century terror group comes into play. If you look at Daesh, for example, as was rightly pointed out, as its caliphate shrinks on the ground, its virtual caliphate remains undiminished. Indeed, if you look at content that is still being produced by Daesh, it is nostalgic in intent. It is creating a repository of content that people can look back on. How do you defeat something that when defeated on the ground continues to exist virtually and becomes a franchise? That is what Daesh now is—it's a franchise, and you can essentially never kill a franchise. You can defeat it on the ground, even though reports of its defeats on the ground are overstated.

We have to understand what we are dealing with. In my book I call it "homo digitalis". It is a slightly fancy name, but essentially it is about the hyper-empowered networked individual that the digital revolution has brought forth. By that I mean that ordinary people have theoretically been endowed with extraordinary abilities. A classic example of that is Eliot Higgins and Bellinccat—are you familiar with that? Eliot Higgins is a chap who uses open source, that is to say non-classified, non-intelligence material, and he is the chap who showed, physically, how Russia provided the BUK missile that downed MH17 over eastern Ukraine. He did that purely from open sources. The barriers to entry are very low. When we face a group like Daesh we are facing not a bunch of rag-tag terrorists, but a bunch of networked individuals. That gives them something, which is to win the narrative war and battle, and that is fundamental for things like recruitment. At its peak, about 4,000 to 5,000 people a week were going to join Daesh. They were leaving from other parts of the Middle East, Europe, North America and so on. If Daesh had existed just 10 years earlier, it would have taken it 25 years to reach a quarter of those people.

We were talking about messaging. In a post second world war world that is designed to regulate war out of existence, state-on-state conflict is largely absent. The Falklands war is obviously an exception, but in Iraq it was not the battle against Saddam's troops but the insurgency that was the problem. That is what we face. With ISIS we saw major institutions



and hierarchies lose to networked groups of homo digitalis. I identify three issues when we talk about the narrative battle, and that is key. In asymmetrical warfare non-state actors will never win the military battle, but we are now in a situation where they can win the narrative battle. That translates into recruitment for a terrorist group, or for non-state actors such as Hamas, into political support. We must understand that Governments and bureaucracies are bloated, often risk-averse and conservative institutions, and time and again I found in my research that they lost out to the freewheeling, fluid, agile homo digitalis.

For example, a case study from my book concerns a division of the State Department tasked with countering ISIS propaganda, but it was totally defeated. The Government of the most powerful country on earth, and possibly in history, was defeated by a bunch of Twitter fan boys, the so-called “knights of the uploading”.

- Q3 **Chair:** You mention your concept of them being defeated in the digital world. Do you mean defeated in the sense purely that the Government did not manage to take down their messages, or do you mean defeated in some broader sense that did physical harm to the country they were attempting to agitate against?

David Patrikarakos: I mean the US was defeated in the sense that first it was swamped by numbers, and secondly its message did not get through. Thirdly, it could not offer an equally engaging counter-narrative. There are three points. First, bureaucracies cannot compete with networked terror groups—they cannot deal with homo digitalis. The UK has to outsource counter-messaging to third parties, which it is doing. Secondly, Government institutions are damned by what they are—they are tainted by their very brand. If you are a young disaffected Muslim, or whoever, who is the last person you will listen to? It will be the US or the UK Governments. Thirdly—this is the most controversial and difficult point, but I found it again and again. Speaking to people who had joined Daesh—that was very hard—and speaking to people fighting Daesh, showed that we do not have an equally positive counter-message.

The media focused a lot—irresponsibly, in my view—on the beheadings and the gruesome violence of ISIS videos. Actually, that was a very minor part of their content; 80% of it was positive intent. It was, “Come and join the ulama; join and worship in a proper Islamic state.” The choice was given to potential groups: stay in London and drive a cab, or come here and be a hero. Our message was: if you go to ISIS, you will get arrested. There will only ever be one winner. We cannot offer an equally positive counter-message; and it shouldn’t be a counter-message but a message about the benefits of liberal democracy—the benefits of living in Britain and in the West. We do not do that. Those are the three big weaknesses.

- Q4 **Chair:** Before you go on, I want to ask one more question before I bring in Madeleine and we go back to John. If the message is so much easier for the terrorist groups to put out than for the Government to combat, could not an argument be made that you must fight them on the ground where you are stronger and they are weaker, not the other way round?



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You are saying that they cannot win the real-life battle but they cannot be defeated in the digital battle. So surely, the best message to send to them is the fate of what happened to people previously who did listen to their message, who went out on to the battlefield and who either came back disillusioned or disappointed, or did not come back at all.

David Patrikarakos: Absolutely. The thing about propaganda is it always has to be tethered to some form of truth. The reason ISIS was so successful initially is that it took Mosul and then rolled across half of Iraq and Syria. Certainly, when you defeat them on the ground, you diminish their ability to message. However, as we have discussed, even when you defeat them on the ground, their message can still continue virtually and they just franchise out. But I agree 100%.

Chair: I know you are still mid-flow, but I want a couple of colleagues to ask questions before we resume.

Q5 **Mrs Moon:** You were beginning to pick at the resilience issue—how we fight back—and the fact that people on the receiving end are not necessarily even aware of how to interpret the messaging and what its aim is when it is coming their way. Are we doing enough to prepare young people for the messaging on social media and its impact on their thinking?

My second question is, are we doing enough about the source of funding for all this? It does not take that much money, but if lots of people are employed to do it, are we doing enough to take down the funding sources as well as the messaging?

David Patrikarakos: That is an excellent question. On the first issue, I believe there is a wider problem: we need to put social media literacy on the national curriculum.

Mrs Moon: Absolutely; I could not agree with you more.

David Patrikarakos: That is a wider issue. This is how people aged 8, 9, 10, 11, 12 and 13 view the world and democracy. This is how democracy is distilled to them. I believe there is a wider issue and we have to do more on that. Putting social media literacy on the national curriculum is the only way to do that.

On the funding issue, I think the social media companies are very culpable. They have a very neutral nomenclature—platform, newsfeed—to give the idea that they are neutral spaces. They are not—they are businesses designed to make money, which is fair enough. Their product is their users. That means they are very disinclined to kick users off their platform, for the simple reasons that Nazis and Islamists buy trainers, too. They are very disinclined to check sources of funding where there are adverts and those sorts of things, if that is what you are talking about. Those are two big issues that you have identified, which I think are serious problems. On the funding issue, there has to be some kind of greater regulation of the social media companies, because they will not do it themselves.

Q6 **Chair:** Emily, did you want to come in on that point?

Emily Knowles: I just wanted to add a couple of points. We have heard a lot and it is really interesting how social media is used by groups on the ground to mobilise, but a lot of our research focuses on how the information age and social media more generally have changed the strategic environment of how the UK uses force more generally.

Defence has failed to adapt to the fact that, in a lot of the areas where we intervene, there is burgeoning access to the internet and smartphones. People on the ground have access to Twitter and social media in a way that we just would not have seen in the past. That is really challenging the way the Government has previously made assumptions about its ability to control the narrative over its military operations. We have seen this to perhaps the starkest effect at the more secretive end of British military operations. Previously, things like special operations would not have been commented on, and they still are not commented on by the Government, yet you see a huge amount of media speculation around them. Libya is a really interesting example. Numerous media reports surfaced about a British role in Libya. You had the US and France, who are able to comment on special operations, talking about their role in Libya. You have to ask yourself how much the UK Government is really hamstringing itself in having this narrative around military engagements by having this “no comment” approach.

