



# Select Committee on International Relations

## Uncorrected oral evidence: Middle East: Time for New Realism - follow-up

Wednesday 2 May 2018

10.40 am

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Members present: Lord Howell of Guildford (Chairman); Lord Balfe; Baroness Coussins; Lord Grocott; Lord Hannay of Chiswick; Baroness Helic; Baroness Hilton of Eggardon; Lord Jopling; Lord Purvis of Tweed; Lord Reid of Cardowan; Baroness Smith of Newnham; Lord Wood of Anfield.

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Questions 1 - 13

### Witness

I: The Rt Hon Alistair Burt MP, Minister of State for the Middle East, Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

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## Examination of witness

Alistair Burt MP.

Q1 **The Chairman:** Minister, good morning, and thank you for being with us. We appreciate it very much. I believe that you have cancelled many other engagements to be here, and we appreciate that too.

I am obliged to note that this meeting is on the record. It is all recorded and there will be a transcript, which can be altered if you or your staff wish. I also remind my colleagues about declaring an interest when they put questions, if interests arise.

As you know, we published just a year ago a report on the Middle East. It was a broad-ranging report in which we recommended a number of policy changes for HMG and a number of possible policy resets. Since then, an enormous amount has happened in the Middle East, some of it good, some of it bad. The good bits are rather small but important: ISIS has been contained, if not finally eliminated. The bad bits, I am afraid, comprise a much longer list of developments, all of which are highly negative in their implication. I am thinking of the Yemen situation getting worse, Israeli-Iranian tensions rising, further complexities with the Turkish operations against the Kurds, Syrian chemical weapons use and retaliatory punishment. There is some criticism of UK strategy in the Syrian turmoil, and there is more trouble in Sinai. There is instability in Libya, with civil war continuing. The Gulf states are divided one against another and not coming together, and so on.

It is a sad list, and an authoritative commentator has said—this is a cruel remark, but I put it to you—that the UK is becoming a toothless spectator in this growing turmoil. Would you like to start by giving us your wisdom, because you are very much at the centre of this, setting out how you see the UK position in this changing—I cannot say improving—scene, and possibly speculate in a limited way on where we might go next and what might improve or what is bound to get worse? That is a very general opening question, but we would like to come in on various aspects of it, particularly the JCPOA, in more detail later. But let us start with generalities. Minister, the floor is yours.

**Alistair Burt MP:** Thank you very much. I am pausing only to put in my dentures in order not to be toothless in front of you all. Thank you for the opportunity to come before you. Talking with my team yesterday, I thought that I would want to open by saying “How long have you got?” Each question that you pose could keep us in discussion right through the day with complete fascination.

**The Chairman:** We realise that.

**Alistair Burt MP:** Your list at the beginning more or less took away my own sense of what I might have said in opening with a list of things that have changed and improved for the better but with a much longer list of things that are of concern. Without going through that list again—I am very happy to go through each and every bit—I tend to look at the areas slightly

geographically and work through them in that way. In northern Africa there is a bit of stability. In general, Mauritania, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and the Western Sahara are working through their different positions, but in some ways they are an oasis of stability in a very difficult area. Libya we know all about. Egypt has opportunities after an election process that would not necessarily have been ours; nevertheless, there is an opportunity for the Government there to take things forward. It is a key economic ally and crucial for the region. With regard to the Levant, Lebanon and Jordan are clearly feeling the effects of what is happening in Syria, but they are coping remarkably with an extraordinary refugee population.

The first response to the "toothless" comment is that we are actively engaged. Lebanon and Jordan are coping with their refugees partly because the United Kingdom has been so extraordinary in its support, with £2.71 billion-worth of support in relation to what has happened in Syria. It is supporting refugees right the way through the area, not just with food and nutrition but with education, health and opportunities for the future, with of course a determination for people to return. But clearly Lebanon and Jordan are overshadowed by that issue.

