Oral evidence: UK policy on Syria,
HC 457
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Watch the meeting

Members present: Crispin Blunt (Chair); Ann Clwyd; Mike Gapes; Stephen Gethins; Mr Mark Hendrick; Daniel Kawczynski; Yasmin Qureshi; Nadhim Zahawi

Questions 1-54

Witnesses: Patrick Cockburn, Middle East correspondent, The Independent, and James Harkin, freelance reporter, gave evidence.

Chair: Welcome everyone to this session of the Foreign Affairs Select Committee taking evidence on British policy on Syria. Thank you very much to our first two witnesses. Obviously this is immensely topical, not least given the Prime Minister’s statement yesterday. I am aware that there have been observations that none of the people who are giving us witness evidence today are actually Syrian. I point out that the Committee wants to understand all the perspectives in this conflict and I think that the witnesses today will be a useful guide to our further work. We would welcome written evidence from anyone who feels that they have something valuable to contribute to the oversight of British policy so that we can bring that into our work.

I know that other groups, such as Planet Syria, have had the opportunity today to present to colleagues in the House of Commons. The fact that the Committee does not, at this first stage, have the bandwidth to take evidence from groups such as that does not mean that we do not want evidence. I do want us to be in a position to understand better all the perspectives within Syria and that surround the Syrian conflict and, therefore, the oversight of British policy. All those perspectives are welcome. It is our rather serious intent to oversee British policy and to make recommendations to our colleagues in the House of Commons.

A big welcome to Patrick Cockburn and James Harkin; thank you very much indeed for making time available to us. I invite Mike Gapes to begin questioning on this first part of the inquiry, in which we are trying to get a better understanding of the current state of the political and military situation in Syria.

Q1 Mike Gapes: Thank you very much, Chair. The situation in Syria today has been described by some people as a stalemate but there have also been reports that, despite the continued use of barrel bombs and chlorine against civilian populations, the Assad regime is weakening. What is your assessment? Has the situation changed in the past few months? Is it true that the opposition are now gaining and that Assad is retreating?
Patrick Cockburn: There is no doubt that Islamic State—ISIS, Daesh or whatever word one wants to use—is advancing. They took Palmyra on 22 May. They have advanced west. Last month, they took a Christian township very close to a decisive main road—the main spinal column of the regime between Damascus north to Aleppo. On Monday, they took the last remaining oil field that Assad controlled. There is no doubt that they are advancing and getting stronger. We are discussing Syria but Islamic State operates in both places and they are advancing; as you know, they took Ramadi in Iraq. There are also signs of the Syrian army as somewhat fought out. When you are on the roads there, you do not see that number of troops. They have always been short of troops and that is beginning to tell at the moment.

Q2 Mike Gapes: You have referred to Daesh but the Syrian opposition is much greater than that. There are lots of different groups. Are all the opposition gaining against the regime or is it just that group?

James Harkin: I think that Islamic State are expanding. If we are talking about the other fight between the Syrian army—the Syrian regime—and the other rebel groups, if it looked like the Syrian army was winning about six or nine months ago, we are now back to a stalemate. If anything, the Syrian army are losing—certainly in areas of the north of the country and Idlib. This fight between the Syrian army and the other rebel groups is, I think, back to a stalemate.

Patrick Cockburn: I think one of the unfortunate things that has happened—it happened some time ago—is that the armed opposition in Syria is dominated by Islamic State, which now holds more than half the country, and al-Qaeda type movements such as the official representative of al-Qaeda, Jabhat al-Nusra, or Ahrar al-Sham and the others are now dominant in the armed opposition, and there are not too many others. The Free Syrian Army and others that people used to talk about are very weak these days.

Q3 Mike Gapes: You referred to the minority communities. Has Assad’s Government lost support amongst the non-Alawite minorities? I have seen a report—I don’t know whether it is true—that the Druze are now significantly disaffected. Can you clarify what the position is with regard to Assad’s support among the former base that he had?

Patrick Cockburn: First of all, on the general situation in Syria, you have the Government, the anti-Government, and then a lot of people who are anti the anti-Government if you see what I mean: in other words, people who are in Assad’s corner because they think the alternative is even worse, and this would be true of the Christians, overwhelmingly, in Syria. It would be true of the Kurds who are discriminated against. They are about 10% of the population; the population of Syria is 23 million. There are probably 2.2 million Kurds and they are discriminated against, but ISIS and others are worse for them than the Government. That is generally true of the other minorities as well.

Some of the Druze have tried to stay neutral in the middle, but then 20 Druze villagers were massacred a couple of months ago. Jabhat al-Nusra took over their village and insisted that they convert to Jabhat al-Nusra’s particular variant of Islam. When the villagers resisted, one person was killed and then 20 people were massacred. So generally the minorities stand with Assad, not because they have any particular great trust in him, but because the alternative is so much worse.
Q4 Mike Gapes: Mr Harkin?

James Harkin: The question about the minorities?

Mike Gapes: Yes.

James Harkin: I think I broadly agree with Patrick. The minorities have always stood aside from the insurgency. One would find it difficult to find a Christian and almost impossible to find a Shi’a in that armed insurgency. They simply did not want to be part of that. What is happening now are fissures in a regime that is facing so many different kinds of enemies, but we should beware of thinking that fissures within different minority groups would mean that a minority group would dissociate itself from the regime. For example, you might find that some minorities are growing frustrated with the regime because they are simply not forceful enough with the armed insurgency. I would beware of thinking that this is going to lead to some ecumenical compromise if minorities become increasingly frustrated with the regime.

Q5 Mike Gapes: How close to collapse could we see the Assad regime, or is there a level of perhaps optimism among its opponents? Is it likely to be able to maintain its position for a considerable period of time? Related to that, what would be the consequences if it did collapse?

Q6 Chair: First question: how close to collapse is it?

Patrick Cockburn: Well, I don’t think it is going to collapse like the regime in Libya collapsed in 2011. I think it will not happen. You asked whether there is optimism. No, there is desperation and terror. All the things you see of Daesh chopping off people’s heads, ritual murders, massacres and mass rapes, the people in Damascus see this and it terrifies them. At the same time, if it looked as though Daesh was winning, you might have a mass civilian panic, but I do not think you would see the regime collapse just like that. This is a genuine civil war: there are core supporters on both sides, and there are those who think they have no alternative but to stand with Assad, or, for that matter, to stand with Daesh.

Q7 Chair: And then the second part of Mike’s question: if the regime did collapse, what would be the consequences?

Patrick Cockburn: Well, we’ve got 4 million refugees already. I think you would probably have about the same number coming out, or trying to get out if they could. Most of the minorities would cut and run. So too would people associated with the army or with the Government, and a lot of the Sunni. You would have mass panic. Can you imagine what it would be like if Daesh entered Damascus or started taking other cities? I think you would have mass population movements. I think it would be very bad.

Q8 Chair: So al-Nusra and its associated forces, and the Free Syrian Army, would not move into that vacuum—it would be Daesh?

Patrick Cockburn: Al-Nusra is very similar to Daesh. It was set up by Daesh—by al-Baghdadi—in 2012. A lot of the al-Nusra commanders are former Daesh, and vice versa. I
was in contact with one Daesh fighter, who ended up in the north-east, and who said, “Yeah, I used to be in Jabhat al-Nusra, but then Daesh entered our village, and they said that we could either join them or get out, so I joined them.” You find that Jabhat al-Nusra units up in the north-east have often joined Daesh. So drawing a distinction between the two is not really realistic.

**James Harkin:** From my point of view, if the Syrian regime and army did collapse, we would face exactly the same kind of war, but this time between different kinds of militias all simply trying to protect their own enclave. The difference at the moment is that you have an overall army trying to control the whole of Syria and failing in that respect, and there is a certain degree of retrenchment. But if the army were to collapse, you would simply have Christian groups and Shi’a groups protecting their own little enclave, and there would be even greater anarchy, I would imagine.

**Q9 Mr Hendrick:** ISIS has suffered some defeats and been on the receiving end of many air strikes, but they have had some successes—obviously in Palmyra. Mr Cockburn, you said you felt that ISIS were getting stronger. Do you think they may have peaked, or are they getting so strong that, eventually, they will overcome the Syrian army, and we may see the army collapse at some stage?

**Patrick Cockburn:** Well, you know, we’ll see. Ever since 2013, people and Governments have indulged in wishful thinking about Daesh collapsing or having peaked, and every time that has turned out to be untrue. At the beginning of last year, President Obama was asked about ISIS getting stronger, and he said, “Oh, they're like a junior baseball team: they can’t really play in the big leagues.” Then they captured Mosul and northern Iraq. Earlier this year, the American army said they were getting weaker. Then they captured Ramadi and Palmyra, and they are advancing west. So, no, I think they are getting stronger.