Mrs Moon: Absolutely.

Emily Knowles: We ran a study of local Libyan perceptions of operations in the country post the fall of Gaddafi. We often get caught up in assuming that the target audience of UK Government narratives is a UK domestic audience or a parliamentary audience, but to the Libyans our author, Alison Pargeter, spoke to on the ground, it did not make much difference whether it was a special operations unit or a regular unit that was conducting operations in their country. What mattered to them was the fact that there was absolutely no information in the public domain about what the UK was attempting to do. That leads to a whole variety of speculation about what UK aims may be, and it leads us into a weird scenario where the Government itself does not have any tools at its disposal to have that conversation. We cannot have an informed debate about UK counter-terrorism in Libya; it is not possible, because of the “no comment” policy.

This is something that the military itself has highlighted as an area of key concern. If you look back even to the 2010 strategic defence and security review, they put up front the idea that winning the battle for the narrative is as important as winning the battle on the ground. I do not think it is possible to have one without the other, because the battle for the narrative directly constrains where and how the UK military can operate. It is really important to get this right. There is a lot of talk within the military at the moment about the importance of strategic communications—the importance of getting the message out—but it does not seem to be



changing the wave of Government policy that really restricts the narrative around contemporary UK military operations.

Chris Woods: I just want to pick up on one of those points, but also to stress that we are talking about social media as a negative thing but it can also be a very positive thing, particularly for those communities most directly affected by the conflicts we are engaged with. Airwars primarily draws its monitoring from those communities that are directly affected, at a very local level. Social media plays a really critical role in reporting the harm that is occurring within those communities—naming victims and so on, and helping us to better understand where the harm is occurring. Local communities in Iraq and Syria played a crucial role in reflecting the activities of ISIS during the occupation, often at great risk to themselves. There was a reason that ISIS had death squads hunting down people who reported out on social media—because they represented a critical risk to their own attempts at messaging.

It is also worth saying, in terms of successes and failures when we look at civilian harm, that we engaged quite heavily with the coalition for the first two years of the campaign, when they effectively ceded the entire social media sphere to ISIS. ISIS decided to make a great deal of civilian harm incidents or allegations locally. They would produce slick videos, they would get in on the ground, they would interview victims, they would go to the hospitals and they would put these videos out on social media. They would be viewed by hundreds of thousands—even millions—of people within 48 hours. The coalition response to that, for the first two years of the war, was silence. The coalition effectively ceded the entirety of social media to ISIS and allowed ISIS to say whatever they wanted about civilian harm, until it got its act together and started to respond on individual events, started to put out a counter-narrative and started, actually, to assess civilian harm events, which it did not even do for the first 18 months.

There were these really significant challenges around social media in terms of ISIS, but we were not listening to what these communities themselves were saying or recognising the enormous risks they were running to get that information out. Even when they got the information out, it would sometimes not be acted upon. That was a concern for us.

Q7 **Phil Wilson:** Just a point, David. I have noticed from the information that we have that the Global Terrorism Index has said that the number of deaths from terrorism around the world has actually gone down, but the number of incidents of terrorism has gone up. In 2004 I think there were 39 countries where there was Islamic terrorism. Now it is over 60, if not higher than that. Do you think that is primarily because of the reach of social media, reaching into countries that have people who have the potential to be terrorists, but are home-grown? They just look at this material and think, "I'm going to use it in a negative way."

David Patrikarakos: 100%. Daesh—ISIS—is the digital caliphate. That is what it is in now. In the same way that the Arab Spring had a knock-on effect, the same thing happens for jihadist, Islamist terrorism. Without a



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shadow of a doubt, all the research points to that. It is, frankly, logical. The amount of content that I have seen disseminated around—the amount of content that is easily accessible on all the major social media platforms. Without a shadow of a doubt.

As I say, obviously these things are connected with events on the ground, but the point is that even if you smash a terror group now, you cannot kill it in the sense that you could have killed Bin Laden. More or less, now it does not matter with ISIS. Whether al-Baghdadi is dead or alive is beside the point. It does not matter. The fact is that all the content is still there.

I repeat: propaganda has to be tethered to a reality. When ISIS was winning victory after victory its propaganda was naturally stronger. The more that you can take them on the ground, the weaker they become, but the fact is that we are dealing with something new entirely.

I repeat: with the war in Syria and various things, there are millions and millions of people, especially young males, growing up in refugee camps. This is a time-bomb that is going to affect us all, because nothing is being done about these people. They are not being educated. They have no hope of work, be they in Lebanon, Turkey or wherever. This is a threat that is going to mature I would say in five years, and it is going to be a grievous one.

Q8 Ruth Smeeth: That is fascinating. How has social media changed counter-terrorism operations? What are we doing?

David Patrikarakos: We have belatedly understood that you need third-party counter-messengers, preferably Muslim. I was at an institution—I will not name it—that engaged in counter-messaging. The person I was speaking to was saying that the earliest videos countering ISIS propaganda showed a policewoman sitting in a chair telling people, “If you go to Syria, we’ll arrest you.” This was absolutely archaic.

As Chris rightly pointed out, ISIS propaganda is slick. The production values are high. Most tellingly of all, it uses Western tropes. This is the really interesting thing. It picks up on Hollywood films like “American Sniper”. It picks up on video games like “Call of Duty”. It uses Western tropes to attract Western youths.

We are now doing several things. We are using Muslim messengers to poke holes in the theology. I have sat in rooms and been told about and seen people online saying, “It’s my duty to go to the caliphate.” They go, “Well, actually, no. The Koran says this and that.” We are making theological arguments, but what we are not doing—there are several reasons for this—is making the positive case for liberal democracy.

With Daesh, what was so incredible is that you saw thousands and thousands of people being recruited by people they had never met. That was something new. Back in the day, you would walk into an Army recruiting office. If you were in the IRA you would meet someone in a local pub. You would get drawn into the cause. These are people being recruited by people thousands of miles away they had never met.



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We have the same tools available to us. There is homo digitalis on the bad guys and on the good guys. The problem is we are fewer in number, we do not have as attractive a narrative and we are still constrained by various bureaucratic norms. They constrain us all the time. I have gone round and lectured, and have been invited to Sandhurst, Army HQ and various brigades. I am talking to brigades engaged in counter-disinformation that are not allowed to tweet. This is insanity.

Also, we have one brigade that is specifically designed for this—the 77th Brigade—and it should be made a corps. What happens is that people come in for two years. After two years, they finally learn what it is all about, and then they move on. They should be made a corps, because people need to stay and it needs to grow, but it is not.

Q9 Ruth Smeeth: One of my concerns is that when we were in Iraq we got told we were the best at it, and we were put in charge of it for the coalition, but I don't think we are the best at it. I am not sure who is, so who should do this?

David Patrikarakos: The best at this is the IDF. They have a much harder job, but they are best in terms of the content they put out and the speed at which they put it out. Also, you have to understand, as you know, they are at war almost all the time. I profile them extensively in my book. I would say they are the best. I have seen the 77th Brigade. We have the brains and the talent. I have seen some of the content; it's great. We have it all. They just need to be allowed to work, but they are not allowed to work properly. Again, it comes back to bureaucracies versus networks.

