



Oral evidence: [Developments in UK foreign policy](#),

HC 606

Tuesday 9 September 2014

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 9 September 2014

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Sir Richard Ottaway (Chair); Mr John Baron; Ann Clwyd; Mike Gapes; Mark Hendrick; Sir John Stanley; Nadhim Zahawi

Questions 1-79

Witnesses: **Rt Hon Philip Hammond MP**, Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, **Sir Simon Gass CVO KCMG**, Director-General (Political), Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and **Edward Oakden CMG**, Director, Middle East and North Africa Directorate, Foreign and Commonwealth office, gave evidence.

Chair: I welcome members of the public to this sitting of the Foreign Affairs Committee. This is one of our bi-annual meetings with the Foreign Secretary, the last of which took place on 20 March. I welcome our new Foreign Secretary. We tried a couple of times to get you while you were Secretary of State for Defence, albeit unsuccessfully as you were taken off overseas. We are glad that you are here in your new capacity. On behalf of the Committee, I give you a warm welcome and congratulate you on your appointment.

Mr Hammond: Thank you.

Q1 Chair: Foreign Secretary, I hope you have been briefed on the groups that we are to question you on. We are going to start with Iraq and Syria. Perhaps you would like to talk about the possible air war in Syria, and whether you think it is in our national interest to join it.

Mr Hammond: As the Committee will be aware, the United States is already carrying out air strikes in support of the Iraqi security forces and the Kurdish peshmerga against ISIL. The Prime Minister has made clear that we have ruled nothing out, but at this stage there is not a specific ask and, therefore, nothing for us to consider. We are clear that there has to be a comprehensive response to the challenge posed by ISIL. It is absolutely clear that air strikes alone, whoever delivers them, are not going to be the solution. It is possible that air activity could be part of a wider package—which involves political initiative and, crucially, must involve an Iraqi-led, ideally regionally supported, operation on the ground—to push back the gains that ISIL have made.

Q2 Chair: You used the phrase that you have not had a specific ask. Should I infer from that that you have had an informal ask and that, once you have got all your ducks in a row, you will get a specific ask?

Mr Hammond: No, we have not had an unspecific ask either. It is well understood by the group of like-minded nations that the US is looking at developing a policy for dealing with ISIL that will involve building a very wide coalition. Secretary Kerry and Secretary Hagel are in the Gulf this week drumming up regional support, which will be a vitally important part of that coalition. They made it clear at last week's NATO summit that they hope for extensive NATO support as well, not necessarily support in delivering kinetic military activity. Secretary Kerry made it clear that he understands that different nations will have different appetites and will want to contribute in different ways to what will be a very broad-based and comprehensive response to the challenge of ISIL.

Q3 Chair: Sorry to press you on this, but I presume there are some conversations going on that would lead you to say that, if asked, this is what you would like us to do?

Mr Hammond: No, we have not had any such conversation.

Chair: Thank you for the clarification.

Mr Hammond: The United States is well aware that this is a very sensitive subject in this country, and that we will want to look at what kind of package of action is proposed in order to deal with the challenge of ISIL. We will want to think very carefully about how we can most effectively contribute to that, what other allies are proposing to do and think carefully about the position we should take. As the Prime Minister made clear again yesterday, in this kind of situation, where this would be premeditated involvement if we did decide that involvement was appropriate, we would come back to the House of Commons for a debate and a vote on that proposition.

Q4 Chair: That is very helpful. Thank you. If the RAF was deployed, would it be because they were going to make a strategic difference to something that the United States was doing, or would it be more of a political gesture of support and solidarity?

Mr Hammond: Different air forces have different niche capabilities, and we do have some niche capabilities. The Tornado GR4 is an extremely capable aircraft for the type of operation that the US is currently carrying out in Iraq, but it is probably realistic to say, given the scale of United States assets available, the primary driver would be the importance of building a political coalition of nations, rather than shortage of military hardware on the part of the United States.

Q5 Chair: Can I just clarify one point, just to go back to one of my opening questions? I have been using the phrase "Iraq". Do you distinguish between Kurdistan and the Kurdistan Regional Government and a request for help, and the Iraqi Government and a request for help?

Mr Hammond: No. The sovereign entity with which we deal is Iraq, and it is clear that any activity—whether it is the supply of weapons and equipment or, indeed, if it, in the future, were to be a question of direct military activity—would always have to be something that was done at the request of the Government of Iraq and with the full agreement of the Government of Iraq.

Q6 Chair: So if the KRG in Irbil asked you for support, unless it was endorsed by Baghdad, you would not go along with it?

Mr Hammond: Yes, it would have to be endorsed by Baghdad. That is the legally responsible entity.

Chair: That is very helpful. Thank you.

Q7 Nadhim Zahawi: Welcome, Foreign Secretary. You quite rightly say that this campaign has to be Iraqi led and regionally supported. Can you say a little more about the new Government that has been announced in Baghdad? How committed are the Kurds? Clearly, they have a timeline of three months, to show good will to Prime Minister al-Abadi. In the Sunni region, there are Sunni personalities who have joined the coalition Government, but where are we in terms of the tribes? Have they been at all involved in bringing the parties together?

Mr Hammond: It is probably fair to say it is early days. It is literally early days—it's the first day. The programme that Prime Minister-designate al-Abadi has set out looks like a sensible programme, and all the right noises are being made by all the relevant people. On the other side of equation, it is fair to observe that a lot of the names in the Government were names that have been around the Iraqi political scene for a long time—there is not a lot of fresh blood—so we will have to wait and see the level of demonstrated commitment to the programme that has been set out. If the programme is delivered, it will represent, I think, significant progress.

I should also say that the role of President Barzani in the KRG has been significant. Clearly, it is very important that the KRG are supportive of the formation of this Government and have focused attention on the need to build an inclusive Iraqi Government to push back ISIL, over and above agendas about Kurdish separatism, which were perhaps more to the fore a few months ago.

In terms of tribes, there is less Sunni tribal buy-in than we would like at this stage, but we have always recognised that it is going to take more than simply standing up a Government in Baghdad for the Sunni tribes that have aligned themselves with ISIL to switch back. They are going to need to see a sustained outreach that reflects their long-standing and justified grievances about the way their interests were ignored by the previous regime. Only by doing that over the long term will Mr al-Abadi succeed in gradually weaning them away from ISIL.

Q8 Nadhim Zahawi: On that, presumably our level of support and commitment and that of the US would be conditional on Prime Minister al-Abadi demonstrating that he can bring people together and move in the right direction, or there would at least be some conditionality around that. Is there?

Mr Hammond: Yes. I don't see this as conditionality in terms of a lever that we are using to try to dictate the behaviour of a sovereign Government; I see it much more in terms of an analysis by us, and certainly by the United States, that this can work only if there is a credible Iraqi Government and credible Iraqi security forces on the ground. If there is not, as much as we might like to intervene, there is not a sensible intervention that is likely to be effective that we could pursue.

Q9 Nadhim Zahawi: Moving on to the position of Iran and that of Assad, clearly Iran is a major player in Iraq. Qasem Soleimani is a major influence over what happens in terms of Government formation in Baghdad. Would the UK Government under any circumstances talk directly either to Assad or to Iran to influence what happens over the operation against ISIL in Syria?

Mr Hammond: As you know, we are in the process of re-establishing an embassy in Tehran and we hope that over the coming months we will find that we are increasingly able to engage in a wide range of discussions with the Iranians, as countries that have diplomatic relations do. That would be our ambition. The situation with the Assad regime is very different. We don't recognise them; they have lost all legitimacy as a result of their barbaric treatment of their own population, which cannot be excused. It would in my judgment be inappropriate and counter-productive to talk about engaging with the Assad regime. It is partly the brutality of the Assad regime that has driven recruits into the arms of ISIL.

