

Defence Committee

Oral evidence: Departmental Priorities post-NATO summit, HC 1560

Tuesday 22 January 2019

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Members present: Dr Julian Lewis (Chair); Leo Docherty; Martin Docherty-Hughes; Mr Mark Francois; Graham P. Jones; Johnny Mercer; Mrs Madeleine Moon; Ruth Smeeth; John Spellar; Phil Wilson.

Questions 88-144

Witnesses

I: Rt Hon Gavin Williamson MP, Secretary of State, Ministry of Defence, Lieutenant General Richard Nugee CVO, CBE, Chief of Defence People, Air Marshal Richard Knighton CB, Deputy Chief of Defence Staff (Financial and Military Capability), and Angus Lapsley, Director General Strategy and International.

Written evidence from witnesses:

[Ministry of Defence](#)

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Rt Hon Gavin Williamson MP, Lieutenant General Richard Nugee, Air Marshal Richard Knighton and Angus Lapsley.

Chair: Good afternoon and welcome back, Secretary of State. This is a continuation of our previous session on departmental priorities. That occasion was cut short by a vote; this occasion we expect to be cut even shorter by a series of votes scheduled for this afternoon. I note that that would never have happened in your day as Chief Whip, but I am afraid that it means our audience will be somewhat short-changed this time. We will have to invite you back a third time, preferably at our usual morning session time, in order to get through our business. May I ask your colleagues on the panel to introduce themselves briefly?

Angus Lapsley: Hello. I am Angus Lapsley, director-general for strategy and international.

Lieutenant General Nugee: Lieutenant General Nugee, Chief of Defence People.

Air Marshal Knighton: Air Marshal Richard Knighton, Deputy Chief of Defence Staff for military capability.

Chair: A quick starter for one from Mark Francois.

Q88 **Mr Francois:** Good afternoon. Secretary of State, we thought we would give you a soft opening: Crapita. You said that their performance was “atrocious” and that if they did not improve, you would not hesitate to sack them. Now that we are into the fourth quarter of 2018-19, may I ask you or General Nugee how many recruits have enlisted in the British Army so far in the year ‘18-’19—not applications, but enlisted recruits?

Lieutenant General Nugee: By the end of this year, we expect somewhere in the region of 5,600 to have enlisted, which represents broadly 60% of our target for this year.

Q89 **Mr Francois:** Okay: that is your expectation, but how many have you actually got to date? You should have the figures for the first three quarters.

Lieutenant General Nugee: I do not have that exact figure, but those who are currently in training, which is anywhere between 10 and 14 weeks, will be coming out towards the end of this financial year. We expect all those who are now in training to come out during this year, so we can be reasonably confident of the number at the end of the year.

Q90 **Mr Francois:** So that is your best guess, Richard?

Lieutenant General Nugee: Yes, based on those who are in training right at this moment.



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Gavin Williamson: On 30 September 2018, the total figures for the Army were 5,578 untrained and 481 trained. For the officers, it was 633 untrained and 27 trained.

Q91 **Mr Francois:** We know that the Army needs around 10,000 recruits a year to maintain a frontline strength of 82,500, but it is down to nearer 77,000 and the frontline units are thinning out. When we asked the Chief of the Defence Staff when Capita would hit their target over the 10-year contract, he said it would be in the final year—the 10th year.

For the last few years, they have got nearly 7,000 out of 10,000. This year, by General Nugee's estimate, they will get 5,600 out of 10,000, so their performance is worsening markedly: they will be at barely 60% of their target, having barely hit 70% for the last three years. They are deteriorating: they were atrocious, and now they are worse. At what point will you, as Secretary of State, intervene and sack these people, who are clearly hopeless?

Gavin Williamson: The Defence Board has recently had Capita in to review where progress has been made, in terms of the contract and how they are performing against it. You are quite right to highlight the fact that we are not hitting the numbers. In terms of how we are seeing a pick-up in it, we introduced the defence recruiting system, which was the computer system that caused such problems as part of the contract. This now seems to be working properly, and it is coupled with the action that we have taken in terms of deploying service personnel as part of a recruitment process. There are 200 that have been deployed, with the additional action that Capita has taken and the pilot scheme that we ran in the south-east, which is substantially reducing the time of flight. That is something that we are going to be rolling out.

