

International Development Committee

Oral evidence: Humanitarian situation in Syria, HC 1877

Wednesday 23 January 2019

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Members present: Stephen Twigg (Chair); Richard Burden; Mrs Pauline Latham; Chris Law; Lloyd Russell-Moyle; Mark Menzies; Paul Scully; Henry Smith.

Questions 1 - 31

Witnesses

I: Rt Hon Alistair Burt MP, Minister of State for International Development and Minister of State for the Middle East, Foreign and Commonwealth Office; Charlotte Pierre, Deputy Director, Middle East and North Africa, Department for International Development; Martin Longden, Head, Near East Department, and UK Special Representative for Syria, Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Rt Hon Alistair Burt MP, Charlotte Pierre and Martin Longden.

Q1 Chair: Good afternoon. Welcome, Minister and officials. Thank you very much indeed for joining us for this one-off session of the International Development Committee, focusing on the Syria crisis. We have an hour and a half, but sadly we will be interrupted on at least one occasion for votes, so I am going to kick straight off. Our aim is to cover around a dozen broad areas. Let me start, Minister, with a fairly open question about the conflict. Given its complexity and changing nature, what do you see as the key humanitarian challenges in the coming year?

Alistair Burt: Thank you, Chair, very much indeed. It is good to be in front of you again. I have with me Martin Longden from the FCO and Charlotte Pierre from DFID. Hopefully, between us we can cover all of the answer. I wish we could come up with a solution to the conflict itself, but that is a separate matter.

Coming challenges for the next year include, in no particular order, dealing with the continued massive humanitarian crisis in terms of the displacement of people—those who have had to move beyond the borders of Syria and those who are internally displaced—and dealing with some very basic humanitarian relief issues, in terms of those who are in Rukban in the camp in the south and those who are in distressed areas in other parts of the country. There are still some who require some very basic needs. As we saw recently with the storms in Lebanon, weather conditions mean that some of those who have already been moved are still suffering quite significantly. We have to be alert to over of that.

There will be, at some stage during the next year, some resolution to the circumstances in Idlib, where a large number of fighters have, over a period of time, been pressed. There is an overall population of 3 million in Idlib, of whom a very small fraction are extremist fighters. There is a pause there, as we know, brokered recently, but at some stage that will emerge. That is in north-western Syria; there will be the issues in the north-east of Syria. There is still the continuing issue of Daesh, because while we concentrate on internal elements of the conflict in Syria, no one should forget the presence of Daesh and the concerns there are there.

One further thing—without saying too much at this stage as I know your questions will cover a lot of this area—is making sure that the world remains aware of this. The tragedy is this has already gone on for a very long time. We know what the world is like; it moves from one thing to another. Accordingly, making sure that the amounts of money needed are raised to cover the basic issues will also remain of some concern. In all of this area, the UK Government in their various guises and Parliament will remain very active.



Q2 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** What is your assessment of the current situation in Idlib?

Alistair Burt: The process that was brokered, particularly by the Government of Turkey, to ensure that there was not a dramatic attack on Idlib has broadly held. As the Committee will know, a process was brokered whereby there would be heavy armaments moved out of the area and there would be a process by which Turkey would seek to distinguish between different groups of fighters, so as to provide an exit for those who could be considered moderate and those who were going to be reintegrated somewhere. In return for that, then there would not be an attack by the regime forces supported by its partners. The principal impact of this agreement was to relieve the immediate danger of some form of attack, which would have affected, as I said, the bulk of those 3 million people who are in the area.

Our assessment is that broadly that agreement has held in place. The process of distinguishing fighters is not yet complete. There are occasional skirmishes. There has been an increase in the presence of HTS in terms of its control and impact on Idlib itself, so it remains fragile. There is no sense yet of how actually it will end completely, but at least the immediate concerns were relieved and humanitarian agencies are working to get things in place should something happen in the future, which is only prudent planning.

Q3 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** If the issues there escalate, the conflict gets hotter, as it were, and those agreements fall apart, have we modelled a level of preparedness for particularly humanitarian assistance? How would we aim for that to get to the right people if the situation on the ground changes? What can you say that you have done? I understand you cannot necessarily say every detail.

Alistair Burt: Broadly, yes. I will ask Charlotte to speak on this, but, yes, humanitarian agencies were already working in the area and were preparing for the worst. In the meantime, we are already funding food, non-food items, water, education, healthcare and trauma and psychosocial support in the area, but of course preparations have been made for the implications of an attack, and we are working with our partner agencies to do just that.

Charlotte Pierre: It is absolutely as the Minister said. The UN has anticipated that should there be an increase in fragility and conflict, we could see up to potentially 800,000 people displaced, on top of the 3 million already vulnerable. As the Minister said, agencies have been preparing. Also as the UK, we have announced a further £42 million to the region since August of last year. We remain in very close touch with our partners. They are pre-positioning and they are watching the situation closely, also in terms of their own staff, which is important to keep an eye on as well.

Q4 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** In terms of access, what representations,



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Minister, have you made or the Government made to Turkey to ensure that humanitarian aid agencies and international organisations are freely able to secure registration in Turkey, so that they are able to conduct their work, particularly in the Afrin region, which is controlled by Turkey, but also able to move humanitarian supplies across that Turkey border?

Alistair Burt: Regular representations have been made at all levels: at ambassadorial level here, at post level out in Turkey. The determination has been to try to ensure that access and registration. We have been prime movers and supporters of successive UN resolutions to ensure that there is a legal basis for the supply of aid across borders. The response I have had from Turkey has been to say it does allow registration and humanitarian workers to be there, but not all. It makes the distinction between some agencies and some who wish to work there, but Turkey makes clear that there are humanitarian agencies working in the region. We continue to press for the access of all who need it, and major agencies, and we keep in close contact with Turkey to try to ensure that.

Q5 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** My contacts there say that very often the only agencies that are able to register particularly to work in the Afrin region, which is occupied by Turkey at the moment, are organisations that are supportive of Turkey in the wider geopolitical sense, often only Turkish organisations or branches controlled by Turkish people, and not actually a wide range of international organisations that might be critical of some of the actions of Turkey. That means that there is difficulty in trust on the ground, for particularly some of the residual Kurdish community. Have we pushed harder on that international element? If it is just Turkish NGOs, it is not necessarily the international scheme that we need.