Can they be stopped? Where the Americans are supporting the Syrian Kurds and their militia, who are well disciplined and well organised, with air strikes, that is where Daesh have suffered defeats. At Kobane, they lost about 2,000 men in a four-and-a-half-month siege. At another place, called Hasaka, also in the north-east, they also suffered a defeat, but there was a combination of efficient ground troops and American air strikes.

**Q10 Mr Hendrick:** Mr Harkin?

**James Harkin:** I think that, strategically, ISIS, Daesh or the Islamic State—whatever you want to call them—have simply decided that, because the defences of the Kurds and some of the Syrian rebel groups are not fortified by air strikes, they will pick off some of the weaker points in regime-held Syria, because those outlying points are easier to conquer, with greater propaganda gains. If we underestimated Daesh early on, a couple of years ago, we underestimated them because we listened to the wrong people and believed the wrong kind of propaganda about who and what they were. I think we are now overestimating them, in the sense that their pitch was to raise the flag and build a state. Now they have a state, but I’m not sure they can work the levers on that state.

A good example—I was in the industrial area of Aleppo a couple of months ago, and what the Islamic State or Daesh do is simply rebrand all of the existing municipal offices and say, “This is the property of our state.” If you look at some of their videos from northern
Aleppo, they are saying, “Our fire brigade is in charge of putting out these air strikes,” but it is very clear that it is the work of Western NGOs, some of which we are paying for. What they are saying is that they have a fire brigade and a municipal state. Often, those things are simply stolen. I think we have overrated their ability to run seriously a modern state, and that will eventually be their downfall.

Q11 Mr Hendrick: That sounds a bit different to what you are saying, Mr Cockburn.

Patrick Cockburn: It is a different take. I was mainly in northern Iraq, from Erbil—obviously, it would be unwise for me to step foot in Islamic State, but I was meeting people who had left there recently. I got the impression that the state is really pretty well organised. They conscript troops everywhere, and it is very difficult to avoid conscription. They tax people, and their taxation system works. They control education. When they captured Ramadi earlier in the year, I talked to somebody who didn’t much like them, but he said, “Look, in Ramadi, we’d previously been asking the Iraqi Government to get the local hospital open because it was closed. After Daesh came in, they killed quite a lot of people but they immediately brought doctors from Syria to open the hospital.” No electricity—they bought big generators into the town.

So they do have a sort of administrative capacity, and they are up against Governments in Baghdad and Damascus that don’t and whose Administrations are very weak. They do claim, as James said, that almost anything that happens is their doing, but that is not an unknown among other Administrations. Overall, I think it would be a mistake to underestimate how well organised these people are and how difficult it will be to eliminate them.

Q12 Mr Hendrick: How effective do you think the US-led air strikes on ISIL are? You mentioned, for example, that where they are working with the Kurds in places like Kobane, it seems quite effective, but in other parts of Syria there is not that effectiveness. How well or how badly do you think the American air strikes are working?

Patrick Cockburn: I think that they work in certain circumstances. They work when the other side—the enemy—are bunched up and attacking a place like Kobane, so you know where they are. Otherwise, when they are dispersed, it is very difficult to hit them, so a lot of air missions by the Americans do not find a target. But above all, what you need is people on the ground who are calling in air strikes and who can see ISIS. If you don’t have that, it doesn’t really work very effectively. For the air strikes to work, you need people on the ground, giving the co-ordinates of exactly where Daesh is, and then they can hit those targets immediately.

Q13 Mr Hendrick: Presumably, in other parts of Syria—alluding to what you were saying earlier, James—you feel that the Americans are perhaps not effective.

James Harkin: Well, the coalition forces do not want to be seen to be protecting the Syrian army, so that leaves lots of weak points for Daesh to concentrate on. There are lots of outlying areas in Syria and much of Syria is desert, so it is not hard for them to take over lots
of land, attack a couple of weak points and create some spectacles, such as Palmyra, for example, and the archaeology.

Q14 Mr Hendrick: Finally, do you think that Western forces will, to some extent, end up co-operating with Assad to try to tackle ISIL or Daesh and to get an outcome?

Patrick Cockburn: I think if you effectively want to stop Daesh, you have to co-operate with those who are fighting Daesh, which includes, say, the Syrian army. That does not mean that you are endorsing the Assad regime. But if you have a situation—black and white—where Daesh is, let us say, attacking some strategic point held by the Syrian army, if you do not attack them, they are going to win. So, yes, I think you need to do that.

Could I add a small thing here? People often say, “Aha, but then you are supporting the dictator, Assad,” but actually I think this weakens Assad, because one of the things that Assad has in his favour is that people in Damascus who do not much like him think that he is their only defence against Daesh, who will murder them and their families. If they think that the British Air Force and the American and other allied air forces are also attacking Daesh, then their reason for giving full support to Assad is much reduced. So I think that if ISIS is to be combated, there has to be this co-ordination of bombing between, in this case, the Syrian army and American and British aircraft.

James Harkin: I think I would put it slightly differently by saying—the Kurds often say this—that there would need to be some kind of reformation of the Syrian armed forces, but in the end this has to be a Syrian-led campaign, whether it is under the basis of some kind of reformed Syrian armed forces that include some of the Kurdish groups and rebel factions. I think in the end we are doing nothing other than containing Islamic State and sometimes provoking their ire in the meantime.

Q15 Mr Hendrick: So you are saying that that might be a scenario if Assad was gone, but, while he is there, you will not get co-operation.

James Harkin: The only way to engender any kind of inclusive campaign against Islamic State would be to try to broaden the Syrian armed forces to include the Kurdish militias and some kind of rebel groups who are up for that idea, and reform the system. But I agree with Patrick that this would have to be Syrian-led, and it would have to be more than a small group of guerrillas who are interested only in protecting their enclave.

Q16 Nadhim Zahawi: On that point about all the different groups, Ahrar al-Sham announced on 24 August that it would begin to form a standing regular army—I suspect that that is to try to gain backing from the likes of Qatar, Saudi and Turkey. But more radical factions within Ahrar al-Sham—those who have been fighting closely alongside the al-Qaeda affiliate of Jabhat al-Nusra as part of the Jaysh al-Fateh coalition—are probably likely to oppose that. Obviously, with Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra, there is a risk of fighting in Aleppo, Hama and Idlib, which presumably would be to the advantage of ISIL. I would love to get your take on whether it would essentially help ISIL if that fighting began to take place.

James Harkin: You mean, if the Ahrar al-Sham coalition was advancing, would that help ISIS?
Nadhim Zahawi: With fracture, yes.

James Harkin: I see it very much as a three or four-way split; I am not sure whether that would necessarily help or hinder ISIS. There is a great deal of bad blood now between them and ISIS; two years ago they were more or less on the same side.

I think there is genuine bad blood between all the different groups, and I think you simply see a carve-up of Syria by foreign-backed militias. In fact, one reason why I think people initially gravitated towards Daesh, unfortunately, was because it was one of the few militias that was perceived to be not so obviously foreign-backed. So I do not see that it would necessarily help or hinder ISIL.

Patrick Cockburn: I think one can go too far in distinguishing between these sorts of very hard-line Sunni jihadist groups. I think I am right in saying that the deputy head of Ahrar al-Sham was blown up by ISIS about 18 months ago and turned out to be the official representative of Bin Laden’s al-Qaeda. So there is not as great a distinction between these groups, with one being in al-Qaeda’s corner, another being hard-line but not al-Qaeda, and Islamic State. They seem to interpenetrate each other.

Q17 Nadhim Zahawi: So you don’t see this sort of union of some of the opposition groups as being any real game changer in Syria?

James Harkin: What you see in Idlib is that all the opposition rebel factions have got together. What you see in Halab—or Aleppo—is that they are arranged in two different groups. I am not sure really what that means, but I am very wary, like Patrick, of distinguishing between moderates and radicals. First of all, in a way it shouldn’t really be our job to distinguish between moderates and radicals, and secondly, I have to tell you that each time we in the West identify a moderate group and give them weapons, that systematically compromises them in the eyes of other Syrians and they end up getting butchered or becoming criminals. That leads to corruption, which fuels ISIS. So I am wary of asking questions about moderates and radicals.

Q18 Nadhim Zahawi: It may be useful for the Committee if you can say a few sentences describing the differences between the aims of some of the groups within Jaysh al-Fateh and ISIL.

James Harkin: If we are talking about Ahrar al-Sham, that sees itself as an Islamic nationalist movement. It very much privileges a kind of Islamic nationalist conversation about the Syrian state, whereas ISIL doesn’t care about Syria, or Iraq—it wants to create a new kind of borderless state. So there are very real differences. There is a huge amount of bad blood between the different groups. But, as Patrick says, whether you are an Alawite or a Christian or a Shi’a, the people I speak to there do not particularly hold great store by analytic detail about hundreds and hundreds of different factions, they just see that these people are out to kill them, because they are heretics.