Chris Woods: I think the UK has had some particular challenges around its social media response to Daesh, particularly around civilian harm issues and credibility. The UK has made a great deal of claims of zero civilian casualties in the war against ISIS, which is complete fantasy. It's an absurd claim to make. Any time you speak privately with Ministry of Defence officials, both on the military and civilian side, they agree that it is fantasy. Nevertheless, officials have been lured into making those absurd claims. Putting out those claims on social media completely undermines any credibility you have. General Jones spoke to the same Committee and said that conflict casualties are inevitable, particularly in the very heavy urban fighting that we have seen against ISIS in the last couple of years. We would agree with General Jones on that. There is an inevitability. You cannot go into Mosul and Raqqa, drop thousands of bombs and not kill civilians, especially when hundreds of thousands were trapped in those cities and held there forcibly by ISIS. But it is still the British position that they did not harm one civilian in either Mosul or Raqqa, despite more than 1,000 targets being struck during those battles.

Again, if you talk to MoD officials, it is not that they don't believe they didn't harm civilians; they just cannot tell you that they have still not been able to resist those claims of not having harmed civilians. ISIS have countered that with their own propaganda around civilian harm. What has been fascinating is that they tend to operate at the conservative end. They



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tend to target those local and regional populations to convince them of why the coalition cannot be trusted and why they are the trusted parties and so on. So ISIS has tended to pitch conservatively around civilian harm. A good example of that was a controversial strike against Mosul University a couple of years ago. The highest level of allegation was more than 100 civilians killed in that event. The consensus locally settled at around 25 killed. ISIS itself put out an estimate of only 16 killed. They tended to err at the lower end because they were courting credibility locally, whereas the UK and the broader coalition were losing credibility by making absurd claims. The people of Iraq and Syria knew well the price that they were paying to have ISIS removed. It is just that the UK was claiming some kind of fantasy model of war where there was no cost to civilian populations.

Q10 John Spellar: You said they had been lured into this position. Lured in by whom?

Chris Woods: I think there is a seductiveness to this idea of precision warfare. There are clearly benefits to precision warfare in reducing harm to civilians. We can talk about the relative value of precision warfare, but I think the UK and some other militaries have been drawn into a more fantastical assumption around absolute precision, and that has been a big problem. It is still the position of NATO eight years after Libya—the official NATO line is zero civilian casualties from the war in Libya. It is not that they don't believe they did not harm any civilians; they just cannot give us an estimate because the way that they model civilian harm requires grand investigations, and there have been no grand investigations in Libya. Again, in Iraq and Syria, all the UK can do when it assesses civilian harm is ISR. It's from above. If they can't see the civilian harm, they cannot understand the harm. Most civilians have died in unobservable spaces, as we mentioned in our report, where they can't be observed or seen.

Q11 Ruth Smeeth: Emily hasn't spoken yet.

Emily Knowles: I agree 100% with what my other panellists have said. It really points to a larger strategic question about how the UK engages in this debate more broadly. We have heard a lot about the reactive measures that the Government has put in place, but I think this should all be taken into the context of how we were engaged in the fight against ISIS already, and it still took a long time to get up to speed in terms of putting across a narrative. As Chris has pointed out, the narrative that we ended up putting across, especially in terms of civilian harm, was never credible anyway. What this should do is give the Government pause for thought about how we do this in a preventative way. The challenges of engaging on a narrative basis around counter-terrorism should never just be a reactive approach once a crisis has erupted, but there should be a much more credible national dialogue about UK military actions overseas and about counter-terrorism activities. We are really seeing some gaps in that space.

I gave the example of special forces before, but the credible reporting in the Ministry of Defence's annual reports about the activities that the UK is



undertaking with local partners is so gappy. We cannot trace year on year who the UK Government have been working with or whose capacity we have been building. We are given broad statistics for UK deployments per region and a snapshot of some individual operations, but they are not the same year on year so you cannot track progress.

Actually, as an external observer, trying to understand what the UK is doing, or what the UK is trying to do in a lot of the places where it is engaging, is very difficult. How they will enter into a narrative about, "What is the UK's strategic aim?" to engage with populations on the ground is a bit beyond me, because we just do not have the access to information to begin with.

- Q12 **Ruth Smeeth:** When we visited Iraq, we did Saudi and Iraq on the same visit. Saudi is investing a huge amount of money in what over here would be a Prevent strategy—their counter-extremism strategy—on this type of messaging, and we got told that we are their lead within the coalition. Based on what you have just said, we are the worst possible people to be doing that.

Emily Knowles: I think it is a difficult one, and maybe Chris will have some thoughts on that as well, from looking at the different parties to the air campaign against ISIS. It is not that the UK does not recognise the strategic importance of it. I mentioned already that, in lots of military strategic documents, that emphasis on strategic communications is there, and the development with the 77th Brigade shows the prioritisation of it. On many of the technical aspects, the UK is nominally putting a lot of effort and attention into being able to do it better. The problem for me sits at the strategic level, where we do not have a Government or a set of policies that actually allows for an open debate about defence. David mentioned—

- Q13 **Ruth Smeeth:** I am trying to take it above that, because within the context of the coalition against Daesh, this was one of the workstreams that was allocated to us. As well as fighting on the ground, we were the lead nation co-ordinating everyone else's message.

Emily Knowles: Certainly, from our perspective, you can look at how the US, for example, has been putting across information about its broader activities across Iraq and Syria. Not only do they comment on their regular military activities; they are also happy to comment on special forces' activities. They have consistently been the one coalition partner reporting on civilian harm caused by the air campaign. You could look at that and say, "Well, there's a model for engagement around military activity."

It is also important to see this in the broader context of what we are expecting the UK Government to be able to do. If you are trying to take this on the back foot and suddenly come up with a counter-narrative approach to terrorism, and you are already on the ground and engaged against a group like ISIS, you are always going to be on the back foot.

David Patrikarakos: I agree 100%.



- Q14 **Chair:** I want to come back to a question that John asked that we did not quite get an answer to. Chris, you said that when you talk to people in the MoD, they are quite frank about the fact that there may well have been civilian casualties; they just do not know who they are. It is right to say that Major-General Jones said the following to us in a previous session: "War is brutal, and if you want to fight in cities, everything is more extreme. Everything is heightened in a city—the number of troops you need, the amount of munitions you drop and the amount of suffering. The idea that you can liberate a city like Mosul or Raqqa without—tragically—civilian casualties is a fool's errand." Air Vice-Marshal Stringer endorsed that by saying, "You can be as precise as you like, but at the end of the day war is a nasty, brutal business." He says: "With the best will in the world...we can't rule out the possibility that there will be some civilian casualties due to UK strikes that we are not aware of at the moment, or that there is that possibility in the future."

Accepting that that is what the military men say, who do you think is taking the lead in putting forward this frankly incredible proposition in the messaging that there are no civilian casualties?

Chris Woods: It is definitely coming from within MoD, although I think that Ministers have been attracted to that narrative. We have seen previous Defence Ministers making much of the zero civilian harm. That is not unique to the UK. Almost all members of the coalition against Daesh—the kinetic coalition—are equally claiming zero civilian harm from their actions, as is Russia, which is claiming zero civilian harm in Syria from its 40,000 air strikes. These are absurd claims.