Alistair Burt: I know. I will come back to it. There is some politics in this, but I will come back to that.

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

On resuming—

Chair: In Lloyd's absence, I will go to the next line of questioning, but I will take Lloyd after Chris's line of questioning.

Q6 **Chris Law:** Minister, I wonder if you could give us a little update, before going through these questions, with regards to US policy. Before Christmas the world was largely shocked to see President Trump's order of the US withdrawal of troops, particularly in the north-east; he claimed that there was no longer a threat from Daesh, and also spoke about the concerns around Kurdish fighters. I wondered if you had an update, because I am looking online and Bolton seems to contradict that and then the previous envoy is telling me there is no future plan. The reason I ask that is really in terms of what effect that will have on UK support for relief in north-east Syria.



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Alistair Burt: Thank you, Mr Law. How can I deal with your question delicately? It is true. Two things are true. First, the President always had an intention of withdrawing troops from Syria. He made that clear during his election process and subsequently. Secondly, there has been obviously real genuine impact on Daesh in northern Syria and Iraq over a period of time. The amount of territory controlled has been drastically reduced and Daesh are confined to a couple of enclaves.

However, what is also true is the ideology behind Daesh and the ability of Daesh to exploit difficult situations remains. The circle is squared by recognising that it is clear now that the American withdrawal will be gradual, over a period of time. Certainly, the national security advice of the United States has made that clear. It will be done recognising that the danger of Daesh continues, despite the degree of victory against them, and that therefore the global coalition's work against Daesh will certainly continue.

In relation to humanitarian assistance, clearly if people are put at risk by American troop withdrawal that is one very specialist thing to consider. We are in regular and urgent consultation with those on the ground about risks related to withdrawals and how that is effectively managed. In terms of the determination to deliver humanitarian assistance in the area, that is not affected by the American position. Our position has not changed in any way, but of course we have to look at the practical effects on the ground. There is a lot of co-ordination between us, the United States and other partners in relation to this.

Q7 Chris Law: I suppose just fleshing that out, could you tell us in a little bit more detail about the plans with regards to protection of humanitarian aid workers on the ground, and also a little bit more about what it will mean for UK stabilisation, humanitarian and other funding in north-eastern Syria?

Alistair Burt: The protection of humanitarian workers remains absolutely fundamental to the United Kingdom. As the Committee is aware, we work through partners in the area, but their safety and security is of huge importance. There is a lot of co-ordination on the ground in relation to that.

Maybe Charlotte will say something more, because one of the questions I have asked the team very straightforwardly is about how we know what is going on. When we have talked about the difficulties on the ground, I have asked very specifically, "How do we make sure that the monitoring is accurate? When I say in answer to a question or a letter or a written question, 'We closely monitor the situation', what does that mean when we are not there?" We have a range of methods of doing that. That monitoring enables advice to be given to those who might be at risk in order to avoid that.

Charlotte Pierre: Carrying on from what the Minister has said, specifically on the humanitarian effort a lot of partners, just by virtue of



the fact that northern Syria is highly fluid, preposition their commodities, support and contingency plans all the time. We are confident that the effort, goods and services will continue to be delivered.

On monitoring and making sure we are giving the right advice to Ministers, there are a number of ways we do that. Our implementing partners are constantly feeding back information, which we triangulate also with our UN partners. We also have a third-party independent monitoring contract, because obviously we as UK officials cannot get into Syria to see what is happening on the ground. We have quite a robust monitoring mechanism through that. That allows for field visits and to try again to check and triangulate the information we are getting from UN partners and from NGO partners. We feel that we have as good a picture as we can of what is happening on the ground.

Alistair Burt: I wanted that very much on the record, because it also applies when we talk about aid diversion and what is happening to supplies. Is stuff getting through, as well as protection? Again, the same answer applies in terms of how I find out and how we find out what is actually happening, as opposed to hearsay.

Charlotte Pierre: Can I quickly add to what the Minister has said? Building on that, we have quite a detailed delivery chain mapping process, where we can actually see commodities and services go from stage to stage to stage, to allow us to be able essentially to follow the money and to follow the goods.

Q8 **Chris Law:** Can I ask one further question? In the light of the increased attacks on humanitarian aid workers, being killed, kidnapped or injured, what have we done in terms of our spend on the security with regard to those humanitarian workers, not least in north-east Syria and elsewhere?

Alistair Burt: Because this is something that affects our partners, as I say, the first and most immediate thing is you do not put people into situations where they are at maximum risk. It is essential to use any information we have to feed back to agencies and keep people protected from going into certain areas.

The support that we give, I believe, allows for the agencies to work on protective materials and the kit that aid workers would use. The most important thing, and the best thing, is to make sure that if the risks are too great then they do not go. That then involves consultation with those on the ground in order to say, "The people that you have a responsibility for now under humanitarian law cannot be supplied by us because of your actions or actions of those connected with you. This must stop".

We then work with the UN co-ordinator and other partners to get that message through. In a lot of places, it is local negotiation that does the job. Remember, the overall rule of law in the area is extremely limited, so often it is militia to militia, with very direct conversations. That is where the skills of some of the workers are most effectively employed.



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That is the key to making sure there is no loss of life and that humanitarian workers are protected, and also those involved knowing that it is a crime and that there will be justice and retribution where evidence is found of those who have been guilty of targeting or injuring humanitarian workers.

Chair: We will return to Lloyd's question from earlier. Do you want to refresh all of our memories?

Q9 Lloyd Russell-Moyle: I was caught up in the lobby. The question was about the international organisations that are impartial and that are not particularly supportive or not of the Turkish regime, the Turkish governance or however we want to phrase it, and whether they were allowed to operate in Afrin. The reports are that there are restrictions on them. You said that Turkey has given you some reassurances that some are allowed, but that did not seem to be covering the reassurances that those decisions on registration were not being politically motivated rather than humanitarian motivated.