We are growing increasingly confident that in the next financial year we will be hitting the recruitment targets for the Army. We have given Capita the time, and we have met the chief executive and got commitments from them to invest extra money in the contract, but we obviously have to see whether that bears fruit. The initial pilot, as I reported to the Committee last time I was here, seemed to show considerable promise. As we conclude that and roll it out, we need to see whether it is something we can replicate right across the country.

Q92 **Mr Francois:** One more question, Secretary of State—I promised the Chairman I would be brief. Every time people appear in front of this Committee—whether it is you or the general or his military colleagues—they tell us, "It's going to get better," but the figures show it is getting worse and worse. You are quite decisive as a Secretary of State, but the Committee cannot understand why, on this particular issue, you are like a rabbit in the headlights. It keeps getting worse and worse, and you keep threatening to do something about it, but you do not. The RAF hit their targets months ago on the back of RAF100, which was brilliant. The Navy are on track to hit their target for this year, or to come very close, with their "Made in the Royal Navy" campaign, which is excellent. You are falling further and further short of the target. You are always about to do



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something, but you never do. This is clearly going south, not north, so my last question is: what, sir, are you going to do about it?

Gavin Williamson: In the last quarter, we saw an improvement in the flow of recruits coming through. If we continue to see an improvement in the number of recruits coming through, obviously that will be a positive. If we do not see that and it becomes quite apparent in the next financial year that Capita are continuing to fail, we will have to look at different options for the contract. We have taken the time in the Department to look at the different options for bringing the contract in-house, but in terms of the investment Capita has committed to making the contract work, we have equally given the time to work with them to try to ensure that that can be a possibility. As I said, we have started to see a turnaround in the number of recruits—that has started to head in the right direction over the last few months—but the question is whether it continues in that direction. You are quite right to say that if it does not, they will have to be relieved of their contract and we will have to look at different ways to deliver it.

Mr Francois: Thank you, Secretary of State.

- Q93 **Mrs Moon:** Secretary of State, let me ask about the recent drone attacks at Gatwick. We appreciate that you may well not want to address the specifics of planned responses and prevention measures in an open session, but perhaps you can help us with some questions. Have UK personnel in theatre experienced drone attacks? Were they able to remove the threat?

Gavin Williamson: We have seen increased use of drones by a number of different organisations, both state and non-state, and that is what prompted the Ministry of Defence to look right across the spectrum at how to deal with drones in the field of warfare. What was demonstrated was that we have developed capabilities to tackle this threat. I cannot go into operational issues, but we are conscious that this could be an increased threat. We have not seen drones used against British forces, but we have seen them used elsewhere.

- Q94 **Mrs Moon:** So you have not experienced kinetic attacks against British forces but you have seen them elsewhere?

Gavin Williamson: We have seen the use of drones as part of the armoury of different organisations, yes.

- Q95 **Mrs Moon:** Right. What discussions had you had with civilian agencies and authorities prior to the attack at Gatwick to help plan for the eventual and inevitable appearance of drones in the civilian area?

Gavin Williamson: As I am sure you are aware, extensive consultation was undertaken by the Department for Transport about dealing with drones, and the Ministry of Defence and the services were very involved in making representations and developing policy on this. It was demonstrated at both Gatwick and Heathrow that there is a capability to deal with such threats. Through the usual military aid to civilian authorities, that capability was accessed by Sussex police and then the



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Metropolitan police, and we brought it into action immediately on having that request.

- Q96 **Mrs Moon:** Are you telling us that that was an in-existence contingency plan in the case of such a threat? Or was it something that was made up on the hoof?

Gavin Williamson: It was a contingency that had always been there and was always available to civilian authorities. The previous work on developing the policy on dealing with drones that had come out of the Department for Transport's consultation was done across our Department, the DfT and the Home Office. We were very much involved in working on that prior to those attacks.

- Q97 **Mrs Moon:** For how long had that been taking place? How long had you been involved in those contingency plans?

Air Marshal Knighton: To my knowledge, it goes back to before the Olympics in 2012, when this was recognised as a threat. Those kinds of conversation and discussion have been going on for at least that length of time, but as the Secretary of State pointed out, the proliferation of drones and the appetite of malign forces to use them has grown, so the threat has evolved, which is why those cross-Whitehall discussions and our own capability planning work has continued.

Gavin Williamson: I am not sure whether this would be useful, Chair, but if at some point the Committee wanted to have a private briefing on this area, on the work that has been done on drones and on some of the thinking, we would certainly be more than happy to make that available, if it was an area of work you wished to look at. Not being in a public forum might enable people to be more expansive about some of the things that are undertaken.