Q19 Nadhim Zahawi: How much support do you think these groups are getting among the population, apart from, obviously, the Alawites and the Christians?
James Harkin: It’s very difficult to tell—Patrick might know more. In Aleppo, you have a small regime enclave in western Aleppo, with 1.8 million people, I am told. The rest of Aleppo city has half a million people—in other words, most of the civilians have left. So you could argue that the ratio of armed men to civilians in rebel-held Aleppo might be quite high. My simple point of view is that this was a very unpopular regime to start with, in many ways, and the international campaigns around Syria and various proxy wars that are being fought have converted a man you could liken to Mr Bean into someone who can now style himself as some kind of Saladin because he is fighting a war. I think the opposition failures are difficult to underestimate.

Q20 Nadhim Zahawi: Very briefly, what secular or moderate groups have any major role now in the fighting or in the political arena?

James Harkin: As I see it, the secular or moderate groups that we support are still ensconced in hotels in Istanbul, having nice lunches three or four years later. These people are largely meaningless to any political settlement, and that really should not be the question we are asking. We should be asking what Syrian people want, rather than who can be our friends.

Q21 Nadhim Zahawi: So what has happened to the American-Turkish initiative of training lots of the Free Syrian Army? We get reports of only a couple of hundred.

Patrick Cockburn: Fifty-four. I mean fewer, but some of them are dead now. The Americans wanted to produce a moderate but American-controlled group. Of course Jabhat al-Nusra could see this coming. Turkey also didn’t like this, so according to the rebels, the Turks tipped off Jabhat al-Nusra that this group—the so-called Division 30—was coming across the border. They attacked them. They killed some of them. They have others as captives. They are very keen that no moderate group could emerge that the Americans could give support to, and it isn’t happening. The dominance of these extreme Sunni fundamentalist groups is pretty total and, I think, probably unbreakable at this stage.

Q22 Nadhim Zahawi: Is that because Turkey is not serious about it, or is it because there are just not the individuals available to recruit? Where do you think the failure is?

Patrick Cockburn: Turkey certainly don’t want it, because they are much more in the corner of Jabhat al-Nusra.

Q23 Nadhim Zahawi: But they signed up to it.

Patrick Cockburn: To what?

Nadhim Zahawi: This US-Turkey initiative for training the Free Syrian Army.

James Harkin: From my perspective—this is very familiar to modern conflict—people are given a choice between secular, often corrupt, groups, and puritanical but principled groups that might be a little crazy. The problem is that when you give all the money and resources to the small group of secular people who you like, that tempts them even further and creates the growth of a war economy and corruption, which further fuels the rise of the other group. All these attempts have been a complete disaster. Everyone knows who the people are who are arranged in secular, moderate groups, such as the Syrian
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Revolutionaries Front and Harakat Hazzm. They are largely criminal elements who were in the revolution initially and probably were very good people at the beginning, but fell into criminality and sometimes kidnapping. That is who we are left with, and we probably shouldn’t get involved.

Q24 Chair: So, in summary, our clients in this exercise, as a liberal democracy, are a complete busted flush.

Patrick Cockburn: Yes, that’s true. I should say that there are other moderates in Damascus and other places who don’t much like the Government—sure there are—but they don’t have any power.

Q25 Chair: So it’s the civic society groups, some of whom have been in Parliament today, such as Planet Syria, who are standing aside from the conflict in that sense, and have kept themselves apart from it. Would that be correct? In a sense, they are civilian players in this.

James Harkin: Yes.

Patrick Cockburn: But they are not really players at this stage, I’m afraid. When you have a war of this ferocity, people who are not armed and do not have military groups—good people they may be—really don’t have any influence.

James Harkin: And part of the problem is that they are no longer in Syria. The Prime Minister makes a very good point that this needs to be resolved, to some extent, inside Syria, perhaps through some kind of zone. The problem is that many of those early activists—I met many of them, and they are very good people—left Syria, came out of Syria or were drawn out of Syria to work in media activist campaigns, where we paid them to tell us the information we wanted to know. The problem is that the people left in Syria are a little more extreme, so there has to be some way—perhaps through international guarantees—of getting more people back inside the country to create the basis for some kind of civil society.

What Patrick would call the internal opposition—the non-violent civil opposition—is, I think, very weak, even inside the country. They are largely old men, and I don’t think we can rely on them. Many of the younger activists turned to the revolution, to armed factions and to weaponry, and are now in Turkey because they weren’t very good fighters. I think there has to be some way of solving this at source and of getting people back inside the country, perhaps through international guarantees of some kind.

Q26 Nadhim Zahawi: Has the recent Turkish re-engagement—I shall call it that—made any difference at all?

Patrick Cockburn: Previously, the people who were fighting ISIS—Daesh—with the greatest success were the Syrian Kurds, who are part of the Turkish PKK, the Kurdistan Workers Party. They are simply the Syrian branch. They are now being denounced by the Turks as being terrorists—as is the PKK—so they are, in effect, weakened. They also appear to have been banned from advancing west of the Euphrates. It is a measure of what a mess Syria is that the people who have been the most effective allies of the Americans have suddenly had the ground cut from under them. In the first weeks of the Turkish air attacks, it
turned out that they had launched 300 air attacks against the PKK and just three against Daesh, so that weakens the opponents of Daesh.

James Harkin: This new Turkish idea for—[Interruption.]

Chair: Please sit down. Would you like to invite this gentleman to leave? Feel free to submit your evidence in writing.

Can I move on to Ann? We have quite a lot of ground to cover in two hours.

Q27 Ann Clwyd: You both wrote very powerful pieces on Kobani and, as Patrick just said, both the Americans and the British seem to be facing both ways. The Americans denounce the PKK as terrorists, and the UK does the same. It is a proscribed organisation. But were it not for the PKK and the PYD in Kobani and their efforts, the loss of life there would have been very much greater, would it not?

James Harkin: I agree. To bring it back to the last point, to my mind the latest Turkish plan for a no-fly zone between Marea and Jarabulus in northern Syria is a potential disaster. It simply replays a plan that they had three years ago, which appeared to be much more about dealing with the PKK than with the regime. If this no-fly zone is put in place along the lines that the Turks envisage, it will simply alienate the only allies that America and Britain have left in northern Syria. I think that there are huge unintended consequences there.

Patrick Cockburn: To pick up on Kobani, that is a very good point. Right up until the middle of October, it seemed that Daesh was going to take Kobani during this siege. President Erdoğan of Turkey said that that was likely to happen. What really changed this was that the Syrian Kurds, the YPG, fought very hard, and in about the middle of October they got very heavy support from American air power. That air power was directed, with people on the ground calling in strikes, so you had 500 lb and 2,000 lb bombs coming down on top of Daesh. That ultimately won the battle. That is an example of how, if you really want to give priority to defeating these people, you need that sort of military combination of local people on the ground who really fight, and air power up above which is in direct contact with them. Only then do we have examples of Daesh suffering very heavy defeats. Otherwise, we don’t.

James Harkin: I have nothing to add to that.

Q28 Ann Clwyd: What is it that the Syrians want? What can they get?

Chair: You almost posed the question yourself earlier. What do the Syrians want?

James Harkin: I think that is the right question to ask. You would be surprised by how much Syrians agree on things, to the extent that they are all very suspicious of foreign interference in Syria, even if they are in receipt of the weapons. We have to look towards the looser outlines of a still unitary Syrian state in which minorities and different groups are perhaps given more power to defend themselves against attack from ISIS, and eventually prosecute a war against ISIS. But there is no substitute for an overall army.

Q29 Chair: Forgive me, I am trying to get us through the session. Before coming back to Ann Clwyd, I want to understand your analysis of whether the leaders of the opposition
groups actually want to find a negotiated settlement. You sent us gently in that direction by saying that there is a surprising amount of common ground between Syrians. Just how opposed are these Syrian groups, and are they going to continue to fight? If left to their own devices, would they be prepared to find a settlement?

**Patrick Cockburn:** Not these jihadi groups. They are looking for victory as a proof of their faith. They are not really looking to negotiate with anybody. Perhaps as a blind or a show, or sometimes to impress international opinion. I don’t think they want that. Nor would anybody in Damascus or on the other side imagine that they do want to, or trust them. I emphasise that this is a genuine civil war, with core support on either side. Ideally, this would end with some form of power sharing. Should Assad go? Well, not at the beginning. He isn’t going to go, because he controls most of the population of the country. At the end, should Assad go? Well, yes, because if there is going to be any real agreement then he will have to go. This tends to get bogged down in talk about whether Assad should go or not. It is really about how to redistribute power in order to get real power sharing in Syria, which will be very difficult after such a ferocious civil war. To my mind, it will be partly geographical, with some parts being controlled by the Government and other parts not, and partly institutional: what would be the position of the Syrian army, and these other things. However, we are not really at that stage, because unfortunately the armed opposition is controlled at this stage by people who do not really want to talk, but want to win.