- Q15 **Chair:** I get the impression that you are saying that this is not necessarily driven by politicians but more by the institution of the MoD. Is that your suggestion?

Chris Woods: There are also systemic challenges. To engage with General Jones's comments, even accepting the inevitability of civilian harm, it is quite proper that we ask where on that spectrum we are comfortable with being—how many is too many? I don't think that question is being asked enough.

For the battles of Mosul and Raqqa, we believe that up to 15,000 civilians died in total as a result of actions by all parties to the fighting, with somewhere between a third and two thirds of those resulting from coalition actions. These are very significant civilian casualties, in our view. Understanding how the UK can get to the end of its campaign, as the second-biggest contributor to the battles of Mosul and Raqqa—

- Q16 **Chair:** In terms of air strikes?

Chris Woods: In terms of air strikes. Raqqa was very much an American campaign, with a tiny input from the British and French. Nevertheless, about 250 British targets were struck. Some 750 targets were struck by the RAF in Mosul, a city with hundreds of thousands of people held captive by ISIS at the beginning. There was significant destruction and civilian



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harm. However, it is still the position of the MoD that there was no civilian harm.

Q17 **Chair:** Do you accept that the MoD simply doesn't know? If you do, what should it have been saying in its messaging?

Chris Woods: Those occasions when the MoD made the overt claim of zero civilian harm should never have occurred.

Q18 **Chair:** Yes. That is not my question. First, do you accept that, when it mounts these air strikes, for the most part it has little, if any, idea of whether there are civilian casualties? If you accept that, what messaging should it be giving, rather than making unrealistic claims of zero casualties?

Chris Woods: I think this also goes back to the process that the coalition has for understanding civilian harm. The coalition has conceded more than 400 deaths at Mosul, almost all of which resulted from US actions. When the Americans have identified the strikes that they have been responsible for, they have admitted roughly one civilian death for every 40 of their air strikes in the war against Daesh.

Q19 **Chair:** Presumably they did that retrospectively, after they were able to find out?

Chris Woods: Indeed.

Q20 **Chair:** I am sorry to press you, because it is all very interesting, but I just want an answer to this: at the time when these strikes are being mounted and there is no way of the MoD knowing whether it has caused civilian casualties or not, what should it be saying in its messaging?

Chris Woods: The messaging should be: "We don't know. We know that civilian harm has occurred, but we cannot say at this point how many were harmed." However, we also think that the British should learn from the Americans how they are able to determine harm but the UK is not. We would like the MoD to take a look at why the Pentagon is getting this significantly more right than the MoD.

Q21 **Chair:** But are the Pentagon getting it right at the time when they put out the initial messages, or are they only getting it right retrospectively?

Chris Woods: I would say both, actually. I think the American messaging has changed quite significantly over the past few years, driven partly by both presidential executive order and Congress requiring the Pentagon to change the way it understands civilian harm. The American messaging is really quite different from MoD messaging these days.

Emily Knowles: Two things: first on what the message should have been, and secondly on what we should do to address this problem. I think there would have been a huge amount more credibility if they had followed up on, "We don't have any credible evidence of civilian casualties as a result of air strikes in Iraq and Syria," and the second half of that sentence, which we hear off the record, "which should tell us more about the deficiencies in our methodology for understanding civilian harm than about



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the impact of our actions,” had been said on the record. It is a real challenge. When you are engaging in a largely air-only operation you do not have large numbers of boots on the ground to do the post-strike assessments that were relied on in Afghanistan to accurately document and bring down civilian harm. It will be a massive challenge going forward. You are given the option of either relying on somewhat unreliable local troop reports of civilian casualties, or just not having access to those areas. You might have a limited special forces contingent that you could send in, but they will not be able to review all strikes. This is something we need to take into account, because as this becomes a much more common way for the UK and its partners to engage in spaces, our ability to understand civilian harm goes down hugely.

That brings me on to the second point, which is about what we would change. The Government’s current protection of civilians strategy was written at the height of Afghanistan. It does not reflect that change in the way that the military is engaging. It is based on assumptions that you could do the same things that we did in Afghanistan to address civilian harm—putting together massive civilian casualty monitoring units, for example, which managed to bring down civilian harm—but we cannot do that if we are going to be engaging through remote warfare and we are not going to be placing large numbers of NATO troops on the ground. Refreshing that strategy to take into account how we are currently operating and the challenges is crucial, but so is ensuring that this is addressed by the military as well.

On the one hand, you have the argument that urban warfare is deeply complex and difficult to prosecute, which is leading to a lot of internal conversations about how the military needs more resources, more kit, more equipment and different training to deal with urban warfare, but on the other hand you have an official Government narrative of, “But it’s completely clean because there has been one civilian casualty conceded in Syria throughout the course of the campaign.” If we go back to consistency of messaging and common sense, they are just not there. Addressing those two things, both in the protection of civilians strategy and in military methodologies for monitoring civilian harm in remote warfare, would be a huge step forward.

David Patrikarakos: Just to say that when things such as, “There are zero civilian casualties” emerge, they are godsend for Islamist propaganda. They are absolute godsend. I know you need to move on, but I wanted to make a quick point: I keep coming back again and again to this question of narratives. Propaganda is as old as war itself, but the big change I have found is that in war as it is traditionally understood, propaganda operations in the media or wherever have supported military operations on the ground. Now what we are seeing, especially in Russia and Ukraine, is military operations on the ground designed to support propaganda operations inside a space and in the media.

Take, for example, the Clausewitzian paradigm of war: two or more sides have a fight in an area almost as delineated as a boxing ring. The winner



then imposes a political settlement on the loser; the Treaty of Versailles is an egregious example of that. In Ukraine, Putin never sought a military victory over Kiev, which in the beginning he could have done easily. He never sought that. What he decided to do instead, after stealing Crimea, was to destabilise Ukraine. How did he want to destabilise it? By pumping in a narrative. He sent tanks and troops across the border to carve out a space. I was there on the ground in eastern Ukraine—I was there in Ukraine for almost a year—and it was essentially, “The Kiev Government is a fascist junta that wants to persecute Russian speakers,” and all those sorts of things. They were military operations designed to support propaganda operations. The key of narratives is again vital in what I term 21st-century warfare.

Chair: I know that Madeleine and Phil want to come in, but I want to stick with the social media side of it, because we are going to come back to the Airwars thing shortly. Ruth, would you like to wrap up with the social media side?

Q22 **Ruth Smeeth:** This question is specifically for David: what lessons can we learn from countering Daesh on social media, if any? I am not sure, based on your evidence so far, that we have done particularly well at countering them at all. Are there lessons that we could learn to defend against other adversaries, including extremist elements of all political kinds—you just touched on Ukraine—and other state actors? What lessons are being learned by anybody?

David Patrikarakos: I think we are learning that, first of all, you need to outsource. You need a network to fight a network. As I keep saying—I’m sorry I’m hammering this point home repeatedly—bloated bureaucracies, very often staffed by people who don’t really get social media, don’t work. If you need an hour, let alone a day, to get a permission for a tweet, it’s done; in five minutes today, it’s done. There is growing recognition of this, but I think a lot of this is generational. I speak to the Army and captains who are 26 or 27. We may just have to wait five, six or seven years until they are majors or something. We may just have to push through.