Alistair Burt: The honest answer to that would be that, because of the reasons for the Turkish incursion against those who they consider to be capable or having been involved in terrorist acts against them, they take a very cautious attitude to those who will be working in that particular area. Being as straightforward with me as they were, to say, "We allow some but not others", would imply that, while we would always wish and expect such decisions to be made on purely humanitarian basis, they will have other concerns as well.

The UN co-ordinator does work effectively with the Turkish authorities to make the case for the humanitarian aid workers to have access and to challenge those decisions that the UN thinks are inappropriate or unfair. Humanitarian work is being done there and the Turkish authorities do allow it, but it may not always be those that they deem might have some political sympathies that may make the situation more difficult, in their eyes.

Q10 Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Particularly in that region, we have reports of about 150,000 displaced elsewhere in Syria. Are there ongoing discussions now that that area is controlled by a NATO ally, despite some of our misgivings of that fact, so that those 150,000 can start to return and rebuild their lives? Have there been discussions about how a safe corridor to allow people to return could be created, bearing in mind some of them fled the Turks themselves? It is a complicated picture.

Alistair Burt: Let me say a little bit and then I will ask Martin Longden to say a little more; he is our expert in relation to the politics. Turkey is very clear about not risking a threat to its own borders. It recognises that what it has been doing in northern Syria has created a situation where there has been displacement and is looking for a political answer that covers both the movement of people and local authority control of the various needs and services that they have, and that does not involve



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those that they would consider to be politically hostile to Turkey but will not also at this stage be the regime either. There is talk of creating a safe zone in which there will be a degree of autonomy, in which people can return to their homes under not the regime and not an authority that Turkey would find potentially hazardous to us. That is ongoing.

Q11 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** Just on that, when you say “hazardous to us”, you mean hazardous to the Turks.

Alistair Burt: Hazardous to Turkish authorities, yes.

Q12 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** Because I am right in saying that we do not consider the Kurdish-led but not purely Kurdish administration as particularly hazardous to us in Britain. We do not consider them as terrorists like the Turks do.

Alistair Burt: No. In order to avoid doubt, I may ask Martin to say more about this, but let us be clear: the situation between the Kurdish community and Turkey is very fraught and fractious. Turkey makes the point that 10 million Kurds live in Turkey perfectly straightforwardly, and there are Kurdish organisations in Turkey. Turkey designates the PKK, as we do, as a terrorist organisation. Turkey then goes further in relation to the YPD in a way in which the United Kingdom does not. That is clear. Apart from the PKK, which is a terrorist organisation and could indeed be a threat to the United Kingdom, which is why it is proscribed, others are not. When I spoke about risk, I meant risk that the Turkish authorities considered to Turkey, should there be others there.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: It was just in what voice you were talking. That is fine.

Alistair Burt: Have I got the complexities of this broadly correct?

Martin Longden: Yes, you largely captured it, Minister. The Turkish view would be that they are not closing off places like Afrin to people who wish to live there. They would argue that if some of the original inhabitants have not returned that is their choice. I am sure the situation is more complex than that and they have deep-seated concerns, as the Minister has said, about those who they believe have links to terrorism. Yes, it is difficult. We are concerned about demographic changes in those areas and we would not want to see any kind of ethnic cleansing.

Q13 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** What I am trying to get at is whether we are pushing back at some of those views where we are not in accordance with Turkey and how hard we are pushing back. I have a particular report from some people that have come to me, from the Afrin region, about education. They say that there are two education systems. There is effectively the Kurdish-inspired north-eastern Syrian administration curriculum and there is the Syrian curriculum. The reports are that the curriculum that is now being promoted in parts of the Afrin region is a Turkish Islamic curriculum. That seems particularly worrying to me.



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One of the things that we know is that it is important for curriculum and language to be accessed as the local population have accessed previously. Have we had any reports on that officially? Is that something that the Minister maybe could explore to ensure that the curriculums that are being proposed to educate the children in Afrin are of local sensitivity?

Alistair Burt: I am not aware that we have had that specifically reported officially. We clearly keep the situation in Afrin under very close supervision, through the monitoring that we described recently. It is far from being a settled situation or anything like that. The system of local government is far from being fixed and finally authoritative.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: It is much less stable now than it was a year ago.

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

On resuming—

Q14 **Henry Smith:** Minister, the Foreign Secretary, as you will know, has effectively said that the Assad regime is in place now for a while. How will that affect UK humanitarian aid for Syria and will there be continued humanitarian funding, irrespective of who the effective administration of most of Syria is?

Alistair Burt: Yes. Of course the Foreign Secretary is correct. The assumption of Assad remaining in office, and indeed in power, is pretty realistic, but a couple of things hang on that. The United Kingdom has not changed its view that over the medium and longer term it is not possible for the Assad regime to rule Syria as it did and expect to see any stability in its country. Indeed, sadly the evidence we currently have for areas that were in opposition control and have returned to regime control, particularly in the south of the country, would indicate that patterns of detention, imprisonment, disappearances and conscription continue. Although it is clear that on the ground Assad and those who have partnered him have recovered much of the country, if there is to be stability in the future, it will not come through the regime performing as it did.

That is why we are looking for the political settlement that will give hope to Syria again and provide some sort of new government structure, with which it will be possible for the United Kingdom to work in terms of reconstruction and the like. In the meantime, there is no question of normalisation for the United Kingdom or anything similar. In terms of pure humanitarian aid and assistance, the UK's position has always been that humanitarian aid is not politicised. It is directed at the most needy, wherever the most needy are. That applies to regime-held areas as well as opposition-held areas. We have no plans to change that.



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- Q15 **Henry Smith:** If I may, just as a supplementary, you partly answered what I was about to ask in terms of DFID aid and humanitarian aid going to regime-held areas. How will that principally be delivered, given the fact that quite rightly we are not seeking to aid and assist the Assad forces?