**James Harkin:** I think that is one of the problems in our political strategy. All these groups are determined to win, but we simply want them not to lose. We want to level the playing field in the hope of encouraging a political settlement, but after three or four years that has not worked. That has not got anyone closer to talks. I think for the future we have to look at the micro level of what is happening on the ground, whether it is the exchange of hostages or some kind of local truces—if we can buttress that with international guarantees; whether it involves some kind of settlement as to how people might be able to come home under international guarantees. I think that is the way forward at the micro level.

**Chair:** Mr Harkin, Mr Cockburn, thank you very much indeed. I am conscious that 40 minutes does not do justice to this subject, but we also want to draw on everything you have written and published between you, which is obviously copious. That is why you are giving us the headlines this afternoon.

Would you like to remain at the top table, unless you have other engagements? If I can then invite the other witnesses for the next session to join us, and then if you feel minded to chip in, in the course of the next session, please do so, but we will direct our questions to the other witnesses.

**Examination of Witnesses**

Witnesses: **Julien Barnes-Dacey**, Senior Policy Fellow, Middle East and North Africa programme, European Council on Foreign Relations, **Professor Raymond Hinnebusch**, Professor of International Relations and Middle East Politics and Director of the Centre for Syrian Studies, University of St Andrews, and **Professor Eugene Rogan**, Director of the Middle East Centre, St Anthony’s College, University of Oxford, gave evidence.
Chair: It is my pleasure to welcome Professor Raymond Hinnebusch, Eugene Rogan and Julien Barnes-Dacey. The focus of this session is on the role of the international community and a potential international political strategy. Professor, welcome. Thank you, all of you, very much indeed, for making yourselves available at fairly short notice. I am immensely grateful.

Q30 Daniel Kawczynski: To what extent does the panel feel that the regional powers in the area, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey, are responsible for the state of the conflict in Syria today?

Chair: Do you want to take that, Professor Hinnebusch?

Professor Hinnebusch: I would agree that their role is essential to have kept the conflict going, because they provide the resources which enable the fighters on both sides to continue the conflict. Additionally, it seems to me you have the situation where, even though perhaps objectively one could argue there is something like a hurting stalemate, where the balance of power is such that neither side is going to win, you have this dynamic, it seems to me, whereby each side feels if their patron would only increase the resources made available to them, at the end of the day they can win.

So as long as you have got that dynamic it is very difficult to move towards a situation where a hurting stalemate is perceived and each side becomes convinced that they cannot win and they have got to go forward towards a negotiated settlement. It does seem to me that there is not going to be a settlement until and if the regional players can be convinced—and I think the great powers would have to play a big role in leaning on them—to begin to ratchet down their support to their clients and to make their support contingent on those clients being willing to, at the beginning, enter a ceasefire and then to seriously move ahead in negotiations.

So the Turks, the Iranians obviously, Hezbollah, the Gulf powers—Qatar, Saudi Arabia: bringing them together is I suppose sort of like herding cats, but unless that happens it does not seem to me that you are going to get a settlement. Do they have any incentives to begin to ratchet down and to lean on their clients? One might have argued that ISIS was one big incentive. The counter tendency has been that each side—various sides—seems to believe that they can use ISIS for their own purposes, or exploit ISIS’s existence as a bogeyman to get support for themselves. It does not seem to me that they have taken ISIS nearly as seriously as the West has done.

Falling oil prices ought to have some impact on many of the players, because it is oil revenues that allow them to continue their intervention. The Saudis are, of course, seemingly bogged down in Yemen, so you might think that that would be an incentive for them to change their policies to some extent. Will Iran be emboldened by the nuclear agreement to ratchet up support for Assad? Or will it want to show that it is a good citizen as its role is normalised? One can see Iran going either way.

Turkey is paying a terrible cost, it seems to me, for its failed Syria policy, in the sense that it has stimulated these jihadists who are going to be a problem back home. At the same time, Turkey’s policies inadvertently strengthened the Kurdish groups and now they are quite
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alarmed at that, as has been discussed. They have seemingly launched a new war on the PKK, so Turkey is in very big trouble, and so one might have thought would have some incentive.

There does seem to be some talking round the edges, but up to now I at least do not seem to see a lot of evidence that the regional players are ready to change. I think I am right—I will ask my colleagues—but some of the signs include the visit of the security chief Ali Mamlouk to talk to Saudis. That is a remarkable development that suggests that there is some rethinking going on in Riyadh on both sides. Oman’s attempt to mediate is perhaps of some importance. Egypt has also tried to play a positive role in this respect.

Q31 Chair: May I ask Professor Rogan and Mr Barnes-Dacey whether they in any sense dissent from your pointing very firmly the finger of responsibility at those three states?

Professor Rogan: Professor Hinnebusch has touched on a lot of the key points. All I would say is that we are dealing with a situation that is very dynamic. It may look like a stalemate but there is a lot of change going on within the region. Many of the states that have been most active in the Syria conflict have themselves of late been distracted.

Although Turkey has declared its intention to engage in the fight against Daesh, it has used that as a cover actually to take on the PKK, as we already mentioned in the last panel. The Saudis have obviously taken a position in Yemen, in which they are beginning to take casualties, along with their allies, Qatar and the UAE, and that is distracting them from Syria. It is really Iran that is being steadfast in its Syria policy, and it has done so right through this conflict, because, like Russia—and unlike Britain and the United States—Syria is a key state of influence for the Iranians. They know what their interests are in the country and they act to preserve those interests.

We can predict how they will behave in Syria. They see it as a link with their ties to Hezbollah in Lebanon and their relationship with Iraq since 2003. It is a relationship that dates back to the heyday of the Iran-Iraq war in 1980 when, as a reflection of the Syrian-Iraqi antagonism, Syria threw its lot in with Iran. It is a longstanding, deep relationship that represents a very important interest for Iran, and they are continuing to play a very important role in preserving the state.

Q32 Daniel Kawczynski: As a follow-up question, I just wanted to make a point about Saudi Arabia, which has been mentioned. That is a country that I have followed very closely for a long time. When you challenge the Saudis as to why they are not proactively taking in more refugees themselves, which is something that I have done this week—obviously the refugees are the main casualty we are focused on—their answer has been that they are providing a lot of resources for the refugee camps in Jordan, and that taking refugees on a permanent basis, as some countries are doing, is playing into Assad’s hands, because he is trying to ethnically cleanse his country. What are your views on that?

Julien Barnes-Dacey: At this point everyone involved in the war in Syria is, to a certain extent, involved in a project of ethnic cleansing—whether it is the regime, some of the Sunni groups or the Kurds. If you look at the way that this is playing out on the ground, unfortunately very few of the middle ground are able to withstand that pressure. I do not particularly see that as the motivation behind what the Saudis are doing in terms of their refugee policy. It is quite clear that Syria is a majority Sunni country and Assad is never
going to be able to change the nationwide demographics to an extent that he will retain power.

Going back to some earlier points, I would like to say two things. One is to remember that this was a Syrian uprising. It is critical—even as one looks at the patronage relationships—and it is right to say that if there is going to be any shift in a positive trajectory it has to come from the outside. It has to come from the regional players, but there will still be a long transition from that to the domestic actors on the ground—the Ahrar al-Shams, the Jabhat al-Nusras and so on—moving on. At the moment, the internal groups are exploiting these patronage networks. They are using them for their own end but we should not lose sight of the domestic drive.

That being said, it is clear that Syria is a theatre for what I think are three regional wars. First, there is an Iran-Saudi conflict, not just there but in Yemen and elsewhere. Secondly, there is an intra-Sunni conflict of Saudis and Qatars arguing about the Muslim Brotherhood—the vision of political Islam and what that vehicle should be. That has clearly been, particularly within the Syrian opposition, a crucial factor in making them so weak and causing divisions. Thirdly, as was referred to, there is this new Turkey-PKK front. As one thinks about the regional players, Syria is a theatre for those different wars, which are not necessarily linked to Syrians themselves. One sometimes loses sight of that connect by focusing too much on the external players even if, at this point in time, the fragmentation, disunity and sense of disorder on the ground means that it is so hard to envisage any solution being Syrian-led and emerging from within Syria as opposed to pushing from outside. I do not see any movement on that front.

The Syrian visit to Saudi Arabia was interesting and it is very positive that finally there are new channels. The Russians are talking to the Iranians. There was a tripartite Saudi, Russian and US meeting in Qatar. It is clear that there is new momentum but, for the moment, everyone is hoping that the other side will blink. There is not yet a situation whereby the regional actors in particular are prepared to enter into a zone of compromise, so to speak. Particularly from a Western European perspective, that is where the focus needs to be—advancing these channels and creating movement that can, down the road, lead to the regional actors pushing these domestic fighters.