- Q98 **Mr Francois:** We have been offered private briefings before by the MoD, and often we have gone to these briefings and not been told anything we couldn't have read in *Jane's*. I am serious. We had one like that on the E-7 once. If we are going to have a private briefing, could you make sure that there is sufficient really interesting material in it to make it worthwhile for the Committee to turn up?

Gavin Williamson: We will do our best to make it very interesting.

- Q99 **Mrs Moon:** In your letter to the Committee, you say that a "national counter-UAV response capability" is being considered. Why is it not actually in place? Why are we not bringing it forward faster, after what has happened?

Gavin Williamson: We have that capability in what the Royal Air Force does. Within an hour of the requests being made, we saw Chinooks taking off and the RAF capability being deployed at Gatwick and at Heathrow. We have always been able to act with great speed. We are very much working across Government on how we expand this. There is something very important that should be remembered: a heavy emphasis needs to be placed on commercial airports, especially the larger ones, and their need



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to be able to invest in the ability to defeat drones if they come into their airspace and affect their operations. This is something that the Department for Transport is leading on. We will work closely with the major airports to give them as much help and guidance as possible in order for them to have the systems in place to ensure that their operations are not affected by drones in the future.

Chair: Can I pick up on those words, “the systems in place”? It seems that the MoD did a really good job in getting an extremely quick reaction, but presumably the only reason it needed to react so quickly was that a decision had been taken not to install equipment permanently at the airports. Can you throw any light on the thinking behind that decision? It would seem fairly obvious that where you have such important components of critical national infrastructure as Gatwick and Heathrow, you ought to have the capability permanently in place, rather than having to wait for an emergency to arise and then summon the RAF to come rushing to the rescue. How is it that that situation has come about, rather than a decision having been taken to put the equipment permanently in place?

Gavin Williamson: I think it is quite obvious to us all that that is a decision that both Heathrow and Gatwick should have made on that type of investment. My understanding is that, as a result of these instances, this is a decision that they are going to be making. It is just disappointing that it was not one that they had made before that, because of the amount of disruption it caused to passengers, but this is a real strength of the Armed Forces in all three services: they develop a whole raft of capabilities and they will always see it as part of their role to make those capabilities available to civilian authorities to support work that they do. Real praise is due to the Royal Air Force for the work it did, the speed with which it acted and the effect it was able to have in getting things running again very swiftly.

Q100 **Chair:** I appreciate all that, and I have already paid tribute to that very thing, but wasn't the whole idea of a National Security Council to break down the divisions between different Departments and to take the initiative, particularly in response to the growth of the terrorist threat? It seems that what you are basically saying is that because these key components of the critical national infrastructure are privately owned, there is nothing much Government can do unless or until they decide they will invest in permanent equipment. Is there not something more proactive that the Government can do in developing a policy to protect critical national infrastructure without just relying on private owners of its components to make the investment?

Gavin Williamson: This is why the Department for Transport is doing its extensive consultation on drones: to bring forward policies and put a heavier emphasis on private operators and airports, in order to be able to have the capabilities to deal with that.

Q101 **Chair:** Did the Government advise the airports previously that they should invest in this equipment?

Gavin Williamson: That would be a Department for Transport issue. I will find out that information and come back to the Committee.

Chair: Thank you.

Q102 **Mrs Moon:** I am a bit worried, because we have focused exclusively here on airports. Realistically, with explosive, chemical and biological devices—all of which we know have been experienced in theatre, not necessarily by the UK but by others—why are we only focusing on airports? How much are we building into risk assessments where there are large gatherings of the public, be they sporting events, concerts or whatever, that would utilise an awareness of the potential risk from drones? Will that be part of your national counter-UAV response, or are we just focusing on critical national infrastructure?

Gavin Williamson: It is a broad range of both critical national infrastructure and areas where there could be risk to people's lives. The Olympics is a good example of where that was first initiated and looked at, but the challenge of drones and their use has increased significantly since the Olympics. That is why the DfT had been leading on putting forward more guidance to deal with that. We are very conscious of the fact that more will have to be done and more investment will have to be made in both the public and private sector to deal with it.

Q103 **Mrs Moon:** Do we have an implementation date for any of this?

Gavin Williamson: It is a DfT-led issue, but I will come back to you on that and get you the date they hope to implement it by.