Alistair Burt: The majority of aid has tended to go to opposition areas where the need has tended to be greatest because of the nature of the conflict and everything else. We will still look at everything on a needs basis, but it will flow into regime-held areas. We constantly keep under review what is happening in order to make sure that aid flows can go in. That does mean dealing with those in authority on the ground in order to make sure the aid gets delivered. Clearly, in the long term this all has to change, and then we get into issues of stabilisation, reconstruction and the like. As we make clear, there is no long-term future in which the United Kingdom can be involved unless there is a political structure that does not rely on regime behaviour, as in the past, but on something different.

Again, it comes down to what I mentioned earlier: the agencies working very closely on the ground with who may be in control, to look at the opportunities to supply the absolutely essential humanitarian needs. If there is a risk to them, they cannot do it, but then the local commanders and others are called out, in terms of, "You are denying those you are responsible for support under international humanitarian law. You need to change this", et cetera.

- Q16 **Mrs Latham:** Could you tell us what the UK's current position is on providing reconstruction support in Syria? How do you tell the difference between reconstruction and humanitarian support?

Alistair Burt: Again, I had to cover this in my learning curve in terms of the difference between stabilisation and reconstruction. Because my view is hazy, I am of course going to ask Charlotte to speak about, but I think I can encapsulate it in broad terms. Stabilisation and the providing of humanitarian assistance to those in acute need is humanitarian aid. It is not reconstruction and, as I indicated, that is supplied to those who need it. That is DFID's role and responsibility, working with partner agencies, to ensure that men, women and children do not starve and are not left naked in conflict areas, et cetera. Stabilisation takes that a little further in terms of areas that have been pounded by bombing and conflict.

Reconstruction, however, is the longer-term larger infrastructure needs of the society that is going to be put back together again. We are involved in reconstruction in Iraq, for example, where the conflict has come to an end. International agencies have worked together to provide sums of money to support reconstruction. It is an international programme to help rebuild. That is being done in Iraq because all the evidence is that the political structure of Iraq has recognised the problems of the past, is working hard to be inclusive, ensuring that the Kurds—those in the south of Iraq in Basra—are included with the majority community. Therefore,



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putting money and support into ensuring that that Government is able to work in a stable manner with a country that is recovering makes sense.

In Syria, if we cannot see this, if it is not possible through the efforts being made at the UN for a political settlement to be agreed that would guarantee freedoms and safety for those in Syria, first, we would be contributing to something that would feel wrong, because we would be aiding a regime that would not be responsible for its people as we would wish it to be. Secondly, it would be money that would eventually be useless because the conflicts would begin again and the efforts would be lost. However, that spectrum of stabilisation and reconstruction is as Charlotte will describe.

Charlotte Pierre: Yes, the continuum is that there are various stages from humanitarian to reconstruction: humanitarian, resilience, early recovery, stabilisation and reconstruction. We believe that, particularly for Syria, we are still at the other end at the moment. We are not moving in one direction. We move backwards and forwards. In terms of our programming, the bottom line is to meet immediate basic humanitarian needs, but where we can we try to move a little bit further and do that kind of resilience and early recover work—where we can, because there are lots of reasons why it is quite difficult. We are doing that. We have helped 300,000 Syrians in the last financial year to improve livelihoods, to safeguard value chain developments of trying to process raw dairy.

We understand that it is a difficult thing to do, but we want to try to move along that continuum where we can, where it is safe to do it and where UK public money is protected to do it.

Q17 **Mrs Latham:** Where we are helping with education and health matters as part of the delivery of humanitarian aid, would that include rebuilding schools and hospitals? Would that money be used? Although it is called humanitarian aid, would it ever be spent on rebuilding?

Charlotte Pierre: For the moment, no. The focus of our programming along that continuum is very much on people and protection still. It is about skills. It is about, as I said, trying to build up as much as we can the local market environment and basically giving very vulnerable people some type of resilience to the constant shock of the very fluid situation. For the moment, there is no hard infrastructure rebuilding.

Q18 **Mrs Latham:** Even though they have lost a lot of hospitals and schools through bombing. Where are we doing operations and things?

Alistair Burt: Let us distinguish a little. Resilience and providing for needs clearly covers hospitals and medical treatment and the like. As Charlotte has indicated, there is a distinction from providing what you can for makeshift but effective medical treatment and rebuilding a general hospital. Clearly at the latter end we cannot do it.



Let me be clear on this and why. The cost of rebuilding Syria will be extraordinary. It will be enormous. Syria itself is unlikely to have the resources to do it. Some of the partners are currently engaged with Syria in keeping the regime in power and inflicting what we consider to be significant damage on its own population. If Syria is to be rebuilt and be stable in the region, which will benefit the partners who are currently acting with the regime, then it cannot be done unless there is a different form of Government than we have seen at present. Clearly, it would not be to our advantage to help a regime recover physically and still be in a position to inflict pain, oppression, imprisonment, detention and disappearance on its people.

In withholding, as we, the EU and other partners do, the support for Syria, we are not denying it to the Syrian people. We will do what we can to protect them, but ultimately the Syrian people will only be protected and free if the regime that has waged war against them is not doing so in the future. Therefore, being very clear about what we can and cannot do in this situation is important in ensuring that every leverage is used to get the most effective political settlement, because that is the only guarantee for the future of the safety of the people in Syria.

Q19 Mrs Latham: I want to move on to safeguarding now, because we have had reports from Syria highlighting sexual exploitation and abuse, particularly of women and girls. It is in part being enabled by the way aid resources are distributed by male-dominated structures and systems. What challenges does DFID face in ensuring that safeguarding standards are upheld throughout the delivery chain in Syria? How have you sought to address these charges, because it is a really big, hot topic? We did a report, as you know, about this and I am particularly keen to always challenge what is happening.

Alistair Burt: Those issues are taken very seriously. The Secretary of State has led a great deal of work in this area. We have responded to the challenges produced by your report and by many others. Safeguarding forms a key part of our due diligence assessments in relation to Syria and elsewhere. DFID Syria's strengthened due diligence procedures of our direct partners ensures that they do have the systems and practices in place to identify and manage safeguarding issues effectively. We require all of our partners to carry out the same checks on all of their partners. We have improved safeguarding structures, but again Charlotte has been intimately involved.