Q10 Nadhim Zahawi: I am sure the Iranians will hear that message loud and clear from you, Foreign Secretary. My final question: is it UK policy that the Islamic State, whether in Iraq or Syria, must be destroyed totally? Or would containment as a strategy be on the table?

Mr Hammond: I am glad you have asked me that question because I heard the US Secretary of State saying clearly on Friday—and it is my view as well—that there is no compromise, there is no containment strategy, there is no co-existence with an ideology such as ISIL's. It has to be a strategy to crush the ideology, to delegitimise it, to cut it off from its sources of support and resource, and to see it wiped out.

Chair: Before I go to John Baron, I apologise to Mr Oakden and Sir Simon Gass for not welcoming them when they came into the Committee room.

Q11 Mr Baron: Foreign Secretary, following on from your previous answer, the logical consequence, which I think the Pentagon believes, is that one has to take on ISIS in Syria if one is going to destroy it. Do you accept that there is a much higher risk intervening militarily from the West's point of view in Syria than in the more limited objective of driving ISIS out of northern Iraq, if only because of the Syrian air defences? It is such a fast-moving, fluid situation in Syria that you are never sure who is going to take the extremists' place. They lurk in the shadows and have morphed into various other extremists as well. What is your assessment?

Mr Hammond: Yes, I agree with that. While the strategists always talk about the need to look at this as a single theatre, because ISIL sees it as a single theatre, the legal, military, practical, technical and cultural differences between Iraq and Syria are very significant. We are dealing with very different situations in the two.

Q12 Mr Baron: Can I move us on to the coalition of the willing? Quite rightly, in London and Washington's view, we need a regional coalition to take on ISIS. The idea that you can just defeat ISIS from the air is sheer make-believe. We all accept that, I think. You can degrade but you cannot defeat them; it needs troops on the ground. There is also the perceived thinking, which many of us would support, that it shouldn't be Western troops. The symbolism of the West taking on and defeating this caliphate would be too strong and the consequences too great. What exactly should be the military role of this regional coalition? Can you add a bit more flesh to the bones? Fostering a regional coalition is one thing, but actually defining the extent to which they intervene is quite another.

Mr Hammond: Of course, we can sit here in this room and postulate all sorts of shapes of coalition. It depends on what the willing are willing to do. Secretaries Kerry and Hagel are exploring in the region right now what people might be willing to do. It is possible to envisage a situation where, with Iraqi forces, including Kurdish peshmerga, in the lead, there might be regional states—Muslim countries—willing to contribute some level of ground force in support

of those Iraqi forces, perhaps specialist troops on the ground in-country, which would train and offer specialist advice and would be more directly engaged perhaps than was sensible for Western countries to look at being able to do.

Q13 Mr Baron: Foreign Secretary, what is the Foreign Office planning to do to address the concern that many of our traditional allies in the region have facilitated the rise of Islamic militias in Iraq and Syria? Some have even been harbouring extremists within their own country and perhaps even funding them. What will the Foreign Office do about this? How will that knotty problem be addressed when trying to put this regional coalition together?

Mr Hammond: We are very clear with our allies that whatever attitude people have taken to different groups at different stages of their evolution in the past, there is no tolerance now for any support for ISIL or any of the organisations associated with it. We sponsored the UN Security Council resolution directed at trying to cut off financial and other support to ISIL. I am comfortable that the countries we are in dialogue with are now clear about their official position. That is not to say that some of them won't still harbour private individuals who may have different sympathies. We will look to them to work with us in implementing the UNSCR to ensure that financial flows to ISIL are cut off. Having said that, ISIL is now an organisation with significant wealth of its own and sources of income from kidnapping, extortion, taxation and oil revenues, which make it far less vulnerable to interruption of donations.

Edward Oakden: If one looks at the name of the state—the so-called Islamic State, the Islamic caliphate—the road to that would lie through most of the Arab capitals, so they have the biggest interest of anybody to ensure that the Islamic State does not achieve what it says on the tin. So, for example, Saudi Arabia has made it illegal, with some very heavy penalties, not just to be a member of ISIS, but to fund them in any way. That has obviously been one of the issues in the past. There may be a distinction in the past between Governments who have been clear and individuals who have nothing to do with Governments. One of the main concerns of Governments now is to ensure that all of their citizens are clearly targeted at extirpating ISIL.

Q14 Mr Baron: Very briefly, do you think there is a general reawakening about the threat and the need to respond to it? We saw Egypt and the UAE conduct strikes against extremists in Libya. How far is this going to go, and do you have any thoughts about ensuring that it becomes a force for good, rather than potentially bad?

Edward Oakden: I think it says something that Saudi Arabia last week arrested nearly 90 members of the cell, and they wound up a couple of other cells. They are clearly taking action. But we must understand that not every organisation in the region that has an Islamist tendency can be tarred with being ISIL, because clearly there is a range.

Q15 Ann Clwyd: I have been very unclear over the last few weeks about exactly who was doing what. It seemed a lot of responsibility was being put on the peshmerga. I think the size of the peshmerga is relevant—the state of its forces, the armaments they have—and yet we are continually talking about the peshmerga as though they were going to solve the whole problem. Have you made a fresh assessment of their capability?

Mr Hammond: I don't think we have ever thought the peshmerga could solve the whole problem. The peshmerga are holding the line against an ISIL assault on their homeland. They are doing it with great passion and conviction, as you would expect, but ISIL has many other targets where the peshmerga will not be the answer. As they were advancing south to

Baghdad, the burden fell directly on the formal Iraqi security forces. In Syria, they are in conflict with other groups. The peshmerga happened to be in the front line at the point where this conflict came to the attention of the world, and it was the Kurds who were holding the line against ISIL. They will remain an important part of that line, but they are certainly not the whole solution.

Q16 Ann Clwyd: We have talked about arming the peshmerga. The arms have gone to Baghdad first. Have they then been distributed to the peshmerga, and is there an equal distribution between the peshmerga of the various political parties?

Mr Hammond: As I understand it, the shipments that have been made so far have gone into Baghdad for inspection, recognising the sovereign control of the Government in Baghdad. The shipments we have made then moved on in RAF aircraft to Irbil, where they have been unloaded. We are attempting to ensure that the distribution of the supplies that we have made is broadly spread among the different groups to avoid any suggestion of favouritism between groups, because there clearly is not as far as we are concerned.

Q17 Ann Clwyd: Can I take you to Mount Sinjar, because there was a lot of publicity surrounding it? There was a worrying report in *The Guardian* a few weeks ago.

Mr Hammond: As is well known, I do not read it.

Q18 Ann Clwyd: It was suggested that the crisis on Mount Sinjar was certainly not over. We have taken for granted the surveillance by the USA, which suddenly withdrew from Mount Sinjar because they said there were only a small number left. Was that accurate? Do we know precisely what the state of play is now? Are there still people not able to get off the mountain without assistance from somebody else?

Mr Hammond: I think it was accurate. These situations are difficult to assess in the heat of the moment. The humanitarian organisations were preparing for—quite rightly—a worst-case scenario when we thought there were very large numbers of people trapped on the mountain. I think there was possibly an overestimate of the number of people there originally. People are intrinsically resourceful, and night after night numbers of people were getting themselves off the mountain, and there was the involvement of the peshmerga forces, particularly some Syrian Kurdish forces, in rescuing people from the mountain. It became clear later on in the process that there was a far smaller number than we thought, and that the best way of getting them off was to reinforce the land routes that had already become established.

We are now confident that nobody is trapped or stranded on Mount Sinjar. That is not to say that it is a perfectly peaceful situation—there are still ISIL forces around the mountain—but we are confident that people who want to move off the mountain can do so. We should also remember that significant numbers of people from that region have been displaced, from the exodus from Mount Sinjar and before that, and they remain displaced, so there is still a major humanitarian problem in the Dohuk area.