We are outsourcing to third parties, and you have to understand that when it comes to countries like Russia, we are at a disadvantage, because we are constrained by democratic norms that they are not constrained by. I am not saying that we in the West do not ever do anything surreptitiously or in a duplicitous manner, but the fact is that we all know about the troll farm in St Petersburg. I have interviewed people in the troll farm. That troll farm has been exposed how many times? Putin doesn’t care; he is not accountable to the press. But the fact is that if we tried something here in London and gave it a month, *The Guardian* would expose it. Maybe some people would be arrested. Everyone would apologise. We are constrained by norms.

The second thing is that you never get ahead of the technology. Let’s look at the example of election interference. We know that Russian fake ads reached 126 million people, which is the number of people who voted. Did this affect that many people? Of course it didn’t. But all you need is 0.01%



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and it can make a difference. So they tried that and it worked. Then they tried with the French. The French were ready for it and it didn't work. But now we are moving to the next level, with video manipulation coming in. We are always going to be behind the curve.

Among all this negativity, we have to understand that we need networks; we need to be quicker and less risk averse; and we need the right messages and the right narrative. I keep coming back to that. We need a positive narrative. It is not enough to punch holes in everybody else's. It is not enough to say, "If you go to Syria, you'll get killed." It's not enough. You have to say, "No, stay here, because here is good as well." You have to offer people something.

Ruth Smeeth: Before I was elected, I ran HOPE not hate.

David Patrikarakos: Oh, did you?

Ruth Smeeth: Yes.

David Patrikarakos: Brilliant.

Q23 **Ruth Smeeth:** So we dealt with the hate stuff and then there always had to be a little bit of hope. The hope was always the harder bit, because you are talking about other people providing the hope.

David Patrikarakos: Absolutely. By the way, I really admire that. I think HOPE not hate is great.

Emily Knowles: Could I just push back slightly against your narrative of being constrained by norms? One of the things that we have to consider is that we should, as the UK, be able to engage in that information space as a credible actor. I don't think anyone would say that we would automatically believe something that came out of the Kremlin or out of Russian troll farms. Our strength on that should be that we are telling the truth or telling a credible story. It's only examples like the "zero civilian casualties" that really weaken our credibility as an international actor. We can use this as well to our advantage, but only if we are actually engaging in a meaningful debate about UK military operations overseas, rather than shooting ourselves in the foot with narratives that no one will believe.

David Patrikarakos: Sure. What I meant was that we can't pretend to be things that we aren't. We can't buy fake ads—

Emily Knowles: And, indeed, we shouldn't.

David Patrikarakos: Absolutely we shouldn't; let me get that straight. What I am saying is that we are fighting with one arm tied behind our back, because we are a democracy, so we have to accept that—but it's a good thing, yes.

Q24 **Mrs Moon:** I am struck by the issue of false information about civilian casualties. I am just wondering whether we have got ourselves tied up with rules of engagement and consequences of engagement. The rules of engagement say that you are supposed to pull back if there is civilian



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risk, and if you do not pull back and there are civilian deaths, there has to be a full inquiry. I just wonder whether there is a tendency to say, "No civilian casualties," because we don't have the evidence that would have needed the inquiry, and it's about that response rather than the social media reassurance or messaging. Are we actually, because of our bureaucratic management, creating our own problems?

Chris Woods: If we look at the battle of Mosul, there was a very complex shifting around risk, involving both military forces and civilian populations. If we look at the battle for East Mosul, Iraqi forces, particularly Iraqi special forces, took very heavy casualties. They were clearing building to building, street to street, and they took 50% casualties—very, very high. One of President Obama's last acts as President was to change the rules of engagement at Mosul, lowering the threshold at which strikes could take place, and there was a transferral of risk from the military forces carrying out the assaults to the civilian population. We saw that borne out in much higher reported civilian harm.

I don't think anyone fighting at Mosul or Raqqa was making any claims of zero civilian harm. I don't think anyone was claiming that that was the objective. I think everyone accepted that civilians were going to be killed. There was an equation for the coalition, in terms of speed. There were concerns, particularly at Mosul, about the population starving because food wasn't getting in. Again, these were terrible equations that were being made by military planners.

I still think that the problem we have got here is that the next urban fight that the British engage in will be using poor modelling around battle damage assessment and collateral damage estimates, and assuming zero civilian harm when the reality may have been significant civilian harm. We have not learned from where things went wrong at Mosul, as well as where they went right. They went right because ISIS was defeated. It was the same at Raqqa, but Raqqa was 70% destroyed as a city. There has been no reconstruction, and the population has been displaced, as David said, with all the consequences of that. There has been no follow-up by the UK or the coalition—no on-the-ground investigations—just as we haven't seen any in Libya eight years on. I have got no optimism that we are going to see this from the Americans and the British at Mosul and Raqqa. If we are not going to go back in afterwards and learn these lessons, we are going to keep getting it wrong, in my view.

Chair: We are going to come back to that side of things shortly, but I would like to move on to Graham.

Q25 **Graham P. Jones:** Before I ask the question that I intended to ask, I want to continue this line. I was interested in what David said. My question is to Chris. You said that there is no credibility in saying that there were zero civilian casualties. As the Chair pointed out, that is not what General Jones and the Air Vice-Marshal said. I take the point that there is a parameter here, and the MoD may be using the lowest point.

I ask you this, because I see a fundamental weakness in your argument.



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You say that there is no credibility in saying that there were zero civilian casualties, but what you are actually talking about—and I think it is true—is the impact it has on an international audience or the audience that, for instance, Daesh may want to receive their message in Mosul and the Arab world. But there is a second audience, which you negated, and which may explain why the MoD might say that: the domestic audience in the West and the United Kingdom. There is clearly a logical reason why you would take that parameter of saying that there are no reported casualties. By the way, I have to say to you that there is much reporting of civilian casualties in many of these conflict zones, but none seem to be accurately attributable to the RAF. If they are, in some cases, it is because there are human shields involved, as General Jones said. Nobody is saying, as an independent third source, “It is the RAF. Here is a section of the munitions. It was them.”

I put to you this question. When you say that it is not credible, it is also incredible if you start saying to a domestic audience in the United Kingdom that we are going around killing people, and they respond adversely, only for Daesh to kill more people in Mosul as a consequence. More innocent people die as a corollary of your argument. Do you accept that the MoD doesn’t just have one audience—that is the argument that you have made? It also has a domestic audience here in the United Kingdom—

Chris Woods: It does.

Graham P. Jones: —who it must have a conversation with. It is credible to say, “On this scale of civilian casualties, this is where we are at. We accept that there are civilian casualties, but none have been attributed to us so far.”

Chris Woods: On that very specific point, I think we have an equal obligation to be straight with a domestic audience as we do with an international audience. It is beguiling to tell a domestic audience that war is now so clean and perfect, and the UK has perfected war to such a point that civilians are no longer harmed. That is just not the case.