Charlotte Pierre: Yes, it has essentially become part of the fabric of how we work with partners. We have really clear and very high standards on it. We will not work with people who do not take this issue seriously. As well as pouring it into our architecture, we are also promoting all the time about how people can report this. We expect all partner agencies to have very clear reporting mechanisms at the local level about how people can report, whether it is a complaint or all the way up to a serious



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exploitation issue. We investigate everything. We also have our own separate reporting mechanisms through into DFID centrally. We have a dedicated safeguarding unit, and also our counter-fraud specialists are also involved to investigate every single complaint.

Alistair Burt: We have put a lot of assistance and action into this, as I say. Of course, the Secretary of State held an international gathering in relation to this, but we have followed it up with practices that listen to beneficiaries, listen to victims and ensure the processes are there for those who wish to draw attention to it. We have all taken it very seriously, because all of us who work in the international development area are all vulnerable if those who are sometimes sceptical of what we do are able to say, "Look at what has happened in such-and-such a place. You do not take this seriously enough". We seek to do so, even in the most difficult circumstances, as in Syria.

Q20 **Mrs Latham:** You do not happen to know off the top of your head if the IPPF—the International Planned Parenthood Federation—work in Syria, do you?

Charlotte Pierre: I think I do. I would have to check it.

Q21 **Mrs Latham:** They have got safeguarding issues and you are funding them. We asked the Africa Minister last week if she would tell us. She did not know anything about it, although it has been in the paper.

Alistair Burt: You are referring to the Kenya issue.

Q22 **Mrs Latham:** Yes, but if they are working in Syria then you need to flag up some bells. That is a bit of a mixed metaphor there, but you need to do something about it, because they are not behaving as they probably should.

Alistair Burt: The Kenyan situation and the African situation is not my particular portfolio area. We are indeed aware of allegations in relation to IPPF, but some of them are to a degree contested and therefore we have to be a bit careful. In relation to naming partners who are involved in Syria, we tend to be very careful, if you do not mind. We work with UN agencies and we are happy to say we work with UN agencies. We do not tend to specify the others on the ground that we work with, for security reasons.

Chair: Just for the record, after Harriett Baldwin's evidence I have written to her to seek further information regarding the relationship there. To make it clear, these are allegations.

Mrs Latham: They do work in a lot of countries.

Q23 **Mark Menzies:** Minister, with regards to refugees, we know the scale of the problem and the way in which people have found themselves forcibly displaced, but looking to the future, just to try to understand, what is the UK doing to ensure that any return of refugees to Syria is based on internationally recognised principles and criteria?



Alistair Burt: There are a couple of things. First, in terms of what we have been doing up to now, I will just put that on the record, because it is important. We have allocated £1.34 billion over the years to support the 5.6 million Syrian refugees in the region and their host communities. Principally, Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon have absorbed these refugees on a scale that would frighten the United Kingdom enormously if it had to deal with the same sort of refugee problem. It has been an extraordinary feat of hospitality. Many, of course, are not in camps. They are in local communities or on the edges of local communities. Our work with partners has been to support them where they are and use our partner agencies to do so. We will continue to do that.

We now get into the difficulties with returns. This is going to become an increasingly complex area, because the rights of host states have to be considered as well as those of refugees. In some, there are particular issues caused. Lebanon's fragile, confessional balance will be known to the Committee. Its leadership is divided between Sunni, Shia and Christian. What has happened with the refugees from Syria is that that balance has been significantly changed, because the majority of Syrian refugees who have come into the country are Sunni. They have now been there for over five years. There is little imminent prospect of them returning. Accordingly, it has become, not unsurprisingly, a very serious political issue. There is much debate in Lebanon about what a safe area is and what is not. There are different opinions about it.

Two things are relevant to say in terms of our consideration of what is safe and what is not. First, people communicate very effectively with each other these days. People do go back over the border into Syria. People have been back to family areas from which they may have been removed. They report back to those who are still in a host country. The stories they tell, by and large, are not good. You will know about legal action that the Syrian regime has taken to remove property from people. People go back and find their areas destroyed or affected by conflict. Also, as I indicated earlier, there is evidence in southern Syria that those who have returned have been subject to disappearances or imprisonment, and their young men have been conscripted, which is potentially a death sentence by taking them into hostile combat areas if they are not trained. People are not going back in those circumstances.

What we look for is the UNHCR definition of what is a safe area, because there has to be some legal basis to returning people. It is very clear that people cannot be forced to return. The rulings on *refoulement* are very clear in relation to that. People can only go back when it is safe to do so. They cannot be forced to do so. The immediate likelihood of this is not strong, until there is evidence that it is safe to go back. We have all heard siren calls from the Syrian regime and some of their partners to say if areas have stopped being areas of conflict, of course people should come back, but until their everyday human experiences are not what has been reported, they are not going to do so. No agency could possible



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designate this. It is a form of protection for refugees and it is a protection for an international system.

The one thing that I would put to the Committee, which we are all going to spend more time thinking about, is about what happens to a host state that has accepted people in circumstances where a regime does not want people back. That is the other thing we have to grapple with here. There is plenty of evidence, particularly in urban areas that rose up against Assad, that he has no interest in people returning to those areas if they are going to continue to be opponents to him. What happens then? Both Lebanon and Jordan, as the Committee again knows, have long experiences of very long-term refugees indeed—the Palestinian refugees.

We all have acute issues to deal with, because if there are future issues of conflict and people cannot return, when do the walls go up and the barriers go up in a situation of conflict to prevent people fleeing over a border into safe areas? It is not a subject for today, but that is why global compacts on migration and refugees are actually so important. It is not that they change UK law, but they focus all our attention on what is going to happen in the future. It is a long answer to an important question, but that is the way in which we will look at this difficult issue.

Mark Menzies: It is also important that to note it is not just people who are returning to areas having fled the Assad regime. You have the added complexity of other groups, be it Islamic State or other militia, where those people do not fit into that environment anymore but there may well be pressure put upon them to return to that community.