Q33 Ann Clwyd: Can I go back to the role of Turkey? Obviously there is need for compromise, but who is compromising? In fact, Turkey seems to be turning its face against the very groups that are actually successful in defeating ISIS in parts of Iraq and parts of Syria. What is Turkey thinking?

Julien Barnes-Dacey: Turkey’s main focus at the moment is the Kurdish issue and domestic politics. There is an upcoming election in Turkey on 1 November. Erdoğan clearly wants the HDP Kurdish vote to go down so that his party can regain a majority. In terms of their policies within Syria, for some time their main focus has been preventing the Kurds from seizing too much land. You see this in the area that they have carved out for a no-fly zone. That area actually separates two Kurdish cantons, which they are worried will join. There is a clear prioritisation of the Kurdish issue and domestic politics even if clearly they have, from the outset, been one of the most hard-line countries saying that Assad must go.
I wonder whether there will be a shift post-election and I would hope that the UK Government and other Governments would push the Turks very hard after that election to dial down the escalating conflict with the Kurds, which adds a hugely new, complex and critical layer to the conflict and push them to re-engage and perhaps approach the Syrian Kurds as they have approached the Iraqi Kurds.

Q34 Ann Clwyd: But there seemed to be a developing peace process between the Turks and the PKK. It had moved forward quite a bit, and now it has completely turned on its head; it has fallen apart, each side is attacking one another once again and there is no ceasefire, as there apparently was for almost two years. I cannot see what the Turks expect to gain from this.

Professor Hinnebusch: I agree with what my colleague has said and his pointing to the upcoming elections, which are crucial. Clearly, Erdoğan has calculated that he will be able to reignite fear of the PKK. Nationalist votes will be attracted to his party. But one can see, under the surface, that there is a lot of understanding opposition to this. A lot of Turks are very unhappy with the idea that the peace process has seemingly been sacrificed, and I think some of them at least accept that this is being done for reasons of electoral calculation. If that is the case, one would anticipate that they will not reward the AKP for having sacrificed the peace process.

There are polls—contradictory, as they often are, but some of them at least suggest that, in a rerun, Erdoğan will not do better. If he does not, he will presumably have to live with a coalition Government, which will include parties that are much less enthusiastic about the kind of policies he has been following. One could hope that they—it depends who is in his coalition, of course. If it is the hard-line nationalist right, who are very against the peace process, one cannot anticipate that the outcome is likely to be a move to restore the peace process. But if it is either the Republican People’s Party or perhaps even the Kurdish party itself, one would anticipate a different outcome. I think those elections are absolutely crucial.

Q35 Chair: We are obviously fixated on the importance of ISIS, and it would be appear to be the common interest of all the nations in the region—certainly the three we have been discussing. Professor Rogan, you pointed out that the situation is dynamic. At what point will Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Iran put ISIS at the top of their priority list in order to put together a common strategy, along with us, to defeat it? Just how strong does ISIS have to get before it hits the top of their in-tray?

Professor Rogan: I do not expect those three countries to concert foreign policies when it comes to ISIS, even though it represents a threat to all their national interests. They each have a policy that is based on conflicting interest and distrust, which has kept them from co-ordinating. In this, Western countries play an important role. We should play an important role in trying to bring together countries with which we have better relations than they have among themselves.

Julien Barnes-Dacey: Could I add one thing to that? I think one of the critical elements here is that so long as the West is willing to assume responsibility for the fight against ISIS, there is very little reason for regional states to prioritise it. So long as US jets, Western jets and European jets are the ones bombing them, the likes of Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Iran can say, “Well, the ISIS problem is being dealt with. We can concentrate on our
geopolitical regional problems. We can even see how we can use the fight against ISIS to further those regional ambitions.”

In terms of the critical necessity of engendering further regional ownership, the question of how much the West assumes that ownership and what that does to regional motivation and threat perception is quite key. Clearly, if bombs are going off in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, that is upping the ante, but I think it will be some time before the response is not to say, “This is a justification of a narrative that Assad must go,” as opposed to what I think is needed. Clearly, there needs to be a more consensual approach that recognises that the zero-sum vision we have been following is not going to take us to the right place and is actually beginning to threaten them, in terms of not just the security consequences but the shaping of the region. Turkey is concerned about the Kurds and so on. So long as we protect them and watch their backs, they are not necessarily going to step up to the plate.

Q36 Chair: To deal with those three key powers, am I right to characterise this as a Catch-22 situation? There is a pressure here in the United Kingdom to increase our contribution to the military effort against ISIS, yet the very effect of that policy is then going to mean that those three states can sit back, look at the West doing this for them, and, as you characterised it, continue with their own regional priorities. Actually, without their co-operation, it is going to be impossible to defeat ISIS.

Julien Barnes-Dacey: That would be my view. The Saudis and the Turks and others are of course hoping that Western intervention against ISIS leads towards action against Assad, whereas the Iranians are hoping that anti-ISIS action leads towards working with Assad. For all the regional countries, it is entrenching their zero-sum positions and entrenching the sense that the West will come to their aid, so I think it is a dangerous dynamic.

Chair: The two professors.

Professor Rogan: I would dissent only in the sense that I believe that the diplomacy must involve Iran and it must be made palatable to Iran’s adversaries on the Arab side of the Persian Gulf. I do not believe that there can be any meaningful progress in resolving the situation in Syria by military means, and I do not believe that any Western country intends to put the military might behind such an effort that might make it successful. No one is going to put men on the ground, and we have seen that air strikes alone are not going to achieve total victory over this movement.

Julien Barnes-Dacey: That was agreement, not dissent.

Professor Rogan: I think that needing to work with Iran, because Iran’s position in Syria is the strongest of all the countries you are interested in, is absolutely essential towards arriving at some sort of negotiated solution, but making that palatable to our allies—Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar—is the real challenge that we face. That is where inevitably things must go if this is to be resolved.

Professor Hinnebusch: I would agree with much of what has been said. Of the three powers, Iran is clearly the one that has the greatest interest in countering ISIS. It is a direct
threat to them. The others are ambivalent towards it. They see it as a tool as well as a potential threat.

The only other thing I would say on the Western role in air strikes is that air strikes can so-called degrade ISIS, but cannot really cope with the real threat that ISIS potentially poses to Turkey and Saudi Arabia, which is a subversive one. You really do not deal with that by air strikes, so it seems there is a threat to those countries that the West is not going to be able to counter. It is a question of when they calculate that that threat is more significant than their perceived other threats, which, in the Turkish case, is the PKK and in Saudi Arabia’s case it is Iran and its proxies.

Q37 Daniel Kawczynski: On this point, Professor Rogan, can Iran provide a constructive role in this, or is she trying to influence—to go back to my earlier point—the ethnicity of Syria, so that Syria in future will gravitate more towards its orbit?

Professor Rogan: Syria is so deeply into Iran’s orbit that it is a question not of making it gravitate further so much as preserving Iran’s position in what is a key strategic country. I think that Iran’s position is rather like Russia’s. Syria is Russia’s last Arab allied state, so Russia, too, has a very strong interest in that country—stronger than Britain or the United States. While I cannot predict that Iran will take a co-operative position, the recent conclusion of the nuclear agreement is signalling Iran’s re-entry to the international community with a new force and vigour. The incentives will be there for Iran to demonstrate its good citizenship. Being part of resolving Syria would be an outstanding way to, let us say, calm people’s jitters about their nuclear intentions. Showing that they are responsible citizens in a major conflict like Syria and helping broker a deal and working with the West would be a coup for them, but that is a best-case scenario. One can imagine scenarios in which they make mischief. I cannot rule that out.

Julien Barnes-Dacey: I think Iran is certainly looking to be constructive. The key question that all the players are looking at now remains the position of Assad. That is what it boils down to. For the Iranians, as for the Russians, he continues to be a non-negotiable. He is a guarantor. I think that is analytically correct. With Assad going, there are no guarantees of what comes next. It is a question of what you are hoping to get from the Iranians and the Russians. I think that this is clearly hurting the Iranians financially, more importantly in terms of manpower, in terms of the sectarianism in the region and in terms of the stretch of Hezbollah, etc., but they are not going to give up Assad precisely because he is too strategically important, rather than ethnically. I would say that there is a lot of room to work around that.

I have argued before that the Assad question is problematic. If one can move away from that, Iran, much like the Russians, would probably be willing to do much more in terms of pressuring the regime, in terms of serious compromises, in terms of some of the power sharing we have been talking about. Based on facts on the ground, Assad will never be the ruler he once was: he has lost control of most of the country in a way that he can never recover. The question one poses to Iran in terms of what is constructive is critical. If it remains pivoted on the person of Assad, it will continue to fail.