Before I ran Airwars, I used to run a project monitoring CIA strikes in Pakistan, and for years I was told that our numbers were wrong, that there were no civilian casualties and that it was a complete fantasy. In July 2016, I got a call from the White House saying, “We are going to admit civilian harm from our campaign in Pakistan.” They had gone back over the strikes between 2009 and 2015, and in the end admitted having killed, on average, one civilian for every seven of those intelligence-driven strikes, using low-yield munitions in rural areas. One civilian killed for every seven actions; that was the reality, on official White House data. For Afghanistan—UNAMA data modelled against NATO data—one said that the best they ever got it to in Afghanistan was one civilian killed for every 15 strikes. The US has officially admitted to one civilian killed for every 40 of their air strikes in Iraq and Syria, in the war against Daesh.

I can see nothing unique about Britain’s military actions that would mean that its strikes do not result in civilian harm, given the context of the war,



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given the munitions used, given the urban density, and, crucially, given the reported civilian harm on the ground. I think we owe it to domestic populations to be honest about the consequences of war. We cannot fight war without casualties. We can make some estimates on those numbers based on what local populations are telling us. As I said, the coalition itself has admitted more than 1,100 deaths, almost all from US actions. I do not think that is because the US has been rasher than other allies, it is just that they are more willing to admit harm, because of the systems that they have in place. I think the messaging should be consistent between international and domestic. It is the same message in my view.

- Q26 Graham P. Jones:** That is interesting, because that leads straight to the supplementary question I will ask about the dishonesty of non-governmental organisations in this country, which partly fuels that. We see time and again with regard to air strikes that there is a gross exaggeration by NGOs as to what has happened. You just have to pick up the newspaper. For the examples that they finally do get to attribute, we suddenly, after investigating, find that they are grossly inaccurate. You say “talking to a domestic audience”, and we talk about the media and the responsibility in terms of counter-terrorism, but if you are to defeat counter-terrorism and talk about honesty, the question is: how do we instil integrity and honesty in the NGO community?

Chris Woods: Which dishonesty are we talking about?

Graham P. Jones: I will give you an example. Recently, in Yemen, there was use of a British Marconi-made missile that killed innocent people. There was no actual body count and no evidence of that. It transpired that the Marconi was exported between 1989 and 1998—so not even under a Labour Government, I might add, but under a previous Government—and they were only fitted to Mirages, so it couldn’t have been a Saudi plane. Straight away, you have an accumulation of so-called evidence that proves to be false. This is constant. That made a major headline and a major story.

Chris Woods: I don’t think it is constant.

- Q27 Graham P. Jones:** But we are talking about countering terrorism. If you are to counter terrorism and get the messaging right, my question is: do you think there is any credibility in the NGO community?

Chris Woods: A great deal, actually. Amnesty International produced a report on the battle of Raqqa last year, which the Defence Secretary, based on a briefing, condemned in the House, and said was a very problematic report. Subsequent to the Defence Secretary’s comments, the US-led coalition accepted almost every event in that Amnesty report as credible and only rejected two deaths—out of almost 100, in nine separate incidents—because the evidence level was lower than for the other events. So the coalition actually accepted almost every one of the deaths set out in a report that the Defence Secretary had told the House was poorly researched and had no credibility.



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I do not recognise this description of an NGO community that misrepresents civilian harm. In the case of Airwars, our own focus is mitigation, and we are not focused on the high-profile IHL violation cases. We recognise that almost all the civilians killed by US-led forces in the war against ISIS were not unlawfully killed, but we still think that the numbers can be brought down. The way that they can be brought down is by a better understanding of where the harm occurs, how it occurs and therefore how to reduce the harm next time we drop a bomb. We think it is right and proper for NGOs to engage in that territory.

- Q28 Graham P. Jones:** Finally, the contention you made is between the accuracy of the NGO community and the inaccuracy of the MoD, in short. We had General Jones before the Committee and he said, for example, as part of the submission of his that was read out, that the number of deaths was also tied into civilian casualties. You will have read the section, I am sure, where he talked about innocent people being welded into buildings, and then tripwires and bombs being put on the buildings. The coalition does not have the imagery to know anything other than that there is an enemy force on the rooftop. Before you know it, even using the lightest munitions and the wisest of considerations, you end up killing innocent people.

It is only from the generals and the MoD that we get any honesty on this. I never read from the NGO community about the huge problem that we have in Yemen now, and in other recent theatres where there are non-state actors and where human shields are being used. They are accumulating a significant number of civilian deaths. For instance, rockets are being launched into Saudi Arabia from marketplaces in Yemen, and the secondary explosion kills more than the primary explosion. We never hear that from the NGO community. You say that the MoD is involved in misinformation, but how can we believe the NGO community, because you do not report the facts either?

Chris Woods: Every day, every week, Airwars interacts, hands-on, with the coalition's own civilian casualty cell. We have referred to the coalition—with no public fanfare, just hands-on engagement—more than 1,500 cases of alleged civilian harm.

- Q29 Graham P. Jones:** How many people do you report having died as human shields? How many do you report having died because of a breach by a non-state actor? How many of those do you report?

Chris Woods: Our own focus is international military action, by Russia, by the coalition, by Turkey—

Graham P. Jones: Exactly.

Chris Woods: That happens to be our organisational focus in Iraq and Syria. Other monitors monitor Daesh.

Graham P. Jones: You make my point well.

Chris Woods: You mention the welding of civilians, but that came from an Amnesty report. Amnesty can defend itself, but you paint a picture of



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an NGO community that is immune to ISIS and its atrocities. I would say that ISIS has been well documented, and rightly so, but it is also proper for Western military action to be held to account.

Chair: We will have to stop soon, so make one last point.

- Q30 **Graham P. Jones:** I want to press the point that you do not differentiate between those who were killed as human shields as part of coalition action, and those whose deaths are 100% attributable to coalition action. You do not differentiate—

Chris Woods: No, we do—

- Q31 **Graham P. Jones:** It shocks me that you can advocate a policy when you don't differentiate. Clearly, in the two theatres that we have now, that is what is occurring.

Chris Woods: We are a tiny NGO—20 people and less than half a million pounds a year—monitoring a massive war, and trying to work as best we can with militaries to help them understand civilian harm. We have limited capacity and we are focused on international military actions. I quite accept that we do not focus on ISIS and civilian harm by non-state actors in that conflict, although we have in other conflicts we have looked at. That is a capacity challenge for us. It is quite proper for people to hold ISIS to account, but our focus happens to be on Western military action as it presently stands, and Russian action in Syria.

- Q32 **Graham P. Jones:** Finally, let me move on to a question about the US drawdown in Syria, Afghanistan and Somalia. What impact do you think that will have on our counter-terrorism efforts?

Emily Knowles: I wondered whether that would come up, because there has obviously been a lot in the media recently about Donald Trump's sudden decision to withdraw troops from Syria and other locations. It is clear that that will have a detrimental impact on UK objectives and missions, not least because of the damage that it will do to our relationships with partners on the ground that we have been trying to foster over the past couple of years, and especially with Kurdish groups in Syria. That is indicative of a larger problem that we have with this style of military engagement.

We get a lot of reports about the tap on, tap off international approach towards engaging with local counter-terrorism groups on the ground, including our interviews in Kabul. We were out there in March 2017, which was a couple of years after the large NATO drawdown in 2014, and we spoke to military personnel on the ground about the impact of that drawdown. A lot of people reported that although they could understand the political imperatives for drawing down troop numbers, a large political and civilian component of that mission had also been drawn down, leaving them without the capacities they needed to conduct their mission effectively. That included counter-narcotics and counter-corruption measures, and the ability to trace money through the Afghan system. That climate of political risk-aversion and limited long-term commitment was having a direct impact on their ability to fulfil what they saw as their

remaining mandate to build the stability of Afghanistan and to work with Afghan partners.