Chair: Charlotte, I am happy for you to respond quite briefly. We still have quite a lot of ground to cover.

Charlotte Pierre: Just to add to what the Minister said, we are not being complacent about the policy issue. We are looking over the next two to three years at a serious support to look at the regional actors in the returns question, and also for refugees to access information and to think about bringing refugee voices into that discussion around the returns issue. We are active on it.

Q24 **Mark Menzies:** Just to return to the Minister, what outcomes would the UK like to see from the March 2019 Brussels conference in terms of refugee access to education, protection and livelihoods? That is the first part. Maybe in terms of brevity, what are DFID's plans for future humanitarian funding for the refugees in Jordan, Lebanon and neighbouring countries? Are we considering changing the objectives for these countries?

Just whilst I am on the subject, it is important to remember that Syrian refugees, whilst obviously concentrated in some of these countries, are spread far and wide. On our Select Committee visit to Kenya and Ethiopia, I came across one solitary Syrian refugee in a camp, surrounded by people that in no way he had any way to identify with. When you come across that, you realise that these people have been



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scattered far and wide. It is important that aid agencies, regardless of what label they have, are aware of that and do everything they can to try to get Syrians supported as close to home as possible.

Alistair Burt: Syria will never be the same again. To assume that refugees will now go back is unlikely, in the exact numbers of those who left. There will always be pockets of those around the world that will say, "We are not taking the risk for the future". That is why it is so important to get a comprehensive political settlement that will give some sense that there is some security so that some can go back. In the immediate short term, while no allocations have been made because it is all part of future spending rounds, we have no intention to not continue supporting those in Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan.

The EU scheme remains in place. We will continue our commitments to that in relation to Turkey, even post Brexit. We will continue to provide resources for IDPs, both in Syria and the neighbouring areas. As I say, there are significant political problems coming along, but it is very important that we give an assurance that when people are in need, DFID will continue to play its part with other humanitarian partners.

Q25 **Paul Scully:** Minister, you touched just then on the IDPs. What is the UK strategy for the 6.8 million internally displaced people in Syria?

Alistair Burt: Very clearly, as I indicated earlier, we continue to support those wherever they may be, whether they have moved to regime-controlled areas or are still in opposition areas and have moved around. We are intensely worried about the situation in Idlib, as I mentioned before, because the population at Idlib has swelled enormously, because as well as fighters having been channelled there over a period of time, through the so-called deconfliction areas in the agreements made by the regime with others in the past, also numbers of civilians have gradually moved up to Idlib. Looking after their needs is, as Charlotte described earlier, done through humanitarian agencies and others still continuing to support them, recognising both the immediate humanitarian needs and the wider ones.

We discussed education a moment ago. From memory, my understanding is that a third of refugees lose primary education as refugee children and half of them lose secondary education as refugee children. We have now been through a period of time longer than the Second World War in terms of Syria and the damage done. The commitments remain, but the most important commitment we can make, because we have only tangentially touched on it, is to say, "There is a UN process still in place". Staffan de Mistura has stepped down. His successor, Geir Pedersen, is in place. That will provide the political structure for Syria, and the long-term interests of those who have been displaced will only be secured and settled by the political agreement, which will give them some security for the future.

Q26 **Richard Burden:** If you look back over the amount that the UK has



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devoted to the Syrian crisis since 2012, it is about £2.71 billion. If you look back over that time, what more do you think you would have liked that money to have achieved for the Syrian people than it has achieved?

Alistair Burt: Clearly, the most important thing would have been an end to the conflict. The statistics on what we have been able to do, which I will not repeat at length, are still impressive. That £2.71 billion has provided 27 million food rations, 14 million medical consultations, 10 million relief packages and 10 million vaccines, and our aid provides life-saving support to millions of people. As this Committee and the Government knows full well, this tends to be the essential treatment of a situation that is causing the problem. We are the sticking plaster. We are the medical aid, but it is the conflict itself that needs to come to an end.

The story of this conflict will be much written about. Some of us were in the House in August 2013, when a significant decision was taken for all sorts of reasons, but the consequence of that was that the conflict, in my view, went on much longer than it might have done. The regime felt emboldened. Its partners then came in to save it at various times. Both Iran and Russia acted at times when the regime might potentially have been toppled. The conflict itself morphed from what was originally an expression of the people of Syria who did not necessarily want Assad to go but wanted reform; it became bloody because of the response by the regime, and then external partners, who were not involved at the beginning but did become involved, including some very nasty people indeed, provided the opportunity for people to mount a narrative of the stability of Syria being protected against Islamic extremists. That all became clear and we have seen what we have seen over the years.

Our aid has done a remarkable job in humanitarian terms. There are still now pockets of real concern. I do not wish us in any way to give a suggestion that there is some stability. 10 million people are still in need of humanitarian care. You have situations like those in Rukban. You have the potential in Idlib and the uncertainty in the north-east.

I am not sure what more we could have done. We have worked hard with partners. We have been a significant donor. We have helped run the international conferences that have provided the opportunity for more donor support to be available in Brussels and in other conferences.

Clearly, the most important thing would have been to see success on the political front and to end the conflict, because that is what needs to happen. That remains elusive because, again being blunt with the Committee, the people who have influence on the ground at the moment are those with weapons. Those who do not have them are on the outside, doing what they can to pull all the diplomatic levers and encourage people to do what is best. In the fairly brutal world of the politics of the region, those who are in fear fight to protect themselves from fear, and fear is described in different ways by different groups. Until we have resolved that situation and then the peace-building work,



which is now an essential part of development, gets going, these issues will still occur. Our diplomatic leverage is significant, but our effect on the ground is much less than those who have physical boots on the ground and the ability to influence events of fighting.

Q27 Richard Burden: You mentioned work with partners there. Could I perhaps just press you a little more on one aspect of that? That is really about the compliance and reporting procedures that we insist on from partners. You have already been asked in relation to safeguarding. That is an agenda that this Committee has pushed, but one thing that has been put to us as well is that a number of local partners or potential local partners on the ground are unable or unable fully to avail themselves of the assistance that they could give, exactly as partners do, because of the sheer bureaucracy involved. How far do you think that our compliance and reporting procedures are actually facilitating assistance rather than sometimes hampering it?