Q19 Ann Clwyd: The groups of peshmerga from Syria and Turkey apparently also assisted with the release of the people trapped on Mount Sinjar. They include the PKK, which is still a proscribed terrorist organisation in this country, but which is obviously key to continuing the fight against ISIS. Are we going to de-proscribe them, or whatever the word is? Can they be counted as no longer a terrorist organisation?

Mr Hammond: That, of course, is a matter for the Home Secretary to consider, and she will do so on the basis of the evidence about their engagement in terrorist activities. A terrorist organisation does not cease to be a terrorist organisation simply because it carries out an act of humanitarian kindness, but I make no comment about the particular case. The process that the Home Secretary will follow will be to look at the evidence of any given organisation's continued link to terrorist activities, regardless of whatever else it is doing.

Q20 Ann Clwyd: Will you make a recommendation, or will you leave it to the Home Secretary without recommendation?

Mr Hammond: That is a matter for the Home Secretary. She has not yet asked me for a view, but if she does I will give her one.

Q21 Ann Clwyd: What do you think the international community should do to protect Iraqi minorities? Clearly, the persecution of Christians, Turkomans and so on in Iraq continues. What should the international community do? Should there be a safe haven in the north?

Mr Hammond: And women, of course. There is not only discrimination against ethnic and religious minorities, but gender discrimination. Clearly, the first thing we should do is collaborate to develop a coherent and credible strategy to push back ISIL and defeat its abhorrent ideology, which is the root cause of this problem in a land where Christians, Arabs, Kurds and Jews have lived together in relative harmony for hundreds, if not thousands, of years. We must also support the international humanitarian effort to support the huge number of displaced people—it is currently estimated that there are more than 400,000 in Dohuk alone. That is a short-term, proximate solution, not a long-term solution.

The long-term solution is to create an inclusive Government in Iraq that is in control of all their territory and has a constitution that respects, in both letter and deed, the rights of minorities across the country.

Q22 Ann Clwyd: Can I particularly ask you about the Yazidi women? I have raised this issue on the Floor of the House a number of times in the past few weeks. We had an international conference in London that the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary hosted at which we talked about the way in which women are often treated in war conditions. Many Yazidi women were captured—I do not know what the numbers are now, but it was about 3,000. We had reports that some of those were sold into slavery and into brothels in the Middle East. Are we trying to find them, as we tried to help find the 700 Nigerian schoolgirls? We are now talking about 3,000 adult women. What has happened to them?

Mr Hammond: I cannot answer the question of what has happened to them. The way these women are reported to have been treated is truly shocking. This is not just casual abuse of women in the course of the conduct of military operations, which is what sometimes happens; this is ideologically planned abuse of women. What is being done here is part of the ideology of ISIL. That is what makes it particularly shocking.

I do not know if either of my colleagues know anything specific about it, but I am not aware of any operation currently going on to track and identify the location of these women. That would probably be very difficult, given the circumstances prevailing on the ground. Bear in mind that there are hundreds of thousands—probably a million or more in total—displaced people moving around the region. I suspect that it would be very difficult to track individuals.

Q23 Ann Clwyd: Is that not something our special forces could do?

Mr Hammond: I repeat what I just said: it would probably be very difficult to do. These people will not, I suspect, be held as a group. They will be dispersed. This is a law-enforcement task, which requires specialist skills in tracing people. Those skills will not particularly be held in special forces, either in the UK or elsewhere.

Q24 Mr Baron: Foreign Secretary, can I return us briefly to practical measures of combating ISIL on the ground? First, we have thrown our weight behind the Kurds on the front line in Iraq. Has the Foreign Office given any consideration to assisting the Kurds in Syria?

Mr Hammond: I don't think we are doing anything directly with the Kurds.

Edward Oakden: No. We will be talking to their political representatives tomorrow, to follow up on the role they had in helping to get so many people off Mount Sinjar. I make a very clear distinction there between the political wing of the Syrian Kurds and the military wing. The main focus of our attention has clearly been on the Iraqi Kurds.

Q25 Mr Baron: May I return to the narrow objective of removing ISIS from northern Iraq? A number of measures have been introduced, including arming the Kurds in Iraq, but is not the elephant in the room the Iraqi army itself, numbering something like 250,000 men? It has perhaps been poorly led and structured and needs drastic improvement, but it is the answer when it comes to ground forces in northern Iraq. Foreign Secretary, can you give us your view of that and perhaps a time scale for when you would expect the army to be licked into shape and able to take these extremists on?

Mr Hammond: The distinction is that the peshmerga are well motivated and reasonably led but severely lacking in weapons and equipment, while the Iraqi security forces are demoralised, very badly led and badly structured, but well equipped with American weaponry, which is why there has not been a discussion about equipping the Iraqi security forces. We see this—I think a like-minded group of countries share this view—as a process that has to be taken step by step. Step 1 is the creation of an inclusive and credible Iraqi Government in Baghdad, which immediately begins to reach out to the Kurdish and Sunni communities within Iraq with a programme that recognises the long-standing tensions about the sharing of resources and levels of autonomy. As soon as that is in place, we need to see a programme of support for the restructuring and reconfiguration—better to reflect the ethnic balance in the country—of the Iraqi security forces, and, I suspect, a significant element of retraining, technical advice and support will be required.

One of the issues that I am sure that Secretary Hagel and Secretary Kerry will be discussing in the Gulf this week is the appetite among countries in the region to provide, in the short term, some of that hands-on training and technical advice.

Q26 Mr Baron: Very briefly, Foreign Secretary, can I suggest that you are absolutely right? It has got to be a political solution in the end—soldiers only buy time—but the way you word it, it sounds as though the timetable is politics first, army second.

Mr Hammond: Politics first.

Q27 Mr Baron: One can understand that to a certain extent, but that time scale suggests many months before we even get the Iraqi army to address the extremists. Am I right?

Mr Hammond: No, I don't think so. The announcement that an Iraqi Government has been formed means that we can now expect to move quickly to begin to put together the package of support for the institutions of the legitimate Iraqi Government, including the Iraqi security forces. Clearly, there is an implicit bargain: if countries in the region and in the West put together packages of support for this Government, they will be doing so on the basis of the programme that the Government has publicly set out. If that proves not to be delivered, it would be a major setback because that programme of outreach to the Sunnis in particular is essential if any of this is to work. Simply retraining and restructuring Iraqi security forces while leaving the grievances of the Sunni population unaddressed is not a formula for the successful pushing back of ISIL.

Q28 Chair: Foreign Secretary, a number of commentators have spoken about a more decentralised, federal Iraq with the Kurds, the Sunnis, and the Shi'as. Do you envisage that happening at all? Is it plan B?

Mr Hammond: Sorry, I thought you were asking me whether it was plan A. As I read Mr al-Abadi's programme, it clearly envisages a significant degree of decentralisation in the territory of Iraq and a sharing of revenues in a way that addresses some of those underlying grievances. It is important that we are clear that it is not for us to define the internal structures of governance in Iraq. That is something that the people of Iraq have to do. Our advice to the Iraqi Government would be that unless they are able to do that in a way that has broad-based buy-in across all the communities in Iraq, it will be much more difficult for regional countries and the West to support the Iraqi Government and, thus, much more difficult for it to overcome the insurgency that it is facing from ISIL.

Q29 Mike Gapes: Foreign Secretary, a few minutes ago you referred to shipments we have made to the Kurdistan region via Baghdad. Presumably, those were shipments of weaponry supplied by other countries. Is that correct?

Mr Hammond: So far, we have made non-lethal shipments of our own equipment and shipments of ammunition supplied by Albania.