We have a similar story with Somalia, where our lack of ability to offer a credible long-term commitment to partners on the ground is really damaging our ability to run effective operations, because it creates an incentive for UK military personnel who are deployed out there to pick small, quick wins that can show visible impact because they are not sure they will be able to be there for the long term. If you look at a problem like building the capacity of the Somali national army during a deployment that is a couple of months long and go, "What can I fix within this couple of months' window that looks good?" it is unlikely to be the problem you would identify as the long-term issue facing your partners on the ground. We heard stories of people picking things like improving Somali national army tent procurement, which I am sure is very important but probably is not the highlight thing restricting their ability to counter al-Shabaab in their area.

From a military perspective, it is understandable that they are being forced into this corner, because—in their words, not mine—people want things to happen much more quickly than they can. We are engaging in these fantastically difficult environments on very limited objectives, with very little idea how long we are going to be there and how long the political commitment is going to last, and we are surprised when we get this short-term approach to countering those problems. One of the biggest things we should be learning from the counter-ISIS campaign is that it is impossible to engage in a large, broad, regional conflict that involves so many different stakeholders, from the international level all the way down to non-state actors on the ground, who all have entrenched interests in the region, and to try to ring-fence our own commitment in terms of countering ISIS and have a very narrow approach to what it is the UK is trying to build.

If one of the things that comes out of this is that we take a broader look as the UK and go, "What are our own actual strategic objectives in these places? Where are we willing and able to have a long-term commitment to partners on the ground? Where can we actually have a long-term impact?" that will be a good thing. One of the things we have seen in the past is an over-reliance on the US as a major partner.

- Q33 **Chair:** We are very much up against time. We have two or three more topics and about a quarter of an hour left. Right at the beginning, I think there was general agreement that the threat posed by global Islamist terrorism is not going to bring about the downfall of Western countries. It follows from that, I think, that given the difficulties in winning what might be called a victory against the ongoing methods other than state overthrow that global Islamism employs, the concept of containment surely has a role here. When an Islamist group actually does overthrow a state and seize territory—as happened, unusually, with ISIL/Daesh—you intervene with hard power to stop it, but the rest of the time, surely you should be trying to contain and neutralise rather than to win a victory



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over their other tools, such as social media, to allow evolution in those societies to a point where their ideas will no longer have appeal. In other words, isn't the cold war concept of containment rather more relevant than the second world war concept of military victory? Briefly, how do you feel about that?

Emily Knowles: It is a compelling argument to a Government who have proven to be reasonably risk-averse and resource-constrained when it comes to looking at international military operations abroad.

Q34 **Chair:** But isn't it the right argument?

Emily Knowles: I would say that it is not the right strategic approach. We have the right strategic approach—the idea that, in order to counter these threats, which are threats even if they are not the immediate threats to the borders of the UK that we might imagine when we talk about an imminent threat, we should build the capacity, effectiveness, accountability and legitimacy of local security providers. That is exactly how you get out of this long-term boom-bust cycle where a crisis emerges and we have suddenly to react to it, which is not the position we would like to see the UK in when it comes to being a provider of security. It is easy to fall into the trap of thinking that, instead, you can contain and work around the edges—

Q35 **Chair:** But if military victory is impossible—and you all agree that it is—then surely you either wash your hands of the whole thing and take what is coming to you, or you have to go for another strategy that does not entail military victory. That strategy is to prevent the other side having a victory over you, until the situation has changed to the point that they give up trying. That took 70 years with the threat of international communism, as opposed to global terrorism.

Emily Knowles: I don't think I disagree with you necessarily on that. I would put it another way. The goal of military intervention, whether that is on a large-scale, military victory basis or on a lower scale of helping out partners in conflict-affected areas, should always be to create or facilitate the conditions for a lasting peace process. That is, bringing people to the table, some sort of dialogue that ends up—

Q36 **Chair:** You are talking about dialogue with people who believe that if you don't believe in and subscribe to their version of fundamentalist Islam, you deserve to be killed. Are you really talking about dialogue and bringing them to the table?

Emily Knowles: We need to start thinking about the fact that we know, from our own Government strategies, that this isn't a narrow, military, counter-terrorism problem where we can kill our way out of it.

Q37 **Chair:** That is what I've just been saying.

Emily Knowles: This is a broader stability issue and you can't have a broader discussion about stability without working out what you want to do with the different armed actors on the ground in these places. You can't just magic them away by not wanting to engage with them.



Q38 **Chair:** I don't think I suggested magicking them away—on the contrary, I suggested dealing with the fact that they can't be magicked away.

David Patrikarakos: I agree in large part with what Emily says, but I also agree with you. You cannot kill your way out of this. The problem is going to grow. There are more and more Islamists appearing every day because of various things. In our lifetimes at least, this is a perennial threat. The best you can do is manage and contain it.

Chris Woods: Very briefly, back to your point about Syria in particular. I think we are close to a point where there will be a declaration of victory over ISIS as a territorial entity. ISIS is already defeated in Iraq. But there is more to do there, and we are not yet hearing from the UK about post—particularly the issue of reconstruction. That is one of the areas where Daesh, and a revived Daesh, can be countered locally. What is our plan for Mosul, what is our plan for Raqqa? Where can the UK be in terms of reconstruction, supporting those populations—even, in Syria's case, with Assad back in control, which may be an uncomfortable by-product of the war against ISIS? For example, Kurdish forces are likely to hand Raqqa over to Assad over the next few months—an uncomfortable fact. Where is the point for the UK in terms of countering? It is partly about being seen to do the right things around reconstruction. We would love to hear more from the UK around that.

Q39 **Chair:** Thank you. I am sorry, Graham, but I have got to move on to Gavin.

Q40 **Gavin Robinson:** Thank you, Chair. Mr Woods, I wonder whether, rather than focus on reconstruction at this stage, I may take you back. Would it be a fair summation to suggest you believe the MoD's position on civilian harm is unsustainable and does not sit well with what the US has conceded? You have given the different parallels, and so on, about our experience. In your written evidence you have said there should be a review on whether there is an over-reliance on ISR—intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance—and also suggested that we should rely on more locally-based, credible reports of civilian harm. So I guess my question is twofold, and they are almost competing questions. Do locally credible, reported events of civilian harm not form part of ISR? Does ISR not rely, to some degree, upon local, credible reporting? Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, whether it does or does not form part of ISR, who assesses the credibility of the reports? How do Government Departments, civil society or NGOs have any sense of the reliability or credibility of the information that would be reported locally?