Q104 **Mrs Moon:** Why is it led by the DfT rather than the National Security Council?

Gavin Williamson: Because they are responsible for civil airspace.

Q105 **Mrs Moon:** But the problem is much wider than civil airspace, so why is the Government response being led by the Department for Transport?

Gavin Williamson: Because it is the Department that leads on civil airspace. It will also, working with the whole National Security Council, bring in other partners to work with it so there is a proper and truly cross-Government response.

Q106 **Mrs Moon:** Since the landing of the drone on the Queen Elizabeth in 2017, have we put in place protective measures to reduce the vulnerability of our military bases, airfields and ships? Are they appropriately protected now?

Gavin Williamson: Yes, we have.

Q107 **John Spellar:** It is quite clear that the work the military did was excellent when they were asked to respond, but the crisis started, as I recall, on 19 December and it was not until well into the 20th that the military were brought in. In the intervening period, we had huge disruption to people's travel plans and major damage to our national reputation, and we now see that very considerable costs, running into several million pounds, fell



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to the airport and particularly to the airline operators. Even if we have the capability and the military have done some contingency planning, is there not a failure within the national security system in terms of the speed of decision making and the activation of military aid to the civil authorities? Does not part of our planning have to be about how we deal with these incidents in real time, and having meetings of the relevant bodies, or even phone calls between them, to speed things up?

Gavin Williamson: You saw a much more rapid call on our military assistance in the second incident, at Heathrow. I think the point you make is one that was understood as a result of the Gatwick incident.

Q108 **John Spellar:** Are you aware whether there was actually a meeting of Cobra on the 19th?

Gavin Williamson: I am not aware of a meeting of Cobra. I certainly was not in attendance.

Q109 **John Spellar:** Do you think you could provide us a note on that? I think it is important. Perhaps people at the centre are all distracted by Brexit or whatever, but, frankly, it seems that once they were aware of the incident and of the cost it entailed to the UK, there should have been a much more rapid response from the machinery of government and, pending a final decision, pre-positioning of capability so it could be activated straightaway.

Gavin Williamson: I do not believe a Cobra was called as a result of the Gatwick incident, but we will certainly come back to you to confirm that. On the Heathrow incident, I understand that within an hour of the understanding that an incident had occurred, the request for military aid to the civilian authorities had been made, and the deployment of RAF resources was immediate.

Q110 **John Spellar:** Ultimately, who are the civil authorities who activated the request for military aid?

Gavin Williamson: At Gatwick, it was a request from Sussex police. At Heathrow, the request came directly from the Department for Transport.

Q111 **John Spellar:** Should not the relevant Government Department have activated the Gatwick one?

Gavin Williamson: On the second one, the request came from the Department for Transport.

Q112 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** Secretary of State, what contribution is the UK going to make to the new "Four Thirties" NATO readiness initiative?

Gavin Williamson: We are working very closely with our NATO allies on providing the resource required. We hold a number of forces, both Royal Marines and Parachute Regiment—16 Air Assault Brigade—on very high readiness. We will be looking at committing various forces, and what is usually a standard amount of forces—what Britain is expected to contribute to NATO operations, which generally runs at about 10% of the



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whole NATO force that is usually deployed. So we are in negotiations with NATO.

We have also been having a close dialogue with the United States on this. I am sure you will also recall that we have also had quite considerable uplifts in terms of manning NATO last year and additional commitments of support and development, whether that is enhanced forward presence, such as the work we are doing in Estonia and Poland, as well as the policing that we have been doing in Romania and will be doing over the Baltic and Iceland this year, and our continuing to lead maritime groups within NATO as well.

Q113 Martin Docherty-Hughes: I would like to understand more about the naval contribution. As you will know, there are times when the Fleet Ready Escort in the UK is provided by an OPV or a smaller vessel. We also know it takes UK surface vessels more than 24 hours to reach the North Atlantic from current UK bases. What chances do we have that the UK would be able to respond, along with NATO allies, to any incident in the North Atlantic?

Gavin Williamson: We can have great confidence.

Q114 Martin Docherty-Hughes: Thank you. How many people will the UK contribute to the new commands in Norfolk and Ulm and to the counter-hybrid support teams?

Gavin Williamson: We have made an uplift of over 100 service personnel, which takes us to over 1,000. Angus, are you able to comment on any of the details on where they would be going?