Q38 Mr Hendrick: On the Assad question, Mr Barnes-Dacey, you said earlier that what developed in Syria started off as a struggle for the Syrian people, as part of the so-called Arab
Spring, that seems to have gone totally out of direction in a way that nobody would have predicted. Since then, obviously, other regional powers, like Iran and Saudi Arabia, have got involved to support different groups and factions within that. Given that the common enemy to many of the groups in Syria was obviously Assad himself, do you feel that if Assad himself was removed that escalation—the regime in some way modified and reformed to be more inclusive, and going from an internal battle to a battle sponsored from outside—could in some way be reversed and you could effectively put Syria back together as a coherent state with some process that could stabilise it? Or do you think it has gone too far now and that Syria as a state, as we know it, is actually finished, and that we will see a carve-up between different groups for as long as Assad remains?

Julien Barnes-Dacey: My view is that it has gone too far. I do not think we are inevitably moving towards the creation of new states, but, in terms of a centralised Syrian state, I think that is an impossibility now. Power has been seized at the local level, whether it be the Kurds, the Alawite militias or Sunni opposition groups, and Damascus is never going to recover that. If Assad was out of the equation, of course everything would be a lot easier, particularly if that involved some kind of transition that maintained the structures of power of the state, but I do not think that is a likely scenario. I think that the regime supporters, who are still numerous, see Assad as a guarantor of what is holding it together: he is, in a sense, the glue. If Assad was to go, that could precipitate a faster move towards that implosion and fragmentation.

Professor Rogan: I say this with a shared distaste for Bashar al-Assad and his methods of government, but I do believe he is an essential man. The policies based around the idea that Bashar al-Assad must go are ill-advised. They are unrealistic because those who advocate them do not have a champion they would put forward in his place and because recent history has shown us that when the state collapses you get a failed state. State-building in the context of a failed state has given us Afghanistan and Somalia, and great difficulties in Iraq—and Libya and Yemen right now. Seeing Syria go the route of another failed state seems to me to be the greatest threat to our interests, as an American, and to yours as Britons, because when the state is gone in Syria the Islamic State will take its place, and it will then be a reality as an Islamic state—we will not quibble over Daesh, and so on. It will be the caliphate that they declare it to be. I think that it is now Bashar al-Assad or the deluge. It is a very unpalatable situation for all of us to be in.

James Harkin: If I could just briefly agree with you, Eugene. The demand for President Assad to go probably should have been the outcome, rather than the preliminary demand. It has become almost a red herring and it is a way to stop debate rather than start it.

Briefly, to talk about the Syrian state, many of you will not be aware that the Syrian state still pays the salaries of people who are in rebel-held areas; it even pays the salaries of some people who are in Daesh areas, even though they cannot work. The Syrian state has huge problems, but to come back to Patrick’s point, the only way that we can resolve this is to distinguish between the Syrian state and the Syrian regime, and in the end that would be the best way of getting rid of a rather cliquey, Mafia-like Syrian regime.

Q39 Stephen Gethins: Professor Rogan, earlier on you touched upon the role of Russia. I know that we have talked about regional actors. I am quite interested in hearing the panel’s view of the role of Russia, its return to negotiations recently and also the reports of its
military build-up. I wonder what you can say about Russia. We have talked about the other regional actors, but could you talk in particular about the role of Russia? I wonder whether colleagues would mind commenting on that.

**Professor Rogan:** Russia is demonstrating its concerns for the stability of the Assad regime by this recent evidence of troop build-up; they clearly want to bolster the regime against the risk of collapse. I think that they think their position is responsible—that they are upholding the Syrian state against nihilism, so I think that the disagreement they have with the United States right now, and I presume with Britain, is less substantial than our press would have it to be. There is probably more scope for common ground.

Again, Russia knows why it is in Syria: its port facilities in Latakia are very important. Syria is Russia’s last Arab ally, and so, for the very reason why the United States and Britain aren’t motivated to be very active in Syria, Russia is particularly motivated to be so. It too, like Iran, is an essential partner to any solution; we must work with these two countries.

**Q40 Nadhim Zahawi:** Could there be a scenario where you would transition—Assad could be exiled to Moscow—to an individual from within his group who could emerge, who protected the Alawites and who was then part of a negotiated settlement? Is that feasible?

**Professor Hinnebusch:** May I interject? Addressing the same issue of what to do with Assad, I agree with my colleagues that the whole dynamic whereby his going was the precondition of negotiations was obviously a non-starter, and Kofi Annan, way back there when he was trying to be mediator, was frustrated with the obsession with Assad going. At the beginning, he said that it should be at the end of a political process, but what would that political process look like? His thought was that you would get two kinds of pressure on Assad: international pressure, but particularly from the Russians, from above, but at the same time, if a ceasefire could be put in place that would enable civil society to revive and put pressure on him from below, and that would enable some sort of transition.

Unfortunately, we have gotten far beyond that; we are now in this position. I agree very much with Eugene that if you insist on a quick exit of Assad without having an alternative in place, you risk the collapse of not just the regime, which could implode, but the state, because they are so intertwined. It is very difficult to separate them at this point.

I wonder if people are aware that when we talk about the regime-controlled areas, we are talking about areas that are populated not just by minorities or Assad’s constituents, but, additionally, by large numbers of Sunnis who have migrated away from the opposition-controlled areas to the Government-controlled areas, because they are the only places where there is any security. You have this curious situation where we talk about Latakia and Tartus as Alawi—they have been swamped by incoming Sunnis trying to escape the conflict. So, if this modicum of security provided by the so-called state/regime gives way, it is going to open the gates of hell. It will be like nothing you’ve seen yet, so I would agree that it is extremely dangerous to talk about getting rid of Assad until you do other things.

What do you have to do? Obviously, there has to be some sort of power sharing—I think that’s been mentioned—and there are examples and precedents. For example, if you look at Zimbabwe, at the level of sharing offices, Assad could remain President and the
Leader of the Opposition could be Prime Minister. Constitutionally, they could check each other. You will say, “Well, that doesn’t matter. What matters is who has the guns.” So, here is where it is absolutely crucial that you have something that can balance Assad’s army. That is why I have always thought that the idea of creating the Free Syrian Army would have made sense—not to fight Assad or even to fight ISIS, but to provide protection for the constituents in the non-regime-controlled areas and to balance Assad’s army. Right now, the only balance to Assad’s army, unfortunately, is Nusra and ISIS. That is the difficulty we are in. Until it ends, it is hard to see how power sharing can work, but it seems to be the only way forward.

Of course, in the long term Assad can’t stay. I think everyone agrees with that. You can’t get reconciliation as long as he’s there, but, along with the power-sharing scenario inside, the obvious other thing that has to happen—it will happen only if it looks like there is a power-sharing agreement inside—is that his allies will have to lean on him and give him incentives to leave, and they will have to foster an alternative. They have to be looking below him for someone. An Alawi general with clean hands—Ali Habib used to be mentioned—would be the kind of thing you would perhaps initially look for as a transitional figure. They have to give Assad an incentive to go and safe haven. Justice may not be served, but peace could be served if he is given some sort of safe haven in Iran or Russia.

Q41 Yasmin Qureshi: I want to explore a couple of things. As you are probably aware, there may be a discussion coming up in Parliament—probably in the next couple of months—about whether there should be any further military intervention against Daesh. Leaving aside the issues of legality and whatever, in terms of practicality, what I understand from what I have heard is that military strikes on Daesh will not necessarily solve the problem. Please correct me—obviously, we rely on what we see on television and read in the newspapers—but the whole thing in Syria started in 2009 as part of a democratic process. People wanted to have democracy and the rule of law. Assad’s regime has been controlling Syria for 20 or 30 years and has been pretty despotic. In the past few years, Assad has been carrying out a lot of killing and mass murdering.

Chair: Yasmin, we are quite pressed.

Yasmin Qureshi: I just want to say that we have talked a lot about Daesh, but we don’t talk enough about what Assad has been doing. Although I agree that he could be the end product, what do we do in practical terms to deal with what Assad has been doing to thousands of people regularly?

Professor Rogan: Ms Qureshi, if I could put one plea forward, it would be to prioritise the sending of bricks rather than bombs to Syria, because I do not see how further air strikes or military action is going to do anything except further destroy the urban fabric of Syria. I tried to find some figures before coming to this meeting, and the most recent I could find suggest that 1.4 million Syrian homes have been destroyed. It is not West London prices—say it is £50,000 a unit—but that is £60 billion to rebuild the houses Syrians need to go home.

You were asking previously what Syrians want. They don’t want to be in Europe. They don’t want to be in England, Germany or Hungary. They want to be home. The sooner we adopt policies that prioritise the needs of Syrians and provide not a safe haven but a safe
habitat for them, with schools, hospitals and homes, the better, but that takes bricks, not bombs. That is why I think the diplomatic turn must be the way a responsible Government turns to try to address Syria’s problems, which are now becoming Europe’s problems, and to create a Syria that Syrians can go home to. I don’t see how further air strikes are going to advance that.