Q30 Mike Gapes: Yesterday, the Prime Minister told me during his statement that the Government were now prepared to directly supply weaponry, as opposed to supplying it from other countries. Can you tell us when that is going to start and what kind of weaponry that is likely to be?

Mr Hammond: I can tell you that the Defence Secretary has, today, laid a departmental minute concerning the gifting of military equipment to the Government of Iraq, including the Kurdish Regional Government. The initial package is scheduled to arrive in Iraq tomorrow and will consist of heavy machine guns and ammunitions with a delivered value of just over £2 million.

Q31 Mike Gapes: And that is going to go to the Kurdistan region, is it?

Mr Hammond: That is going to go to the Kurdistan region.

Q32 Chair: Foreign Secretary, can we move on to Russia and Ukraine? You said last week that “Russia has chosen the role of pariah, rather than partner”, and that it has rejected efforts to draw it into the rules-based international system. Does that have any impact on our diplomatic approach to Russia?

Mr Hammond: I don’t personally believe in dissembling. It is clear that Russia has had the option of being in a partnership relationship with the West. Indeed, that has been our strong preference and desire for nearly 25 years. Since the cold war, we have tried to draw Russia into the community of nations and create a partnership with it, recognising that we will not agree on everything and that we have strategic differences of outlook, in a sincere belief that we are able to work constructively together as partners. Russia has shown by its actions that it rejects that notion of partnership. I chose the word “pariah” deliberately. We have a long-established taboo in Europe against changing the boundaries of nation states by force of arms. That is not the way we do things. Russia has shown itself to be completely oblivious to that established rule and willing to use force to pursue what it sees as its immediate, short-term interests in a way that is rejected by every other state in Europe.

Q33 Sir John Stanley: Foreign Secretary, the chronology of Russian territorial aggrandisement is that it carried out the de facto annexation of Transnistria in Moldova, which was followed by the annexation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia, which was followed by the annexation of Crimea in Ukraine. Do you agree that Mr Putin’s territorial objective is to carry out a de facto territorial annexation of the eastern part of Ukraine?

Mr Hammond: I don’t think we know that. I don’t think there is any evidence that that is the plan. There is plenty of speculation about it, but it is probably the case that Mr Putin will have expected a stronger popular rising in support of the separatist movement than what actually occurred in the Donbass region when these events began to unfold. I do not think we know enough to say whether his current strategy envisages annexation. Certainly, the words of the most recent agreement point strongly away from that outcome.

Q34 Sir John Stanley: I will leave aside for the moment how you judge the Russian Government’s territorial objective in Ukraine. How do you respond to the criticism that the British, American and other Governments have done nothing like enough to bring home to Mr Putin that the continuation of de facto military annexation, in violation of the boundaries of sovereign states, is both unacceptable and redolent of the most extreme dangers, and that if he thinks he can carry out a similar policy of de facto annexation of part or the whole of the territories of one or more of the Baltic states, he could precipitate the horrors of a world war three?

Mr Hammond: I don’t have to respond to criticism of the United States or any other country, but I will respond to criticism of the UK Government. I think we have responded in a measured and sensible way to an outrageous provocation. We have stood by the people of the Ukraine. We have been at the forefront of the implementation of measures within the European Union and within NATO to provide reassurance to the eastern member states of NATO and impose economic sanctions on Russia. I think such measures are more effective for having been imposed by the whole of the European Union and, in the case of the delivery of and support for reassurance measures, by the whole of NATO, than they would have been if we had taken, within Europe, a series of bilateral actions.

Acting at 28 means that we have to be pragmatic about how fast and how far we can go. We have to take everybody with us. My judgment is that the level of response that we have delivered—delivered at 28 in both NATO and the EU—is sending an effective message, and is delivering a far more effective message than would have been delivered by perhaps a stronger bilateral response.

Q35 Mr Baron: Foreign Secretary, can I ask about your assessment as to whether we have had the right balance in our dealings with Russia? I think we would all agree it is important to stand up to the bully in the playground. Belatedly, some of our neighbours and allies are waking up to that fact. But we could also argue that we ourselves have sometimes traded cheaply when dealing with Russia—for example, not leaning enough on them when it came to their intimidation of Georgia—in the hope that we could secure their allegiance or help when it came to Iraq. What is your take on that going forward? What lessons do you think we can learn?

Mr Hammond: The first and most obvious lesson is that hindsight is a wonderful thing, and we can all now ask whether we were perhaps being naive about the type of relationship that we could have with Putin's Russia. We need to distinguish different things here. There are areas where self-interest means that Russia will continue to work co-operatively with the West. Where we have an alignment of interest in relation to third countries or problems in other parts of the world, I would expect that, whatever difficulties we have, we will continue to pursue a course of action that is in our mutual best interest.

With the benefit of hindsight, of course it is possible to say that perhaps we should have woken up to what now appears to be going on earlier in the process. Perhaps we should have paid more attention to Mr Putin's rhetoric around the collapse of the Soviet Union being the greatest disaster of 20th-century history. Perhaps we should all have read his doctoral thesis a little more closely, where he sets out his view that energy politics can be a lever of state power. But all of these are with the benefit of hindsight.

We have spent much of the last 25 years genuinely and sincerely trying to draw Russia by stages into the international community. I think that at one stage we all felt that that was being pretty successful and that Russia was becoming normalised, if you like—learning to play by the rules and becoming increasingly engaged in the international economy—and increasingly a country we could do business with.

We should also emphasise that we have no dispute with the Russian people. When you and I were growing up, the Russian people were a mystery to us. Now plenty of Russian people live in London and across Europe. People visit Russia and do business in Russia. It is no longer the great mystery it was, and we have no dispute with the Russian people. But we do have a disagreement with Mr Putin's view of the world, and more particularly with his ideas about what is acceptable in going about achieving his objectives.

Q36 Mr Baron: I don't suggest for one moment, Foreign Secretary, that you should be reading the doctrines, but perhaps mandarins in your Department should be reading them. In a way, that leads me on to my next question.

What has contributed to our underestimating the risk here? Sir Tony Brenton, the former UK ambassador to Moscow, recently said that British diplomacy towards Russia and elsewhere has suffered because of a loss of language skills, particularly in the Foreign Office. We know we have reopened the language school, and that has been a good thing, but there is still a general

feeling that we are not committing, or have not committed, enough resource to eastern Europe and Russia. Is that your take on things? Do we need to invest more now, given the scale of the issue in front of us?

Mr Hammond: I think we are reinvesting in Russia and eastern Europe now, as our gaze refocuses there, but there is no doubt that this is well-trodden ground. Over a decade or more, the UK lost traction and disengaged from large parts of the world. My predecessor spent a lot of time and energy rebuilding that engagement with the world, and that has included making investment, for example, in language capacity.

I just checked this figure before we came in here: we have 156 FCO personnel who are registered as having Russian language skills. That is probably fewer than we would like, but a lot more than we had at the bottom of the curve.

Q37 Mr Baron: Briefly, Foreign Secretary, can I suggest—I am sure you are not saying this—that this is not just about language skills?

Mr Hammond: Of course it's not, no.

Q38 Mr Baron: It is about a fundamental understanding of a region, the peoples and so forth. Many Committee members are concerned that over the recent decades there has been a promotion of skills favoured by management consultants at the expense of more traditional skills—about, for example, understanding regions, their peoples etc.—which help us increase our understanding of the problems at large. Would you accept that? Can you be more specific as to what extra resource you are putting into this? It is all right saying, “We’re putting extra resource in,” but that is a vague term. Can we have some details?

Mr Hammond: Again, with the benefit of hindsight, of course we would like to have more Russia and east Europe-focused resource, but I think if you look at how we have managed our diplomatic footprint over the last decade or so and look at how some of our major allies have done it, we have degraded our Russia capability rather less than some of our allies have done. I am going to ask Sir Simon to comment on this.