Angus Lapsley: We are still in the process of negotiating that with NATO. They will be spread across the different commands, with a particular emphasis on the new maritime command and the new command looking at the movement of forces around Europe in the event of a crisis, which would be located in Germany.

Q115 Martin Docherty-Hughes: Part of that maritime command will now be in Norfolk. We previously discussed the options for the UK to play a role in that command structure and to base it. In those discussions that you had at the Department, was basing the command here at the UK discussed as an option?

Gavin Williamson: We looked at a range of different command options, but it was quite clear from an early stage that it looked as if that command was going to be based in Norfolk.

Q116 Martin Docherty-Hughes: Was one of the options to base it in the UK?

Gavin Williamson: It became quite apparent that that was not something that was very likely to happen.

Q117 Phil Wilson: In what we know as "Four Thirties", we have to have 30 battle-ready squadrons from NATO. If a third of our planes are incapable of flying at the moment, how are we going to contribute to that?



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Gavin Williamson: We have every confidence that we will be able to meet our NATO commitments. We are investing considerably in terms of fast jet capability. You have seen the coming online of the first F-35 squadron and the generation of new Typhoon squadrons, which are going to be based in Lossiemouth and Coningsby. We are very confident that we are going to meet that NATO commitment but also generate significant other forces in order to be able to have the various different options that quite understandably people expect us to have.

Q118 **Phil Wilson:** You can understand people's concerns if a third of the fleet have been mothballed or are not ready to fly. Why is that? Are the press reports we saw yesterday or the day before, about a third being not fit to fly or mothballed, correct?

Gavin Williamson: I do not believe that they are. I do not recognise that a third of our air force is not fit to fly.

Air Marshal Knighton: I have not seen those press reports. Complex fighter aircraft require routine maintenance in order to ensure that you prevent any problems with them and to continue to make sure that they are updated. At any moment, we will have a number of our aircraft in maintenance. It may be that that is what they are referring. I have not seen the details and those numbers do not seem right.

Q119 **Phil Wilson:** It is in the *Daily Mirror*. An article published on 3 January states: "Figures unearthed by freedom of information campaigners show 142 of 434 of the air force's planes have been sidelined." If that is not true, it is not true—but whether it is true or not, it appeared in the national press recently, so I would have thought you would be aware of it.

Gavin Williamson: What we have done is put heavy focus on expanding our fast jets and bringing on the F-35s. All planes go in for routine maintenance, but the availability of resource is not something that we have seen degraded. You would quite rightly expect all aircraft to have a proper maintenance programme in order to make sure that they are available. We have actually improved quite considerably the availability of Typhoons and the length of the periods that they are able to fly or are out of service—a considerable amount of work has been done on that. As I said, the Royal Air Force have put heavy emphasis on generating two new squadrons of Typhoons and bringing on the F-35 squadron as well, so they have every confidence that we will be able to fulfil any additional commitments.

Q120 **Phil Wilson:** If you have not seen the press reports, may I suggest that you take a look at the *Daily Mirror*?

Gavin Williamson: I look forward to reading the *Daily Mirror*.

Phil Wilson: It says that freedom of information reports have "revealed



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55 of the 156 Typhoon jets are in the RAF's 'sustainment fleet'—and not in its 'forward fleet'", and that some aircraft are being mothballed. That is worrying. It has been all over social media since then, so I am surprised that you did not pick it up. If it is not true, it is not true, but I would like some kind of written response to what was reported in the press, because it says that a third of aircraft are being sidelined.

Gavin Williamson: What we focus on is generating fighter squadrons that are able to deploy. The work that has been done is to expand the availability of Typhoon fighters that are ready to fight. Richard, do you have anything further to add on that?

Air Marshal Knighton: I will add that you can be confident of the Air Force's ability to generate the fighting power that it needs from the fleet that it has. Managing a large fleet of complex aircraft over a 30-plus year lifespan is a complex business and requires us to maintain what is described as a sustainment fleet, to ensure that aircraft can be used right the way through the period they are in service and that they are properly maintained during that period. We would, of course, be very happy to respond to that in writing—

Phil Wilson: That would be great.

Chair: I think we need to move on now, but if you would look into the matter and write to us, we would be grateful.

Q121 **Mr Francois:** Is part of it that a number of the Typhoons have been offline while they have been receiving the Centurion upgrade package—Meteor, Brimstone and all of that? If they were receiving a weapons upgrade, that would be a logical reason why some of them were not available to the frontline.