I am sure that we will come back to Israel, the Middle East peace process and the United States. Those are certainly areas of real concern, but our engagement with Israel and, we hope, with the Middle East peace process will be significant. I am not one of those who believe that the Middle East peace process should be considered very much as an afterthought compared with what else is going on in the region. Yes, the issues have been there a long time, but it cannot be managed. The position between Israel and the Palestinians is not a stable one in which the status quo will hold. It is changing, and changing for the worse. Accordingly, the United Kingdom has to be actively involved in efforts to resolve that issue, and we wait to hear what the envoys have to say.

On the Gulf, again, the United Kingdom's relationship with the Gulf states is hugely important. We are doing everything we can to support Kuwait in its mediation process with regard to the dispute in the GCC. It is a dispute that hurts all the friends of all the countries in the GCC. We are playing what part we can to help the GCC's work to continue. There was a recent conference at Wilton Park on the technical aspects of the relationship between the UK and the GCC. It was not an attempt to resolve the dispute. We cannot do that, but we can support those who are trying to work it out, and we can support the countries involved on the basis that a resolution is in all our interests.

On Iraq and Iran, we are playing an active part in relation to Iraq and have been a significant donor to its reconstruction—£300 million pounds of loan guarantees have been offered as part of the recent Kuwait conference. Iraq shows signs of opportunity for the future. Terrible lessons have been learned both by the outside world and by people in Iraq itself. A reconstruction now should avoid some of the mistakes of the past and make sure that the election process produces a Government determined

to support all elements of the community and not leave one or another feeling disadvantaged, with the seeds of conflict thus being there for the future. The UK is playing an active part there.

I am sure that we will talk more about Iran. I took very careful note, as did the Government, of your observations on Iran. I have been there twice since your report was published: first, for the installation of President Rouhani, and again just last Sunday in the light of what was happening on the JCPOA and everything else. There were good conversations with the MFA and an attempt to look forward.

Finally, we are trying to deal with what has become a much more acute issue in the region—the binary way of looking at almost every part of the problem. We are reaching a situation where almost inevitably everyone is squeezed into saying that they are on one side or the other, but on many of these issues we should not be. There is a middle ground. The United Kingdom's particular facility is to find that middle ground and to try to make sure that every single thing that happens in the region is not seen in terms of, "You're on our side or their side". That is when there is only a build-up of confrontation and no opportunities to find ways through to get the agreements that are needed. The United Kingdom needs to play its part in the choreography towards the peaceful resolution of these conflicts; it should not join in a dance towards something much more dangerous and disastrous.

We have reached into each and every one of the issues that you mentioned in your introduction. I do not think that the UK is toothless. I think that it is effective in giving diplomacy the best opportunities. We are not as physically active on the ground as we were in years gone by, but there are reasons for that. It is not always the best thing to do, but we have to be prepared to be active on the ground when we need to be, as was seen in the recent very carefully targeted strike in Syria in relation to chemical weapons usage. It is certainly a very broad picture, but as we go into each and every bit of the detail we will see that the UK is very actively involved, and hopefully for the best.

**Q2 The Chairman:** Minister, thank you for that. It is a broad but nevertheless very expert picture, because you are very closely involved, and we are grateful for it. In the next few minutes, we want to pursue in detail many aspects of the things that you have raised, but we have one more general question before we degeneralise. What is the UK's strategic mission in the whole area now that we see ourselves as part of the sheriff's posse, along with the Americans, in dealing with things, as we appear to do when we fired some missiles in response to the chemical use the other day? Or are we looking at particular British interests? And how does it work out in Syria? Whose side exactly are we on? Do we still believe that Assad is the man who must go? We find ourselves fighting against the Turks, who are supposed to be our NATO allies, in Afrin, because we are supporting the Kurds. We are accused of supporting some extremely violent jihadists with the Syrian rebel army against Assad. These things worry the public enormously. Is it possible to put in a nutshell our overall commitment and

mission for the area, before we get down to the details?

**Alistair Burt MP:** I am not sure that, in all honesty, it is possible to put in a nutshell. The truth is that it is almost impossible to be broad brush, because, as you will all well know, you can go through each and every one of the countries in my portfolio and find differences in each one in how they are handling common issues.