Julien Barnes-Dacey: If I could quickly add to that, Assad needs to have pressure put on him, but I think the means of doing that is via Russia and Iran. It is clear after four years that a military attempt to depose him is not going to bear fruit. The question is, how do you enter a diplomatic process that bears fruit on that front? I would say that taking the Assad question off the table is one way of actually containing him and forcing significant compromises, including, for instance, the ending of barrel bombs, via the Iranians and Russians.

In terms of the anti-ISIS air strikes, I would just say that I think they make the threat from ISIS worse. I think the UK’s extending air strikes feeds a sense of radicalisation within Syria, because Sunnis say, “Look, the West is not helping us against Assad, but they are fighting ISIS.” Of course, it makes us more of a direct threat. We become direct parties, all the while contributing nothing meaningful, in terms of military numbers or capability. I really fail to see how air strikes against ISIS will not do more harm than good.

Q42 Mike Gapes: The only air force in Syria at the moment— apart from the air strikes that have been carried out against Daesh— is the Syrian air force. The only air force that is dropping barrel bombs and killing civilians is the Syrian air force. As I understand it, Assad has killed six or seven times as many people as ISIL, yet the whole thrust of the discussion I have just been hearing is saying, in effect, “Well, we’ll just have to allow this guy who is dropping chlorine and bombing civilian areas,” and he is the main cause of the millions of people who have been displaced and the millions who are outside Syria. So, frankly, isn’t this just a recipe for a continuation of that kind of policy for years to come?

Professor Hinnebusch: You are pointing to the notion of a no-fly zone, which has been advocated—

Mike Gapes: Exactly—a no-fly zone to protect the civilian population.

Professor Hinnebusch: The reasons that the Obama Administration have been reluctant to do that are, I am sure, well known to you: the legal and also the military problems with it. It might be a good idea in principle, except one has to take account of the fact that it would shift the balance of power against the Assad regime—okay, that is fine, but who will pick up the pieces? It will be Daesh or Nusra. So a no-fly zone is probably a good idea, but within the context of a ceasefire.

Here is where the UN mediator’s heroic efforts to get local ceasefires as a beginning would also, of course, be a way of addressing barrel bombs. They then have to be expanded. Has there been any serious backing of his heroic lone efforts to get those ceasefires going? And then you can have a no-fly zone if it is accompanied by the kinds of things that would need to go along with it, which are truces and the beginning of political negotiations.
Julien Barnes-Dacey: Or you can do it another way: you can put British troops on the ground to guard the no-fly zone. That then establishes a secure area where you can get humanitarian access—

Q43 Mike Gapes: Why British troops? Can’t there be Arab troops?

Julien Barnes-Dacey: Again, this is about regional responsibility—this is what I am asking. Arab states are not willing to do that.

Professor Rogan: Don’t confuse pragmatism with in any way condoning the methods of the Assad regime. The whole point is to put the needs of the Syrian population first. We all know the statistics you quote, and I agree with you that the man has more blood on his hands than should ever make any of us shake his hand, yet because he is backed by the two strongest powers in this conflict, Russia and Iran, the demands that he must go are not realistic. So the question is: do you wish to stand on purity and damn the Syria people—

Q44 Mike Gapes: I am not saying he goes. We have no-fly zones to protect the civilian areas from his air force. That does not necessarily mean he is gone. He would still be there, but he would not be able to carry out the barrel bombing that is currently happening every day.

Professor Rogan: I would be totally for it, but I just do not think that we are going to achieve that if we are going in with air strikes. And if there is a way to achieve a no-fly zone through concerted Russian, British, American and Iranian action with their Arab allies, I am so for it. But I just would not make that the sine qua non. I think we need to get there by discussions with the strongest, most influential parties in the conflict, alas.

Chair: Gentlemen, we have overrun, inevitably. Thank you very much indeed for your consideration in coming and giving us your time and insights. I suspect that—tragically—we will continue to examine the subject of Syria for some time to come; we certainly will be in the context of our formal inquiry into ISIL/Daesh and the international strategy towards that, because they are inextricably linked. Thank you all very much indeed for your time.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Professor Michael Clarke, Director, Royal United Services Institute, and Rt Hon Dominic Grieve QC MP, former Attorney General, gave evidence.

Chair: Dominic Grieve, Professor Clarke, thank you very much indeed for coming to do the third of our sessions. This is where we want to focus on the strategic and legal options for the United Kingdom, and I would like to ask Ann Clwyd to start this session.

Q45 Ann Clwyd: The legality of intervention in Iraq against ISIS is clear—I think everyone is agreed on that—but what is your view of the legality of intervention, such as air strikes, by the UK in Syria?

Mr Grieve: Who are you striking is, I think, the first question you have to ask. There is, I think, a considerable difference between, for example, taking military action against the Assad regime and taking military action against IS, for this reason: Assad, although he is clearly threatening his own citizens, is not a direct threat to the security of the United Kingdom or its citizens.
So there are two bases, I suppose, on which one could take military action against President Assad. The first is if we could get a United Nations Security Council resolution authorising it, which is clearly, on the current evidence, a non-starter, and the second is that you invoke, as was being suggested in 2013, the doctrine of humanitarian necessity to justify the UK and its allies acting unilaterally, or together, against Assad, under that umbrella.

I think it is right to say that humanitarian grounds, or the doctrine of humanitarian necessity, is a rather contested area. The United Kingdom has always put it forward as a basis for military intervention, if necessary. We have invoked it in northern Iraq; we have invoked it in the context of former Yugoslavia; but there are many countries that do not recognise it. I think that in the Yugoslav context only the United Kingdom and Belgium used it as their grounds of intervention. Interestingly, the other countries that intervened at the time did so without any apparent basis at all.

The United Nations itself is very uncomfortable with it, because although it has now acknowledged the existence of a responsibility to protect and has enshrined that in its own thinking, the responsibility to protect would be, in its eyes, a justification for the UN Security Council taking collective action against the state and overriding what I suppose used to be called the Westphalian principle, that a state could do whatever it liked to its own citizens as long as it wasn’t affecting people outside. It has never seen it as a justification for a state acting unilaterally or in concert outside the United Nations to do it. But it is a well-established United Kingdom principle, which we have put forward on many occasions, and indeed it is what the Prime Minister was putting forward in 2013. That is one element.

The other element is IS. I think you yourself acknowledged that IS, on the evidence of what it itself says and appears to be doing in places such as Tunisia and this country, constitutes a national security danger, which might justify our taking action against it to protect ourselves under article 51 of the UN Charter. It might justify our extending into Syria the action that we are currently taking to help the Iraqis in Iraq for the same reason, because the border is meaningless and IS is operating in ungoverned space. I hope that answers your question.

The other reason is that, in Iraq, we have gone in essentially by invitation of the Iraqi Government, but that doesn’t apply beyond its borders.

Q46 Chair: Ann has set us off on the legalities, which was not necessarily the order in which we were going to address it, so we will stay on the legal framework and will come back later to the strategic options for the UK. Obviously, the session follows the Prime Minister’s statement yesterday. Mr Grieve, you said that Syria is not an operational theatre of war for the United Kingdom at present; is there anything you want to add on the implications of this for the legal basis of allowing drone strikes?

Mr Grieve: Hold on, I am not sure that that is quite what I said. I was seeking to distinguish between the different actors within Syria. I was simply saying that, in legal terms, President Assad and his regime may be highly reprehensible and appalling, but they are not directly threatening us. As we have discussed, and there seems to be a general consensus, IS is clearly a threat. IS is doing a number of things. IS is creating humanitarian disaster, so there might be justification for exercising military power against IS on that basis. If the Prime
Minister is correct and all the evidence we have seen of what has been going on is correct, it is a direct danger that might justify invoking article 51 of the UN Charter.

Turning to the specifics of yesterday’s announcement by the Prime Minister, as I have been at pains to say, I am not privy to the intelligence information that the Prime Minister had to justify his actions, but is it possible for me as a lawyer to see a legal basis on which you could attack IS in Syria? The answer must be yes. If IS is threatening the national security and the lives of people in the United Kingdom and is operating in ungoverned space, and if the Government have gone through a checklist to decide that what they want to do is necessary and proportionate, and there is no other way of dealing with the problem other than using lethal force, those provide perfectly clear grounds in international law why air strikes could be used. That is not only in the context of what happened on 21 August, but in the wider context of taking military action, if the factual basis for doing it is there.

Q47 Chair: Amidst a plethora of opinions expressed yesterday, people expressed concerns that we were moving towards an American model, in which the laws governing armed conflict are used to justify action in states with which we are not at war, officially. Do both of you share those concerns?