Sir Simon Gass: I'd just like to add that I think we can overemphasise that a bit. If you look at our ambassador in Moscow, for example, or our ambassador in Kazakhstan or our ambassador in Ukraine, and those in a number of other places, they are all absolutely steeped in the former Soviet Union. They have huge amounts of expertise and they all speak excellent Russian. Our ambassador in Ukraine can manage in Ukrainian and our ambassador in Kazakhstan can manage in Kazakh. I agree it is not just the languages, but that is an indication of the thought process.

I do not resist the notion that our expertise in this area is not what it was in 1990, but the fact that you mention eastern Europe along with Russia tells part of the story, in that in the 1980s we had a much bigger pool, because if you were based in Warsaw you had to think Sovbloc. If you were based in a number of European countries, that is what you would spend a lot of time thinking about, but that is not quite the case now.

Q39 Mr Baron: Sir Simon, can I briefly come back to you? I accept that expertise is there, and one is reverent towards it, but the fact is we fundamentally misunderstood—did not read—the intention behind President Putin’s stated objections. Why did we get it wrong?

Sir Simon Gass: I think, to be fair, successive British Governments have been a lot more transactional with Russia over a number of years—than the idea that we believed in some community of values. It is true, of course, that Russia was playing a different role on the world stage in different areas, where, in cases, our interests collided, but you only have to think back to the Litvinenko case, which was a pretty clear indication of the way in which these things can evolve, and the measures the then Government took in response to that. So I would resist the notion that we have been completely naive about Russia, because I don’t think that is accurate.

Mr Hammond: This is a comparative game, and if you look across Europe at how different countries have handled their relationship with Russia, I think, with the benefit of hindsight, we have done rather better than some.

Q40 Mark Hendrick: Foreign Secretary, has the Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Co-operation and Security Between NATO and the Russian Federation lost its relevance? Should it be repealed? Should restraints on the location of NATO troops be lifted?

Mr Hammond: First of all, the Russians have clearly breached the Founding Act. In our judgment, the reassurance measures that we wish to take can be delivered without breaching the restrictions in the Founding Act on the permanent basing of substantial troop formations in the new member countries.

Q41 Mark Hendrick: Is there any reason why you should not breach that?

Mr Hammond: The first is, from a purely military point of view and looking at what we want to do—the efficient utilisation of military forces—to rotate relatively small numbers of troops through for training purposes and to create pre-positioned stocks of equipment—forward deployment hubs—that we would deploy to in an emergency. All of those things can be done within the restrictions of the Founding Act. We have made the judgment that, if there is no practical need to breach the restrictions in the Founding Act, there is value in maintaining the moral high ground and continuing to observe the rules-based system that the Founding Act put in place, as well as continuing to remind the Russians that they have breached it.

Q42 Mark Hendrick: Are you talking in particular about the Rapid Reaction Force and what was discussed at the NATO summit?

Mr Hammond: Yes—the reassurance measures, including the Rapid Reaction Force, the spearhead forces and how they will operate in eastern Europe. There are no NATO members, and certainly not the UK or the United States, who wish to position significant numbers of troops on a static basis in eastern Europe. That would not fit with our model of training and using our forces to be highly mobile and flexible. It is a Cold War-type model that just does not fit the way we do things any more.

Q43 Mark Hendrick: Okay. There is some uncertainty among fellow member states as to whether Article 5 could have been invoked in response to events in Crimea or anywhere else in Ukraine. If Ukraine had been a NATO member, a lot of what Russia has done—cyber attack, economic destabilisation, psychological warfare, the use of volunteers and retired troops, soldiers

suddenly getting lost in eastern Ukraine—really could not be pinned down to Article 5. Had Ukraine been Latvia or Lithuania, it could have been a very different situation. How do you respond to that?

Mr Hammond: Ukraine is not, of course, a NATO member, and therefore Article 5 does not apply and has never at any time come into the equation. The Baltic states are NATO members, and they benefit from the collective security guarantee that Article 5 offers. You are, of course, right; I have sat in this very chair on a number of occasions, discussing with the Defence Committee the challenges that emerging technologies like cyber present to the various legal definitions involved in war fighting and military operations. In many countries, including the UK, an active debate is going on about how to address cyber in particular, but also the other areas you mentioned, in the context of where the boundary lines are drawn in the international legal system, which governs permissible responses to aggression.

Q44 Mark Hendrick: Surely, Foreign Secretary, we need a bit more than debate. If President Putin can say to Mr Barroso over the phone, “I can be in Kiev in two weeks,” I am sure he could be in Latvia or Lithuania within four, five or six weeks. Some of these techniques may be used prior to an entry into Latvia or Lithuania. A debate in the next few weeks will not sort that out. Do we not need a quick change or reappraisal of Article 5 in order to stop what we have seen in Ukraine?

Mr Hammond: No, we do not need any reappraisal of Article 5 at all. What we have to do is keep our thinking up to date as military technology—the technology of war—changes; this will not be the first time we have done it. That is true in any legal field. The legal thinking has to keep pace with the reality of the technology and we have a whole new domain of warfare now called cyber, which did not exist a decade, perhaps even half a decade, ago. There is a process under way of thinking through how these different legal doctrines apply in the domain of cyber.

Q45 Mark Hendrick: You are speaking about the domain of cyber, which is considerably more clear-cut, but I mentioned psychological warfare, economic destabilisation, the use of volunteers and retired soldiers—those are grey areas, surely.

Mr Hammond: They are grey areas and this—what the Russians call hybrid warfare—is a challenge to us. Again, I am rehearsing territory that I covered in my former role. One of the challenges for the West—NATO—is that we are a grouping of democratic and open societies. We cannot do deniable warfare, proxy wars and veterans fighting campaigns. We cannot do that kind of thing. We have to find a different way to respond to the tools that Russia is using. Russia is using its relative advantages, one of which is that it can do non-transparent stuff.

Q46 Mark Hendrick: That is what I am saying, so what are you going to do about it?

Mr Hammond: We have to use the relative strengths that we have and we have demonstrated them in respect of the Ukraine. Our big comparative strength is the resilience of our collective economy in the West, which is far stronger, bigger and more resilient than the Russian economy, which suffers from significant structural weaknesses.

Q47 Mark Hendrick: Will that stop the annexation of eastern Ukraine?

Mr Hammond: I have said that I don’t think that we have enough evidence to speculate on whether annexation of eastern Ukraine is an objective of the Kremlin or not, but I can

confidently say that we have an asymmetric capability in the application of economic and, particularly, financial sanctions where Russia is not able to respond in a symmetrical way because of the difference in structural strength and size of our economies.

Q48 Chair: While we are talking about Article 5, can you give us an update on what is going on in Estonia at the moment?

Mr Hammond: We are in touch with our Estonian colleagues. There is little more to tell than what has already been published in the news media. An Estonian official remains in custody in Russia and the Estonians are continuing to negotiate and discuss with the Russians to get him released and returned to their custody.

Q49 Chair: If militias came over the border in the way that they had done in Ukraine, might that invoke Article 5?

Mr Hammond: Article 5 would allow a member state to call upon the other member states if there were a military threat to its territory. As I indicated in my answer to the previous set of questions, there will of course be a large number of lawyers poring over the specific circumstances of any particular threat to identify whether it meets the criteria for triggering Article 5.

Q50 Mike Gapes: At the NATO Summit last week, there were obviously discussions about arming—providing weaponry to the Ukrainian Government. The Prime Minister’s statement yesterday mentioned that some NATO partners were providing weaponry to Ukraine. I saw a list of five or six countries. The UK was not among them. Why not?