Alistair Burt: I will give that straight to Charlotte. That is a technical detail. I understand the point, and we seek to be alert to it as we are with all risk. There are very difficult risks to manage—aid diversion and the like—which sometimes people interpret as you say, but it is a very practical detailed issue.

Charlotte Pierre: With respect—I do not want to be cheeky—we do not see it as bureaucracy. We see it as a risk and control architecture that we absolutely need for a very high-risk area of delivering UK public funds in Syria. We understand that it is enhanced and we have had it reviewed on two occasions by ICAI, who agree that it is the right thing to do.

I understand what you are saying specifically on the point about Syrian partners. What we try to do through our own delivery relationships with what tend to be international partners is encourage them to build Syrian NGO capability. It is something that has been specifically singled out in the last ICAI report of 2018. The recommendation has been made to us that we need to do more. We take that recommendation and we have provided more detail on how we are going to take that forward to the review that is coming back to the Committee a little bit later this year.

Richard Burden: Perhaps I could put to you a quote that we were given by Dr Farouq al Habib, who is director of the Mayday Rescue Foundation. He said, "Everybody agrees that the volume of the humanitarian crisis in Syria is now so huge and so big that it is far beyond the capacity of any region, country or local organisation to meet or handle". I am sure we would all go along with that, but he then went on to say, "Regarding assessments, excuse me, but I have to say this: we, as Syrians, feel so frustrated by the many requests for assessment. We believe that the catastrophe is obvious to everybody, no matter how much time we spend on bureaucratic systems of the UN and international NGOs filling in questionnaires for them and doing surveys on the ground with people to assess their needs, and following policies that change all the time and the number of IBFs in area that move all the time. This just tends to be a big



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machine that wastes the time and effort of people who are so exhausted”.

There does seem to be a feeling on the ground there that actually, whilst well-intentioned, some of the procedures involved can actually get in the way of delivering assessments.

Alistair Burt: It is a balance. At one and the same time, we could be accused of not doing enough or putting funds or resources into a situation where they are diverted and used for other uses. There have been occasions when we have had to stop aid-giving, when we got clear reports of the diversion of resources into terrorist or extremist hands, because we would then be liable for that and the Committee would be right to say, “Why are you operating? Why has this happened? What have you done to check it?” There is a balance.

I have made clear to officials when we have had discussions about who bears the risk here. I have put it this way, and I would hope the Committee would agree. I expect officials to guard against diversion, fraud and misuse by doing all of the due diligence that is necessary to make sure that in our answers to you or to any audit we can demonstrate what has happened and show what happens if we have a problem. Equally, I am aware we are operating in a war zone. The officials’ role is to give me the information and the advice. It is my job and the Secretary of State’s job to take a risk. If we find in the circumstances that you describe that the need is sufficiently great and the balance of risk allows us to do the work, then I should take the risk because I am then answerable in the Commons and the like.

It is important that officials know that we have that room for manoeuvre. Their job is to safeguard what we are asked to do, to make sure that accountability and scrutiny is great. Otherwise, if that is glossed over, then the risks of diversion become very serious. As I said, these are war economies. People make money out of this. People prevent aid from going to those who need it and use it for the extraction of power, of exploitation of people and all of that. Where, however, the bureaucracy is onerous, fine, let us see what we can do about that, but the need to make sure that we have done all we can to make sure there is no misuse is not because of form-filling. It is because of the real human consequences of getting it wrong.

We will always try, and Ministers will try, to get the balance right, but it may mean on occasion, if we have taken a risk and we have to explain to you that we have taken a risk that has gone wrong, you will have some sympathy with Ministers who have had to take that decision. That is the right way to go about it and to meet the challenge of those on the ground who have written to you.

Richard Burden: I absolutely understand your point about this all being a question of managing and balancing competing risks. As well as there being, in a sense, a potential problem for local NGOs of the sort I



outlined, through international and international NGOs' compliance procedures, it has been put to us that, particularly as the regime's control over the country has extended, there is a real risk these days of donor funds being channelled in ways that could actually allow the regime too much control of the assistance that is going in. We have had estimates given to us. Some have said to us, in terms of the proportion of humanitarian aid reaching intended beneficiaries, it could be as low as between 2% and 18%. There are allegations that aid funding has ended up being diverted to the regime and its conduct of hostilities. Do you recognise those? Those are fears, but are those fears well-founded?

Charlotte Pierre: Aid diversion is aid diversion. That is why we put all our efforts into making sure we have got really strong risk architecture. Absolutely, Mr Burden, we have had to constantly change the way we approach risk management, particularly in regime areas.

The Syrian-Arab Red Crescent is essentially an institution that we have to deal with. However, no UK aid money goes through Assad institutions—that is very important to make clear—but the SARC is there. It is not a direct partner of UK aid, but it is a body that the UN and other NGO partners have to engage with to be able to do their job. Having recognised that, we have done a deep dive of the risk of how our partners engage with SARC. Also we have engaged directly with the SARC leadership ourselves, through the donor group in Beirut and also in the UK. We recognise the potential for that to happen. We have put in place as robust a risk architecture as we can. We make sure we understand SARC and how SARC has to engage with our delivery partners, to protect ourselves as best we can.

Chair: Charlotte, you mentioned ICAI. Paul now has some further questions on ICAI.

Q28 **Paul Scully:** I just have a couple of quick questions about those two reports. When they looked at DFID's effectiveness in Syria, they concluded that DFID had made slow progress in its objective of shifting towards cash-based programming and recommended that DFID Syria should prioritise livelihoods programming and supporting local markets, to strengthen community self-reliance. Are you on track to achieve your goal of 20% of total humanitarian expenditure in Syria to be cash-based by 2019? What is your target beyond that?

Alistair Burt: Our spending on livelihood intervention accounts for 19% of DFID's Syria portfolio spend in 2017-18, with the same percentage planned and on course for full delivery in 2018-19. We have taken this very seriously. We like cash-based programming. I know that this Committee will know more about it than most. We are looking at new opportunities to do more in response to the report and our own sense that cash delivery in key areas is really important.