Mr Grieve: I simply say that one has to be very careful. If you are going to use lethal force, you have to think very carefully about what it is you are doing and the purpose for which you are doing it. Just to take an example in the context of yesterday’s announcement, it is not acceptable to use lethal force to punish somebody for something that they have done in the past. There might be a terrorist sitting in Raqqa who has done misdeeds in the past but is currently not doing anything. Deciding that you are going to kill him as a piece of retribution is not lawful in international law. It is not lawful in domestic law either. Bear in mind that domestic law applies to the actions of the UK Government—certainly in killing UK citizens—anywhere in the world. In those circumstances, the justification has to be self-defence—that you are stopping something happening and that you have good grounds for concluding that something is going to happen. That does not mean that you have to wait for it to happen, but it does mean that you have to be satisfied that there is a risk—an imminent risk. You can base that in part on what the person may have been doing in the past of course, but you need something more than just their past misdeeds, or what you conclude are their past misdeeds, if you are going to take action.

Professor Clarke: I share exactly that view. Those are my concerns as well. The Prime Minister said that this action—he had been advised by the Attorney General that it was lawful and I take that at face value, but that must mean, as Mr Grieve says, that there is intelligence that points to some future action that was specific and imminent and could only be dealt with in this way. If that is the case, it seems to me that the action that was announced as having taken place last week can be regarded as lawful. We do not expect the Government to give us operational detail in public, but I think there is a very good case for the Government to have maybe the ISC, David Anderson or someone look at this case to offer some reassurance that the lawfulness has been tested outside the Government as well.

The other aspect of it that I find concerning is a switch in strategic policy in the use of our Reaper drones. We used our Reaper drones in Afghanistan, and the Government always insisted, rightly, that those drones were only ever used with lethal force when British troops or other ISAF forces were involved. In other words, they were used for a battlefield purpose.
in a territory in which we were conducting war-like operations. We did not use our drones in the way the CIA used its drones—for, effectively, extrajudicial killings. This has the look of a potential extrajudicial killing about it, and I would like some reassurance that it was not. If it was, that is a pretty big shift of policy that may have been made in response to a very specific issue a couple of weeks ago on 21 August, but it bears some examination, at least by some qualified assessors.

Q48 Stephen Gethins: Two years ago, this Parliament was gearing up for military action against Assad. I am wondering whether there is a responsibility to protect nowadays, and if so, is the responsibility to protect against the Assad regime or against ISIL? What are your views on that?

Mr Grieve: I have always understood the responsibility to protect to be a doctrine that imposes on the state a duty towards its own citizens. The importance of that, as I was trying to explain, is that it provides a justification for the United Nations taking action against a Government for what it does to its own citizens, rather than what it might do elsewhere. I think in logic—Professor Clarke may disagree, but I think it could be extended to anybody who is exercising de facto authority. If IS is exercising de facto authority somewhere else in Syria, in practice, I don’t really see why it should not apply to IS as well.

As I was trying to explain, the principle behind it, as I have always understood it, is that it provides a new justification for the Security Council meeting and deciding to take collective action. That is different from the doctrine of humanitarian necessity, which the United Kingdom has always said it keeps in reserve to use unilaterally or with its allies if it considers that necessity requires it.

It is a difficult question. As you are clearly aware, the politics of this is that the UN Security Council is paralysed over the issue of bringing peace to Syria because of the different views of its constituent members, as a result of which the killing goes on. On the face of it, if the reliance were to be entirely on responsibility to protect as understood by the UN, nothing is going to happen at all.

Q49 Stephen Gethins: On a point of clarification, if I may—could it be used by the United Nations, say, in the establishment of safe havens, if that were a direction in which they wanted to go?

Mr Grieve: If the United Nations wishes to act with the Security Council to take military action in Syria in a whole variety of forms, there is plainly nothing to prevent it from doing so, except the agreement of the members of the Security Council.

Q50 Daniel Kawczynski: On the point that was made by my colleague—this is specifically for Professor Clarke—if I can take your mind back, about the time when we were deciding in Parliament whether or not to give the Prime Minister the mandate to intervene in Syria, there was a lot of hostility to this among the British electorate. Mr Miliband, the then leader of the Labour party, changed his mind at the last moment. Was it a mistake for Parliament not to have intervened at that time, and is the situation more difficult to resolve now than it was two years ago?
**Professor Clarke:** Are you speaking, sir, about the 2013 decision on chemical weapons or the decision in October last year to involve Britain in Iraq but not Syria?

**Daniel Kawczynski:** The 2013.

**Professor Clarke:** That decision was extremely curious. I interpreted it as a rejection by Parliament of what seemed to be a very flawed strategy, because nobody knew what would happen if initial air strikes to prevent the use of chemical weapons, or to punish Assad for using them, did not work. Nobody had any idea what would happen next. That scepticism about the strategy became a parliamentary issue. I also think it was incredibly badly handled by both the Government and the Opposition. For an analyst, it was an amazing week to watch parliamentary procedures.

The result, whether right or wrong, had a huge reputational effect on the United Kingdom’s standing in the world. Whether the decision was right or wrong, Parliament took a decision that it did not like what seemed like a flawed strategy, and the American Congress seemed to react the same way within a few days. But the rejection of leadership on this issue—the fact that Parliament and then Congress, in effect, had reversed the wishes of the American and British leaderships—was extremely debilitating. I myself was in the Gulf the following week, and then Japan. Everyone in the Gulf was talking about it, and when I went to Japan three or four days later, it was the only topic of conversation. I was astonished that anyone in Japan would take that much interest in what was going on in the British Parliament.

The questions that I was getting were very crude. “Is Britain withdrawing from the world? Has Britain ended its relationship with the United States? Has Britain ended its relationship with the world?” I said, “No, of course not. This was a parliamentary mess. You’ve got to understand it in that way.” But of course they did not. I was very impressed by the degree of diplomatic damage that the mishandling of that issue created.

**Q51 Daniel Kawczynski:** And who would you blame for that? Would you venture to say whom you would blame?

**Professor Clarke:** Oh, I had lots of fun that week, as an analyst who isn’t responsible for anything. I thought the Government mishandled it astonishingly by making the decision, right up until the Thursday, look just like the Iraq decision of 2003. Almost everything they did seemed to imitate what had happened in 2003, and then the Opposition missed an open goal the following day. All the Government had to do was either vote for the Opposition amendment and get something through or put down another amendment, but it voted to do nothing. It voted not even to talk about it. Then, the following day, the Opposition missed an open goal. They could have been statesmanlike and said, “We’ll get the Government off the hook here.” Instead, both Government and Opposition contrived to produce a situation where we had frightened ourselves out of anything.

**Q52 Chair:** Given that as a background to our consideration of 2013, do you now think that we have a defined strategic approach to this issue, or are we simply responding to events?

**Professor Clarke:** I think there is a strategic logic behind all this. Whether it is successful or not, or whether it will be successful, is a different question, but there is some
rationale behind it. Air strikes, as part of the coalition, are designed to contain the influence of ISIL physically on the ground, to buy time for the development of ground forces that can ultimately reduce ISIL’s coverage in the area and a political settlement. That is the idea. Air strikes cannot defeat ISIL—nobody pretends that—but they can stop it moving around, or make it more difficult. There is some evidence that that has happened, and that ISIL has lost as much as it has gained militarily in the last 12 months. Again, the ultimate strategic outcome of that is to be discussed.

**Q53 Chair:** Do you think the extension of the Royal Air Force’s area of operations from Iraq to Syria within the concept of the whole coalition operation will make a material difference to that objective?

**Professor Clarke:** It would make very little material difference, because what we might extend to Syria would be essentially the same size of operation moving across a different border. It is very difficult to imagine that we could double or treble the size of the operation in present circumstances. Any decision to include Syria in the operational area would, in my view, have some political benefits, some benefits within the coalition and some benefits in terms of the consistency with which we do this. But, operationally, it would not make very much difference to the physical air operations against ISIL. Bear in mind that the Secretary of State for Defence has already said, until yesterday, that we are operating over Syria in non-lethal ways and that 30% of all the coalition’s ISTAR—the intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance and so on—is provided by British aircraft across Syria and Iraq. So we are already doing quite a lot in Syria to enable and back up the strikes that are taking place. If we decided to strike in Syria as well, the difference would be pretty marginal.

**Q54 Mr Hendrick:** To start where Professor Clarke finished, if we were to operate there, it would be pretty marginal. I noticed that you were in the sessions earlier, and you will have heard the discussion taking place about the political and military or battle complexities within Syria at the moment. If we were to pose the question of whether we should intervene now in Syria, with the forces that, for example, we are currently using in Iraq—typically, Tornado aircraft—you have just said that it wouldn’t make a great deal of difference. From the previous discussion, it is obviously not going to solve the problem. Would that be seen, in your view, as just a gesture to support the Americans, or would it be seen as part of a bigger issue of Britain actually trying to get military solutions to what is essentially a political problem? [Interruption.]

**Chair:** We will have to suspend this session. We have one or two more questions for witnesses, but I am conscious that, if we returned after the Division, we would be well after the time allocated. If that is all right, we will follow this up with further questions in writing, and end the session here. Thank you very much.