Air Marshal Knighton: I will have to look at the precise numbers, but I do not think that that would be a major contributor to it.

Q122 **Chair:** May I ask you something as a cohort? You had the NATO summit and you came up with these various alliterative plans about the four 30s and so forth. How did you all feel when you heard that the US Secretary of Defense had resigned? How do you feel NATO's morale is at the moment? We worried when President Trump came into power with his background of making disobliging remarks about NATO, but then perhaps we thought that he was actually following a strategy of encouraging NATO to grow stronger by pressing his allies to spend more on defence. Now we seem to have had another setback. How does all this affect you as defence professionals?

Gavin Williamson: It is quite right to pay enormous tribute to Jim Mattis, who contributed so much not just to US defence, but to UK defence. I was incredibly privileged to have the opportunity to work closely with Jim. His contribution, his work and the support that he gave NATO and all allies were enormous. I think I speak for all four of us when I say that we were saddened when he made the decision to leave. Having spoken to him since

that, I have certainly passed on our thanks for the contribution he has made.

Q123 Chair: Has this turmoil shaken the strength of the UK-US defence relationship?

Gavin Williamson: Not at all, because the strength of the relationship is not based on one individual. It is something that goes all the way through all three services. It is an understanding that, as two nations, we have continuously served side-by-side since the second world war. There has been an enormous amount of sacrifice by both nations in pursuing common aims and common values. That relationship is not built on one individual; it is much deeper than that. We equally recognise that it is a relationship that we have to keep investing in, whether that is in terms of our nuclear deterrent, in terms of F-35 or in terms of the deployments we have together. So often we have British officers commanding US forces and US officers commanding British forces. It goes to show the depth of relationship and depth of trust between the two nations.

Chair: I know that Graham has a question following on from this, so I will hand over to him.

Q124 Graham P. Jones: Following the US decision to withdraw troops from Syria, what is the UK Government going to do to ensure that there is not a resurgence of ISIS?

Gavin Williamson: We have to constantly recognise the fact that while ISIS has been defeated territorially, as an ideology it very much continues. Those forces, while they do not command territory, have dispersed. They will go to different parts of the world and will continue to remain a threat against the United Kingdom. So often you get asked the question, "Why is the Royal Air Force flying over the skies of Iraq and Syria?" The action we are taking is trying to deal with the threat that is very clearly posed to the United Kingdom from as far as we can. That has meant taking strikes against ISIS in Iraq and in Syria. We have to have our eyes wide open on this. We have to recognise the fact that that threat will emerge in different theatres and in different ways. We have often talked about Daesh/ISIL. In the past, we were talking about al-Qaeda. You are seeing both these organisations developing presence in different countries. We have to be aware that we have to remain vigilant. We will have to continue to put in resource and support other nations to manage the threat.

Q125 Graham P. Jones: It seems to me that that will be difficult without the US. You talk about them being defeated, but I read what Michael Knights wrote for the Combatting Terrorism Centre. He said: "district-level analysis suggests the Islamic State is enthusiastically embracing the challenge of starting over" in Iraq. The metrics from just over the border in Syria are 1,271 attacks, "of which 762 were explosive events, including 135 attempted mass-casualty attacks and 270 effective roadside bombings". Some 148 people were executed. I do not think we have defeated them. I am deeply concerned about this. I return to the point,



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as does Michael Knights, that we have just turned the clock back. By drawing down like we did in 2011, we are just allowing them to go again. I want to know from you, Secretary of State, what you are going to do about it in light of the American drawdown.

Gavin Williamson: We will continue to work with the United States and also with France on how we continue to place pressure on Daesh, whether that is Iraq or Syria. We are very conscious, as I touched upon, that while territorially they have been deprived of the caliphate—

Q126 **Graham P. Jones:** Can I say that they just blew up two American convoys in Manbij and Shaddadi? How have they been defeated territorially?

Gavin Williamson: What you have seen is that in the amount of territory they control, they have been reduced to the Middle Euphrates river valley going up to the Iraqi border. We will continue to place pressure. You have seen the tempo increase of attacks and strikes by coalition forces—by the United States, Britain and France. In the last month there were 51 strikes by the Royal Air Force, and you have seen an increase in tempo of strikes by the US and France as well.