Mr Hammond: The UK does not believe that there can be a military solution to the conflict in Ukraine. Ukrainian forces made significant gains over a period of weeks after the MH17 incident. We have seen over the past two weeks that Russia will not allow those gains to stand and that they were a pyrrhic victory. They were met with the response of further illegal incursion by formed Russian units. We do not want to encourage the Ukrainians to believe that there can be a military solution to this conflict.

Q51 Mike Gapes: But other NATO partners—Norway, the United States, France, I think, and others—clearly take a different view.

Mr Hammond: This is a bilateral issue; it is not a NATO decision. The UK takes the view that it would not be able to supply military equipment, given our own stringent export controls on military equipment, in the current circumstances. It is a conflict theatre.

Q52 Mike Gapes: But other EU member states are taking part in this.

Mr Hammond: I am aware of other EU member states that are certainly talking about the possibility of supplying equipment to the Ukrainian armed forces, but we should distinguish between the supply of equipment immediately during the period of conflict and discussions about supply contracts, where delivery would take place at some future point.

Q53 Mike Gapes: Why has it taken us so long and proved so difficult to get agreement within the European Union on effective sanctions and action against Russia over Ukraine?

Mr Hammond: I am not an experienced hand at EU negotiation, coming new to this, but those who are tell me that this has been a lightning-speed response. The EU, particularly galvanised by MH17, has moved relatively swiftly to impose sanctions that, frankly, were far stronger and more effective than many predicted. The signals, as we read them, are that they were far stronger and more effective than the Kremlin ever expected.

Q54 Mike Gapes: Is it not the case that several European countries have said that they would be shooting themselves in the foot, to quote a Hungarian Minister, to bring in sanctions against Russia, because of dependence on gas and oil and trade with Russia? On the other hand, we have got our oligarchs in London, with their massive amounts of money in our banks.

Mr Hammond: Of course, you cannot impose economic sanctions without inflicting some pain on yourself. We have been up front from the beginning that they will cause some pain. The financial sanctions in particular will impose some cost on the financial markets in London. Different EU countries have different tolerance levels for absorbing that pain. You have also put your finger on an important strategic point. Both sides have learned a lesson over the past few weeks. Europe has been reminded of how vulnerable it is in certain areas to Russia, particularly energy supply. There is a lot of talk at the moment about the need as a strategic agenda—not over the next weeks or months or even the next couple of years, but over a decade or more—to have a clear and effective programme to reduce our collective dependence on Russia as a supplier of energy.

It is also clear that the Russians have been taken aback by their dependence on western economic systems and, in particular, things such as our payments clearance systems. They, too, have resolved in the heat of the moment to invest whatever it takes to reduce their economic dependence on the West, so I think we have both been reminded of that interdependence, and certainly, I would advocate that the EU should, as an important strategic agenda, seek to reduce the dependence of EU countries on Russian gas—not because we do not want to buy Russian gas, but because at the moment, we have a dangerous overdependence on a single source of supply. That could be disrupted by design, but it could also be disrupted by technical problems or some other event happening within Russia.

Q55 Mike Gapes: Are there any lessons to be learnt, both by the European Union and by our own Government, about the way the handling of relations with Ukraine over the EU association agreement developed last year? Was there an underestimation of the hostility of the Russian Putin Administration towards not just Ukraine signing the association agreement, but prior to that, are there any lessons to be learnt from his effective scuppering of the Armenian association agreement in September last year? Was that not a warning that we could have taken on board at that time?

Mr Hammond: It is important that we put this in context. These negotiations started six or seven years ago and Russia did not raise objections to them at the time, when Yanukovych was in control in the Ukraine. If you remember the sequence of events, we got right to the point where Yanukovych was contemplating signing an agreement with the EU when events began to spiral, so I think it would be wrong to see this as the West, or Europe, having failed to read signals. I do not think Russia was sending any signals for the first six years of that seven-year negotiation.

Q56 Mike Gapes: But is it not true that, in 2013, they made enormous efforts by offering lots of money to Armenia, for example, so that President Sargsyan changed his position over one weekend in September, without even consulting his Government or his Parliament? Did Russia apply exactly the same pressure and the same arrangement with Ukraine? Was that not clearly something that happened with regard to Putin's attitude? What was that?

Mr Hammond: Yes, but I do not know what it was. I am afraid I do not control or have access to what goes on in Mr Putin's mind.

Q57 Mike Gapes: Would you like to speculate as to why the Russians took this position?

Mr Hammond: What I would say is this: the EU entered in good faith into negotiations with the Ukraine over a long period of time. This was not some rushed deal to try and spite the Russians; it was a long negotiation. Russia did not raise objections while its man was in control in Kiev, and I think we have to be very careful about any suggestion that we would allow Russia a veto over the relationships that sovereign independent countries want to negotiate with a bloc like the EU.

Sir Simon Gass: I was just going to add that it also came as rather a surprise to President Yanukovich, who was, after all, very close to Moscow at that stage. He did not expect that degree of resistance because, as you say, he was coming to Vilnius expecting, probably, to sign the agreement.

Q58 Mike Gapes: So would you like to tell us why you think the Russians took this view?

Chair: That is the last question, Mike.

Mr Hammond: Well, the only logic is that the Russians expected to be able to control the situation by one means or another. When they sensed, perhaps, that they were losing the lever of control that they thought they had through the regime in Kiev, they became more concerned about the agreement being signed, but we can only speculate.

Sir Simon Gass: It may also be, of course, that President Putin did not actually think that we were going to get to Vilnius and get a signature out of Ukraine. You may remember that at that time, there was quite a lot of talk of conditionality of different types on Ukraine, and part of the question was whether the European Union was going to be prepared to sign the association agreement with Ukraine, because of the various bits of conditionality around reform, which had not been met at that stage—possibly.

Q59 Mr Baron: Very briefly, Foreign Secretary, can I just bring us back to NATO's response and the nature of it? Quite rightly, there has been lots of talk about defence spending of 2% and so forth. Do you think NATO also needs to address another issue, in that it needs to be able to have a comprehensive response to the sort of tactics we have seen by Russia when it comes to the use of militias? It is a grey area, and I am not sure that NATO has thought this through. In answering that question, could we also, if you don't mind, Foreign Secretary, have absolute clarity? If similar tactics were used in Estonia by the Russians to what we have seen in the Ukraine, and the Estonians tried to invoke article 5, would we stand by that?

Mr Hammond: Article 5 is very clear, and if an armed attack took place—

Q60 Mr Baron: By militias?

Mr Hammond: Well, that is not what has happened in Ukraine. We have seen formed Russian units pouring over the border into Ukraine. That has been very clear in the final stage of that campaign.

Article 5 itself is clear, but there is a question, which I think I have already addressed—I have certainly explored it with the Defence Committee—about where you draw that line in international law that permits a military response. We are not talking just about article 5 here. We are talking about a broader question of what kind of attack on a state constitutes armed aggression that entitles the victim to make a military response, and that is a debate that is happening here, in the United States and in various fora around the world.

I reject the idea that NATO is not thinking about this. I have raised it at at least the last three NATO Defence Ministers meetings that I have been at, and it is increasingly on the radar, driven by the awareness that a major cyber attack can have a very destabilising effect on a nation not dissimilar to the effect of, say, a limited air strike. However, as yet, we do not have a clear and internationally accepted answer to the question. I suspect that the nations of the world will have to define what in the cyber domain constitutes an armed attack that justifies a military response at some point in the future.

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

On resuming—

Chair: Order. We still have a lot of questions to ask, and the Foreign Secretary only has 25 minutes left. We may have to cut out a chunk—I will have a look at that as we get going. I would be grateful if colleagues could be brief with their questions and perhaps, Foreign Secretary, you could be focused in your answers. We move now to Libya.