Q29 **Paul Scully:** You are nearly there and you want to do a bit more, but have you got any set targets beyond the 2019 original target that you



were talking about?

Charlotte Pierre: Because of the fluidity of the situation, we are taking it bit by bit. For the moment, the target has not changed. Our working assumption is where we can do cash we will do cash, because the evidence is there that it is a much better form of assistance. Regarding what it does in terms of resilience and the potential for a little bit of early recovery, the evidence is there. There are some real practical issues.

Alistair Burt: There are security problems.

Charlotte Pierre: Exactly. There is not an effective banking architecture that we can actually use for this. We rely on the local hawala agent architecture, which itself has to be vetted and also cannot absorb the big chunks of money. There are some real practical issues around giving of cash that are big challenges for us to do more, but we are refreshing our cash and livelihood strategy this year.

Q30 **Paul Scully:** Brilliant, thank you very much. ICAI also concluded that DFID had been relatively slow to implement a strong protection focus into its operations, given the scale of the need in Syria as well. It recommended that DFID should focus more on protection activities. How successful have you been in encouraging your partners, especially UNHCR, to put protection at the heart of their programmes?

Alistair Burt: We are doing more. Again, Charlotte knows more about that.

Charlotte Pierre: Yes, protection is the essential. It drives most of the way we do our humanitarian programmes. A lot of the stuff we do around food or around health is fundamentally around protection. We did also have a joint FCO/DFID strategy on protection, which we are delivering, but it is one of the hardest things to do in an active conflict situation. There are also a range of protection issues in play. There are women and girls. There are women and girls in terms of societal norms as well. There is gender-based violence. There are also minorities. There is so much out there and we recognise we must continue to do more.

Alistair Burt: In terms of the action we have taken in relation to chemical weapons, there is the very strong denunciation and moves we have taken at the UN to condemn chemical weapons, seen only this week with the EU sanctions against individuals in Syria who have been noted in relation to this. All of this goes to ensure that there is a prevention of the use of chemical weapons, as there should be. Right across the board, we have tried to do the different things to support the different groups of people who might be more at risk.

Q31 **Chair:** Can I finish by taking us back to the first question and answer? You rightly reminded the Committee of the sheer scale and longevity of this crisis, but also of the substantial financial commitment that the United Kingdom has made over that period of time and of the difficulty



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the world has in retaining focus on a crisis of this sort. How confident are you that the funding is in place, going forward, for the humanitarian efforts that we have been asking about today, both those within Syria itself but also very importantly those that support the hosting activities in neighbouring countries?

Alistair Burt: It is a very good question, to which there is no clear or honest answer, because the degree to which states will respond to another appeal depends not only on the length of time that a particular situation has been going on but any new issue that arises that drains funds, and also the availability of finance state by state, economic pressures, et cetera.

I am pretty sure that those who are working in these areas will continue to make the case for those who are in need. I do worry that in the absence of a political settlement there may be some who might throw their hands up and say, "This is now hopeless". I worry too that there is evidence that the regime may not necessarily want a resolution to everything. As I mentioned earlier, the fact that the regime may not be keen on everyone coming back means that they might do what they can to suggest, "Nothing to see here. Move along now".

Internal pressures in states affected will remain high on the agenda. As the Committee will probably know, we have a major conference involving Jordan due at the end of February. This is partly in terms of recognition of Jordan's pressures in terms of refugees, but also a recognition of our strong partnership with Jordan and our determination to support its economic reform programme to make sure that it copes better, both with some internal issues but also with refugees.

We saw the prime Minister of Lebanon just before Christmas, when he was on a visit as well. We keep in close contact. As I say, the mechanism to continue support for refugees in Turkey will probably continue. Again, that has been a major means of preventing people taking the difficult and dangerous journeys of migration that have caused so much horror in the past but still go on.

Am I confident that it will stay in the public mind? Yes, but we all know that hitting the phones for another appeal is always quite difficult. I was speaking to David Beasley of WFP just the other day, particularly about Yemen. He is confident that more is being done there, but he says making sure the flow of money stays to the appeals is really important. The best I can offer you from the United Kingdom is that we will not forget. We will keep raising the issue. We will keep working with our partners. Their response will depend on other things.

The most important thing we can all do is to press on those who have the maximum influence politically, to say that the best we can do for the refugees, the displaced and those who have been affected by conflict is to end the conflict politically and to make sure that a country is both safe to return to and has the sort of future that people want to return to. That is



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a very strong commitment from all of us in Parliament and of all of our international partners. Is there anything, Martin, you want to add? You are closer to the political resolution, perhaps.

Martin Longden: I will just make two points very briefly. First, as the UK Special Representative, it is an extraordinary benefit, although perhaps not designed as such, to have the quality of the programme that DFID produces. It is recognised by my international counterparts. We get huge credit, kudos and influence for that, which is really important given the limited leverage we have. It is deeply frustrating that so much of our resource and effort is really spent on tackling the symptoms of this conflict rather than, as the Minister says, at the heart.

I am, though, a cautious optimist about Syria, because when this conflict finishes, as it must to at some point, in one way or another, Assad will find a post-conflict environment infinitely more difficult to operate in. He will not be the popular leader. The lies and the promises—the fake promises—will be exposed. At that point, the leverage that like-minded people in the international community have will start to grow. We have to be patient and really work to tackle the worst of the injustices in the meantime. It is dispiriting often, but in the medium term there may be cause for gentle optimism.

Alistair Burt: I would just say finally, to all our humanitarian workers, a very warm thank you to those who are working in dangerous situations, recognising that some have lost their lives. Although their work must seem very desperate sometimes, without doing what they do it would all be that much worse.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed, Minister. Thank you to both of you for joining the Minister here today for our slightly interrupted evidence session. Thank you in particular for staying for the extra 15 minutes. We are very grateful, and we will obviously maintain a close interest in events in Syria as a Committee as this moves forward.