Q127 **Graham P. Jones:** Is it not true that we have just turned the clock back in defeating ISIS to where they are now? We have not defeated them and have just turned the clock back.

Gavin Williamson: What you see is the fact that the British Government recognise the fact that Daesh continues to remain a threat. We will use all resource and all that is required to continue to do what we can to ensure that Daesh does not pose a threat to the United Kingdom. We will continue to work with Iraqi forces and the SDF. We have had a good relationship with both the SDF and the Iraqi Government, and we will continue to build that relationship.

Q128 **Graham P. Jones:** Most people listening to that, online or wherever, will just think that there is no substance to what you are saying, Secretary of State. "We will endeavour to do something about it." What does that mean? You are minus the significant coalition partner. They have drawn down their troops. We are facing an insurgency that is likely to rise. I have given you the figures for Iraq, which are terrible. This is not a defeated enemy. Where is the substance in defeating Daesh?

Gavin Williamson: As I touched on, they have been deprived of much of the territory that they previously had, but we recognise that they continue to remain a threat. That is why we continue to look at all options on how we continue to place pressure on Daesh in order to ensure that they do not have the space to bring about attacks on the United Kingdom. We will continue to look at all options with coalition partners on how to continue to support the Iraqi Government and the SDF. These are ongoing discussions that we are having with the United States and with France.

Q129 **Graham P. Jones:** But do you recognise that the argument that you are making is not a strong argument?



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Gavin Williamson: I am sure you are listening to me. We are making quite similar arguments. You are saying that the threat of Daesh is still there. I am saying that the threat of Daesh is still there. We both recognise that we will have to continue to take action in order to deprive Daesh of the space and the ability to operate freely.

Q130 **Graham P. Jones:** You talked about tackling Islamic terror groups, or terror group fanatics, et cetera. You mentioned al-Qaeda. Could we briefly turn to Yemen? We are the penholder, and UN resolution 2451 has gone through. What conversations were there between the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and yourself with regard to that resolution, and the risk that it carries should the Stockholm peace talks collapse?

Gavin Williamson: We have regular discussions with the Foreign Secretary. It is something that is discussed right across Government. It is also something that is discussed with the United States and other allies in terms of how we can bring forward the peace process in Yemen. I would like to pay particular tribute to the UN Special Envoy, who has done so much in bringing about these peace talks.

Britain recognises the humanitarian price that has been paid and the challenges we see in Yemen. Right across Government—DfID, the Foreign Office and the MOD—we are working closely together to look at every option on how we can alleviate that.

Q131 **Graham P. Jones:** We are dealing with another Islamic terror group. We were putting UN observer troops in on the ground into Hudaydah. What advice did you give as far as risk to the Foreign Secretary if the peace talks collapsed? What would be next to deal with this Islamic terror in Yemen?

Gavin Williamson: There needs to be a peace process in Yemen—

Q132 **Graham P. Jones:** And what advice did you give to him about the risks if it collapses?

Gavin Williamson: There needs to be a peace process in Yemen in order to look at putting in any form of UN or any other forces, to go into a country to make sure that there is a distribution of international aid. I am not going to go into military advice that is given to the Foreign Secretary.

Q133 **Graham P. Jones:** Can I move on to the peshmerga? Will we continue to train and support the peshmerga in Kurdistan?

Gavin Williamson: Yes.

Q134 **Graham P. Jones:** Is there a risk that we may no longer train them? What are the risks involved in the north, with the Turkish incursion into Kurdistan? I would like to know your views on this particular issue and on where you think the dangers are in training the peshmerga.

Gavin Williamson: We have had a long relationship with the Kurds in northern Iraq. It is a deep relationship that goes back to after the first Gulf war. We will continue to work with both the Iraqi Government and the Kurdish forces in the north of Iraq in the future.



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Q135 **Chair:** In relation to Syria, do you accept that, given our understandable reluctance to do anything to support President Assad's forces, the main forces on the ground that our bombing campaign has supported have been those led by the Kurds in the Syrian democratic forces?

Gavin Williamson: Yes.

Q136 **Chair:** Do you agree, therefore, that those forces have played a crucial role in such contribution as we have been able to make towards the defeat of Daesh in Syria, and that without their support it would have been very difficult, if not impossible, for us to contribute much to that conflict?