Q61 Mr Baron: Foreign Secretary, it looks as though we have civil war yet again in Libya. Most western embassies in Tripoli have been closed. It has got to the point where the Libyan Parliament is now taking refuge in a Greek car ferry in Tobruk. The House of Representatives also called very recently—last month—for a new foreign intervention to protect Libya’s civilian population from militias, as civilian casualties are through the roof. Do you think Libya is at a breaking point? If so, would the West even countenance the House of Representatives request?

Mr Hammond: I’m sorry, I missed the last part of the question.

Q62 Mr Baron: Would you agree that Libya is at breaking point? If so, would the west—Washington, London—countenance the House of Representatives request for a further intervention to protect Libya’s civilian population?

Mr Hammond: I do not think I would use the term “breaking point”, but clearly the situation is very difficult on the ground. If anything, the evidence suggests that positions between the different groups are becoming more entrenched. If I may, I will invite Sir Simon to update the Committee on the conversation that he has apparently just had with Jonathan Powell, the Prime Minister’s special envoy, who is just back from Libya. That might be helpful.

Sir Simon Gass: Jonathan Powell and our ambassador to Libya visited the country a few days ago to see what the scope was for trying to arrive at some sort of political agreement

between the various parties. Of course, I do not for a moment underestimate the difficulty of this. There were some elements which suggested that the situation, while clearly grave, has possibilities. The fighting is probably not as bad as it was some while ago. It has died down in most parts of the country for now, but it could resurrect itself.

One of the side effects of the fighting is that there has been more or less a coalescing around two camps in Libya. Therefore, rather than trying to negotiate with a whole patchwork of different tribes and groups, there are probably more like two main parties with whom to negotiate. As you say, the Parliament in Tobruk is one, and then there is the alternate Parliament, which has been resurrected in Tripoli, clearly on an illegitimate basis. It is a very difficult situation, but there are some prospects by which a political process could be arrived at.

Q63 Mr Baron: Air strikes by the UAE, courtesy of Egypt, were quite a development—the strike on the Libyan Dawn. Do you welcome that development, Foreign Secretary, or do you see dangers from it?

Mr Hammond: I think we are always cautious about interventions of this nature. It seems to have been a limited intervention, but it was clearly partisan in support of one side in the conflict. Our approach is to try to bring the different parties together and to impress on them the need for an inclusive solution that will allow the various factions and tribes in Libya to co-exist peacefully and share in what could be significant prosperity.

Q64 Ann Clwyd: Do you think we have made the same mistakes as we did in Iraq in 2003, when we failed to plan for what happened after the military intervention?

Mr Hammond: The intervention in Libya was made in response to a pending humanitarian disaster. I think the intervention was right, and it saved many lives. We were always clear that it was going to be a limited intervention. There were not going to be boots on the ground, and there were no boots on the ground. It was strictly limited in its scope. We are often urged when we do things to ensure that the objectives are clearly defined and that there is no mission creep. The Libya campaign is an example of doing just that—defining the limits of what we were prepared to do, doing it and completing it. Of course, that has meant that the final resolution of the post-Gaddafi arrangements on the ground is still a work in progress and a matter of dispute.

Q65 Ann Clwyd: So you would not argue that we have abandoned Libya to its fate?

Mr Hammond: No, we certainly have not abandoned it. We are very much engaged with Libya. We are training Libyan Government troops in the UK at the moment. We have a prime ministerial special envoy who, as you have just heard, was in Libya last week seeking to broker some kind of agreement between the principal protagonists in this battle. We absolutely have not abandoned Libya. We recognise that Libya's stability is important to us, not least in terms of its role as a route for flows of migrants into southern Europe, which ultimately have an impact on us in the UK.

Q66 Chair: Can I move the subject on to Gaza and the Israel-Palestine conflict? How would you characterise the UK's role in introducing the ceasefire? What steps did we take to facilitate it?

Mr Hammond: Obviously, we welcomed the ceasefire. It was not the first, of course. We have been actively engaged in urging the parties to those talks to agree a ceasefire as a necessary first step. It is not in itself sufficient, but it is a necessary first step. We have not been direct participants in the ceasefire negotiations, but we have strongly encouraged the Government of Egypt in the role it has taken on. I visited Egypt shortly after I was appointed and met with Foreign Minister Shoukry and President al-Sisi to urge them to leave no stone unturned in bringing the parties to a ceasefire.

We continue to engage, both directly with the parties and indirectly with others who can influence them, to try to ensure that, out of the ceasefire, which has held for nearly two weeks, we get a substantive and meaningful negotiation that leads to measurable, delivered improvements for ordinary Gazans trying to go about their business. We want to see an easing of restrictions on them, increased flows of humanitarian aid, a resolution of some of the long-outstanding problems around fishing rights, payment of civil service salaries and so on, and the reintroduction of the Palestinian Authority into Gaza, which we regard as a crucial next step to allowing matters to develop further.

Q67 Mike Gapes: As you are very well aware, the Government's policy towards Gaza has been controversial. Your former ministerial colleague, Baroness Warsi, said it was morally indefensible, and the Deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg, has said that the UK's policy and response has risked damage to our reputation in the region. What is your response to those comments?

Mr Hammond: The Deputy Prime Minister said we have risked damage. He is making a statement of the obvious. Of course, whenever we take a position, we risk our reputation in some sense, but we are very clear that the resolution to the problem in Gaza has to be through a ceasefire, negotiations around improving the situation in Gaza, the reintroduction of the Palestinian Authority to Gaza and then a resumption of the broader discussion about a two-state solution as a final resolution of this very long-running conflict.

Q68 Mike Gapes: You do not therefore agree that the Government could have said more, or been more outspoken on the issues?

Mr Hammond: I am not sure what you mean by more outspoken on the issues. We have been clear from the outset that Israel has a right to defend itself. First of all, Israel has a right to exist, which Hamas still denies. Israel has a right to defend itself, but it has an obligation in so doing to comply with the rules of armed conflict and the principles around the protection of civilians, inflicting the minimum damage possible—

Q69 Mike Gapes: Have they done that?

Mr Hammond: Well, this is an area that there is a lot of noise about. There will need to be a proper examination of the conduct of both sides during this period of conflict. The one thing that we do know for certain is that Hamas launched rockets out of Gaza into Israel, aimed at the civilian population. That much is clear. Israel is conducting its own internal inquiries. To be credible with the outside world, there will have to be a significant independent element in those, but there will also be an international element. The United Nations Human Rights Council has established its own inquiry into the events that took place. We will encourage the parties to engage openly with that inquiry, and we will also be looking very carefully to ensure that that inquiry is itself conducted impartially.

Q70 Sir John Stanley: Foreign Secretary, I want to preface my question by saying that I have been to Sderot, the target of probably the largest number of Hamas rocket attacks, and I condemn unreservedly all rocket attacks against Israel by Hamas, which are clearly indiscriminate.

I visited Gaza after the 2008 Israeli attack on Gaza, and there I saw an entire industrial estate flattened and an entire hospital burnt out with phosphorous shells. Do the British Government consider that it is legitimate—against a terrorist target—to use military force against purely economic and employment targets and against key social service institutions and buildings like hospitals?

Mr Hammond: The law of armed conflict is clear, and the laws around humanitarian protection are clear. It would not be legitimate to target that kind of infrastructure, unless it was being used for the purposes of military activity. One of the accusations made is that Hamas, during this conflict, deliberately and systematically positioned offensive military equipment in areas of sensitive infrastructure, like hospitals and schools, and in areas of dense population, seeking to use members of the civilian population effectively as human shields. That in itself would be illegal activity. These are allegations. There are huge numbers of allegations on both sides. They must be investigated and what happened needs to be properly established.