Chris Woods: Those are great questions. On the point of the challenges with UK monitoring, we would say that they are systemic challenges—they're mainly technical challenges. We have spoken to MoD officials about this and there is probably some agreement there. The modern battlefield basically relies on what you can see and ISR is really dominant in that. Do we have eyes in the sky? Do we have other assets that allow us to observe? We are not calling for less ISR—quite the opposite. ISR plays a critical role, but ISR alone is demonstrably not showing us what is



happening with civilian harm—particularly in an urban setting. Why? Because most civilians die in unobservable spaces. So even if you have eyes on a target—the classical example was the al-Jadida event in March 2017, where the Americans dropped a bomb on a building, which killed two snipers, and did not know there were 150 civilians in the basement, even though that building had been under some observation. The building collapsed and up to 140 civilians died in that one event. That was an error. We accept that was an error. ISR could not have answered those questions, and I am not sure what could, in that circumstance; but if you are only using ISR, or primarily ISR, both to assess civilian presence prior and to determine civilian harm after, you have got challenges. As you say, we are calling firstly for a classified review by someone who is cleared to look at the raw material that MoD is looking at—a stepped back review of what is going on, why civilian harm is being missed. In terms of credibility—

- Q41 **Gavin Robinson:** Before you get to credibility, am I wrong to assume that local credible reporting does form part of ISR?

Chris Woods: No, not of ISR. As I understand it, when MoD or the broader coalition depends on ISR, it is only military ISR platforms that they are drawing that from. The local reporting comes in later, when it is referred to the civilian casualty cell. In terms of defining credibility, the way that Airwars operates is that we have a standard methodology we run across all belligerents, all conflicts. We make a provisional assessment of credibility based on the quality of reporting, a determination of strikes in the near vicinity by a named and identifiable belligerent, and we will make our own determination and then flag that, for example, to the coalition; but they will make their determination of credibility.

- Q42 **Gavin Robinson:** Have you had any discussions with them about how they view your assessment of credibility?

Chris Woods: Yes. If you look at—

- Q43 **Gavin Robinson:** Are they satisfied that what you deem credible is indeed credible?

Chris Woods: There are significant disagreements, but they are not hostile disagreements, so we and the coalition view the number of casualties differently, and I think between the two we are trying to explore that space in between—trying to understand the difference in those public estimates of civilian harm and military estimates of civilian harm. There have been innovations in the war against ISIS—for example, the coalition opening up to external sources and external agencies such as Airwars. We think this is a very positive thing. Airwars now is the only named external referral agency where, if we refer an allegation to the coalition, it will automatically trigger an assessment. The coalition has monthly reporting. It has a standardised assessment process. The command of the civilian casualty cell has gone from a lieutenant to a lieutenant-colonel, so there is much more authority within the cell itself. We think these are all very positive innovations, which we welcome.



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We will make our own assessment of credibility, but ultimately it is for militaries to make the final determination. We may disagree with that determination but we can only offer our interpretation. They will have other information as well.

Chair: Unless anyone else is bursting to reply, I must give the floor to Johnny to ask our final questions.

Q44 **Johnny Mercer:** Can you just repeat that point about the level of authority for these strikes going from a lieutenant to a lieutenant-colonel?

Chris Woods: When the coalition first created a formal civilian casualty cell, our understanding was that it was a lieutenant in charge of that cell.

Q45 **Johnny Mercer:** That is absolute garbage.

Chris Woods: In terms of the day-to-day running of the cell and in terms of the engagement with Airwars we were dealing with a lieutenant.

Q46 **Johnny Mercer:** Okay; well, I will tell you now it is absolute garbage.

Chris Woods: And the last outgoing official we had engagement with was a lieutenant-colonel. It is currently a major.

Q47 **Johnny Mercer:** I just think—totally in line with Graham’s point: we talk about fake news, and countering it, and how we all have a responsibility to it—some of us could start at home. What other recommendations would you, Emily, make to improve the UK’s defence contribution to countering Islamist terrorism?

Emily Knowles: Four things, here, for me: two of them focused around debate—and quality of. I think improving the standard of internal debate is really important. We have seen some good progress in the national security capability review in improving engagement around the National Security Council, for example.

However, reports that we get from the ground at the moment suggest that UK troops deployed in those locations, who might have access to different sorts of information or different perspectives on UK strategy in those areas, are not really feeding up into National Security Council debates. Especially when we were out in Kenya, we were told repeatedly that it was not even really on the NSC agenda, so it is difficult to see how that feedback loop can work.

For external debate, opening up the black box of the National Security Council is also really important. We do not even know the agendas, which makes it very difficult, as an external society, to feed in meaningful lessons learned and things that might help or have an impact on NSC discussion.

We also think that it is vital at this point that the UK has a strategic review of building partner capacity in areas affected by conflict. It is clear that, in some circumstances, working with local partners can have a really positive effect on the ground. We would like to see the Government better understanding when that is the case and when it is not, and the risks



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involved. We have done some preliminary work around that ourselves, but I think it is really important for the Government to take that forwards.

My final point is more for the military and making sure that lessons learned from contemporary campaigns are really internalised into doctrine and training. I find it kind of fascinating that a lot of the discussion post Mosul, for example, has been about British approaches to urban warfare. All the conversations we have been involved in have been focused on what the UK can unilaterally deliver for urban warfare, despite one of the outstanding characteristics of the Mosul campaign being that we are relying on a local force. It is a mixed-capability coalition, which presents its own challenges. Our engagement with the military suggests that that is not something that we are currently effectively training for, or that has been effectively drawn up into joint doctrine.

Q48 Johnny Mercer: Do you think they are pretty slow on the uptake?

Emily Knowles: There has been an Army field manual on building partner capacity, for example, but that is not joint. There are mixed initiatives, but there is nothing that has been owned by Defence as a whole at the moment.

Q49 Johnny Mercer: What about you, Mark? What recommendations would you make? Sorry—David. I can read. Your name is in front of you but I still got it wrong.

David Patrikarakos: It is usually the surname that people get wrong.

Q50 Chair: Because of time, we will have to make these the last comments from each of you. I know that Johnny also had in mind to ask you to what extent the MoD and the UK armed forces have engaged with you. Could you draw those two together in your answers? Then that will have to be the stop, I am afraid.

David Patrikarakos: What I have found extremely gratifying—personally, but also beyond that—is that there has been a huge amount of interest in the type of stuff I am talking about. As I have said, I have been invited to Army HQ, to Sandhurst and to various brigades all over the place. I take British hard power as not perfect but as a given. I think it is pretty good. I would say, briefly, that there a lot of very competent men and women who really know their stuff in the narrative field. Set them free.

Q51 Johnny Mercer: Chris, has the MoD engaged with you?

Chris Woods: Yes. You have heard a lot from me today about the challenges around the MoD, but there is a lot that it got right, particularly in terms of transparency. It was without a doubt the most transparent member of the coalition and set good standards that we encouraged other partners to follow. The MoD was the first to have a reference point for external agencies such as ours. It has always engaged on individual civilian harm events where there was potential UK involvement. We welcome all of that engagement.

Q52 Chair: Thanks, Johnny. Emily, you have been engaged with the MoD and



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the armed forces as well?

Emily Knowles: Yes, definitely. I have been speaking to the engagement that we have had on the ground on location with UK forces, which has always been hugely productive. The UK military is not unaware of these problems. It has a lot more time to reflect, and it reflects a lot more than I think it is often given credit for. Beyond that, in the UK, again, our engagement through the different services has been really positive, whether that is Sandhurst or Shrivenham.

Chair: I am sure you can all see how we would have loved to carry on for another hour, but we have another session, which is why we cannot extend this one. I thank all three of you for your very interesting and original contributions. I am left with the concept of homo digitalis. I looked up digitalis, because I thought it was another word for foxgloves. It says: "Foxglove is most toxic just before the seeds ripen." I leave you with that thought. Thank you once again.