Gavin Williamson: As I said in the House the other day, we are very conscious of the close relationship, and of the work we have done with the Syrian democratic forces and the role they have played in defeating Daesh. What is absolutely critical is that the SDF play an important part in the peace process and the peace talks to bring stability to Syria. The territorial hold they have over the north-east of Syria is an important territorial hold, and that should be recognised by all parties. I know it is something that, from a UK Government perspective, we are very keen to emphasise.

Q137 **Chair:** I welcome those comments. Do you agree then that it would be absolutely disastrous in terms of ever getting indigenous forces to co-operate with us in future campaigns if we were to allow the SDF to come under attack from our fellow NATO member country, namely Turkey?

Gavin Williamson: There is no reason that should happen. Turkey needs to, and must, play an important role and be an important voice in bringing about stability in Syria, but we have to recognise the role that the SDF have played, both the Arab and Kurdish parts of the SDF. They have to be part of that peace process, in terms of bringing stability to Syria.

Q138 **Chair:** Are we making the strongest possible representations to Turkey that they should behave responsibly in this matter?

Gavin Williamson: Yes. I recently had a meeting with the Turkish ambassador to the United Kingdom and it was something I emphasised then. It will also be something I emphasise at the next NATO Defence Ministers meetings and the bilaterals I have there.

Q139 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** The last couple of questions that have been asked have been on Daesh in Yemen and the MDP and also on Secretary Mattis's role in support for both you as a Secretary of State and the Department, in that gaining of knowledge and legacy planning. You gave the Secretary of State the courtesy of being in contact after he left office. My concern is: since you took office in September, have you spoken to your own predecessor? Did you give them the same courtesy to gain knowledge and understanding of the position of the Department when you took it over?

Gavin Williamson: I am greatly privileged to have the vast amount of support and great amount of advice that lots of people give you when you are in the role of Secretary of State for Defence.

Q140 Martin Docherty-Hughes: That will be a no, then. The former Secretary of State leaves office—whether I agree with their positions on many things or not—and a new Secretary of State, given the conflicting issues faced by the Department, such as those mentioned by Graham and others, didn't pick up the phone to talk to the predecessor.

Gavin Williamson: I am not quite sure where this is relevant. You have a great opportunity to get a broad range of advice from officials, the military and a lot of people who are connected with defence, on Select Committees and such like.

Q141 Martin Docherty-Hughes: The relevance is that, given the profound issues that have been questioned by Members here today, when you are talking about Secretary Mattis and being in touch after he left public office, I would have thought it would have also been natural in September to have picked up the phone and talked to your own predecessor about some of the issues that you were going to face in the years ahead as the new Secretary of State. That is called legacy planning, so that when you come to this Committee you are armed with a lot of information that your predecessor might have had. I get that, clearly, the answer is a no.

Q142 John Spellar: If we can move on to the INF treaty, what military advantage do you assess the Russians are trying to gain by violating that treaty?

Gavin Williamson: This issue has been highlighted with Russia since 2014, and the United States brought it up. Obviously, what they are looking at is the forward deployment of forces—they are looking at the development and deployment of the SSC-8 cruise missile system. They obviously see it as giving them strategic advantage and the ability to deny NATO allies the ability to access and manoeuvre in certain theatres.

Q143 Mrs Moon: Could I ask for a clarification, Secretary of State? While the INF was in place and restraining development between Russia and the US, did we actually have a little bit of a vacuum in which a country outside of the INF treaty such as China was able to move ahead and develop capability unrestricted and unrestrained?

Gavin Williamson: Our view is that the INF treaty is an important treaty, and we would like for it to carry on, but for it to carry on you have to have Russia in compliance with it. There was a move, I think, 10 years ago to invite China to sign up to the INF treaty, and I believe that was a move made by Russia, but there was a belief that this was maybe a distraction technique and not a technique to try and improve matters. What we would ideally like to see is the INF treaty working, not just for Russia and the United States, but for other nations as well. Of course we would.

Q144 Mrs Moon: Are we now in a situation where China has missile capabilities that are in advance of what America has because of the INF treaty?



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Gavin Williamson: I cannot comment.—*[Interruption.]*

Chair: I am afraid that I am going to have to stop the proceedings there. Now that the votes have started, Secretary of State, it seems unlikely that we will be able to resume. Perhaps we can check the situation as we go over and if it changes, we will resume, but I think it unlikely that we will be able to do so. Members of the public are welcome to stay on the off-chance, but it is probable that we will have to bring matters to an end for now, and we will welcome you back on a future occasion. Thank you very much.