Q71 Sir John Stanley: Can I just turn from buildings to people? If the Israeli Government believe that they have identified a particular Hamas terrorist, or perhaps one or more Hamas terrorists, do the British Government consider it legitimate to destroy entire buildings and neighbourhoods using air-to-surface missiles, tank shells and artillery shells, resulting in very substantial civilian deaths of completely innocent men, women and children? As a rider to that, speaking as a former Northern Ireland Security Minister, can I just add that if a British Government had dealt with a terrorist in Northern Ireland by using military force in the same way as the Israelis, I am absolutely confident that the outrage in the House of Commons would have been such that the entire Government would have been forced to resign.

Mr Hammond: You are probably aware of the rules about proportionality in response, Sir John. The question that you pose cannot be answered simply. For a military response in pursuit of a military target to be lawful, it has to be proportionate. It is not possible to make a generic statement about types of attack or types of response without knowing the full circumstances of each individual incident—it is not possible to make that evaluation. People can speculate, and they have, but what is now needed is a proper analysis of each incident that occurred. That will not be easy, but it has to happen.

Mistakes will be made in the prosecution of any military campaign; incidents will occur that are not justified. The question will arise as to whether such incidents have occurred by inadvertence, error or failure, or whether they have occurred as a result of deliberate targeting. There are many questions that will have to be answered in analysing exactly what happened over that period of time, but I do not think it is helpful to speculate and to seek generic categorisations of types of incident without knowing the details of the individual incidents in question.

Q72 Mark Hendrick: Well, Foreign Secretary, I would totally agree with you if there were just one or two incidents, but to get to a death toll of between 2,000 and 3,000 we are not talking about one or two incidents; we are talking about vast numbers of incidents. We have seen TV footage of ambulances being fired on and health facilities being attacked by tank shells. The idea that at some stage in future there is going to be some forensic inquiry that brings Israel to justice beggars belief.

Mr Hammond: If you do not mind my saying so, you have rather prejudged the case, haven't you? There are clearly actions by both sides that need to be judged.

Q73 Mark Hendrick: My point is that there is not one case; there are literally hundreds of cases, many of which were captured on film and many of which UN officials have given eyewitness accounts of. The Government have said that the death toll in Gaza was unacceptable, but the Prime Minister—

Mr Hammond: I said it—my words.

Q74 Mark Hendrick: Well, I remember what the Prime Minister said in the Chamber: he used every word other than disproportionate, and after repeated questioning. A death toll of 2,000 to 3,000 compared to 60-something on the Israeli side is by no means a proportionate response to the death toll or the attacks that we have seen on the Israeli side.

Mr Hammond: No, I am afraid that that is a mistaken understanding of the proportionality test. First, let me say that the level of civilian deaths was horrific. I said so on many occasions—

Mark Hendrick: You are stating the obvious.

Mr Hammond: It was outrageous, and we want to do everything possible to ensure that such a conflict cannot happen again. The proportionality test does not require us to look at the number of deaths on each side in the conflict; it requires us to look at the response that was delivered to each individual military action—

Q75 Mark Hendrick: I understand that, Foreign Secretary, but the point I am making is that if you look at the outcome as a whole, statistically at the very least the fact that so many people died leads one to believe that even if a fraction of those attacks were disproportionate, we would not have the results that we have had.

The point I am trying to make as well is that earlier in your responses to different questions—for example, on Russia—you were very eager to say how effective sanctions were in determining the behaviour, for example, of Russian forces and how they might behave in future. Why haven't the Government talked about EU sanctions and, what is more and within the purview of this Committee, the withholding of arms sales in the way we would have expected?

Mr Hammond: Because the Government do not think that in this case sanctions would be appropriate or effective. There has been a conflict, there has been a significant number of deaths and we deplore the fact that those deaths occurred. We have been very clear about that throughout. There are very clear legal constraints on the parties involved in this kind of conflict, and there are accusations on both sides of unlawful conduct, which need to be investigated. We cannot do that here in this Committee. We don't have the information. You are taking gross

numbers and extrapolating from them, but many of the rockets that were launched against Israel were intercepted by the iron dome system so did not cause casualties. That does not mean they were not unlawful. Their launch remained an unlawful act—every one of them.

Q76 Mark Hendrick: I condemn those rockets and the actions of Hamas, but if this was a boxing match it would have been stopped after the first round.

Mr Hammond: Well, Mr Chairman, we and many others would love to have stopped it after the first round. I assure the Committee that we spared no effort in seeking to stop it.

Q77 Mark Hendrick: My colleague, Sir John, has made the point that had he been a Minister, the Government would have fallen, or at least resigned, as a result of action like this. How the Prime Minister and you—

Mr Hammond: With respect, Sir John was referring to action by the British Government. We are not talking here about action by the British Government.

Q78 Mark Hendrick: The parallel was drawn with actions that could have been taken in Northern Ireland and actions that were taken by the Israeli Government.

Mr Hammond: The record will speak for itself.

Chair: Finally, Foreign Secretary, can we discuss Iran in the remaining few minutes?

Q79 Nadhim Zahawi: I know that time is tight so I will ask just one question about a number of issues that we can tackle. First, you are about to respond to our report. Could you give us a flavour today of areas where you may disagree with us? Secondly, do you think a settlement with Iran by November on its nuclear programme is becoming more or less likely? Finally, there was an announcement on 17 June that our embassy in Tehran would reopen. Nearly three months have passed. Why is it taking so long?

Mr Hammond: On the first question about the Committee's report, the Government's response will be published on 12 September—Friday this week. In general, we are in broad agreement with the report's findings. Not surprisingly, there are some differences of emphasis on certain points and one area that I could perhaps mention now is trade with Iran. The Government's position is that it is important that Iran sees agreement on a comprehensive deal as the means to restoring its trade relations, so we are not encouraging companies to trade with Iran. Of course, within the existing restrictions, it is for individual companies to decide whether they wish to trade with Iran, although it is quite challenging because of the scale and breadth of the restrictions in place.

On the question of the nuclear negotiations, they are at a sensitive stage and I do not want to do anything that makes them more difficult. Both sides understand the red lines that each other has drawn and I would hope that over the next few weeks there will be a determined effort by both sides to see whether more common ground can be found. During the United Nations General Assembly in New York, there will be particular opportunities for various bilateral and multilateral informal meetings to occur and for positions to be explored. We are clear that we want to see a deal done, but we do not want to see a bad deal done. It has to reassure the international community that Iran is not pursuing a nuclear weapon and that its

interest in retaining nuclear enrichment capability is purely directed at a civil nuclear programme. We are some way away from being convinced of that position yet.

Finally, on the embassy, it is our intention to reopen it, but we must ensure that it is done in a way that will provide proper protection to our staff and will allow them to go about their business and perform their functions effectively. Some technical issues still remain outstanding to be worked out with the Iranians. They are engaged in those problems with us and we do not expect anything in there to be a show-stopper, but there are processes that need to be gone through. We are also acutely aware of the fact that one of the principal purposes from the Iranian point of view in getting the embassy reopened is to have a visa service available in Tehran. We need to ensure that we can put in place an effective visa service when the embassy is reopened, or we run the risk of disappointing people in Iran who have been looking forward to the reopening of our embassy as an opportunity to make the obtaining of a visa rather more straightforward and simple. We want to ensure that the two things—the reopening of the embassy and the provision of a local visa service—go properly hand in hand.

Chair: Foreign Secretary, thank you very much. It is now 5.32 pm so we will stick to our side of the bargain. We have not asked you questions on Nigeria and Boko Haram, on drones or on the future direction of the Foreign Office generally. If we may, we will write to you about those.

Mr Hammond: I would be very happy.

Chair: On behalf of the Committee, I thank you, Mr Oakden and Sir Simon very much indeed.