If we start from the point that 2011 was not an event in itself but the culmination of a series of processes that have been going on for some time and that will go on into the future, we realise how complex that process was and how the ripples of 2011 are still going on and being handled differently. This requires the United Kingdom to be involved in different ways in almost every one of these states. So it is very difficult. It is certainly true that it must be different from being there at the side of the sheriff with our badge on as deputy and the holster ready. That is not where we are. Equally, we are not simply standing on the sidelines as commentators moving into the pundit box in order to view events.

I would characterise it like this. The United Kingdom has extraordinary reach in the region. As I suspect we all know from visits, it is very humbling to be told in the first instance by those we meet, "You understand us better than anyone else", before they tell us, "And it's all your fault". So we are somewhere in between this. But we have a reach. Each and every one of those states believes that they have a particular relationship with the United Kingdom because of what we have been in the region. We sometimes have a less good influence, but very often we have a good influence. That means that they want us to help. We cannot decide things any more. We are not going to make the decisions for this region, but we ought to be able to make judgments in each and every case, either about what is and is not for the best or about what is least bad in the situation that someone is in, and play a part in moving towards a better resolution and choose our path with partners to reach that better resolution.

Our position in Syria, for example—to come to one of the specific points in your general point—has not changed markedly. We do not believe that there is a military solution for Syria that will leave it stable and secure for the future. There is a military aspect to what is going on that plainly the regime and its partners are winning, but that will not end the root causes of what happened in 2011 and will not create a settled Syrian society. That will be done through political resolution in which many parties have to play a part. We support the United Nations process, which is designed to reach that particular point, but we are not there yet.

The situation began in 2011 with an issue between the Syrian people and Assad. It began with peaceful protests and calls for reform, not for Assad to go, which the regime responded to with violence. That, together with Assad's determination to release Islamist prisoners in order to create a narrative of himself against terror, changed the nature of the conflict. It did not begin that way, but that is what it became. That complicated the issue, along with the rise of Daesh and everything else that we know.

The concentration on dealing with Daesh has involved a wider coalition of nations. In that process, we have retained our belief that, in the longer term, President Assad will not have the authority to bring his country to a position of stability, which was lost in 2011. We have moved our position, as the Foreign Secretary made clear last year, to recognise that in the shorter term President Assad will plainly play a part in a transitional period, as agreed by him and by the partners who have kept him in power. Longer term, however, we do not believe that that will be the case, and that is for the political process to resolve. We have to choose our pathway very carefully, but ultimately it is designed for the best and for the long-term future of Syria. It can only be decided by the Syrian people themselves, but we are playing as good a part as we can in the diplomatic processes for that future.

**Q3 Lord Hannay of Chiswick:** Minister, could I ask you about a country that you did not say a lot about in your introduction: Yemen? Do you share the view, which was expressed at a meeting in Parliament yesterday by Sir Mark Lowcock, the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs at the UN, that the humanitarian situation is better than it was when the blockade was in full force, and that a lot of humanitarian supplies are getting through, but that the priority now is to try to revive some kind of peace process, and that the appointment by the UN Secretary-General of a new special representative, a British national, Martin Griffiths, is an important moment? What are we going to do to support this UN effort? What, in particular, are we going to do, as the pen in the hand of what I believe is now called the pen holder at the Security Council seems to have been frozen for some time? Are we going to come alive and try to give the new special representative a better platform in order to work with the very, very tangled situation in Yemen?

**Alistair Burt MP:** Thank you. First, I met with Mark Lowcock before he came over to see you all here. We meet quite regularly. I agree with his assessment that the humanitarian situation is better than it was, but it is not simply a matter of the restrictions imposed by the coalition after it found missiles directed towards Riyadh by Houthi rebels. The missiles were being smuggled into Yemen in some way, which required restrictions on points of entry.

Yes, those restrictions have been eased, partly because the United Kingdom, again, has been so active in the UNVIM process to monitor goods in order to try to reassure members of the coalition that the world will play its part in avoiding the risk of them being attacked. But once goods come in, there is also the question of how they are spread around Yemen and issues of access. We have all noticed that Houthi-controlled areas have become more difficult to access. Of course, they take taxes from goods that come in in terms of finance and enrich themselves. They have been restrictive in relation to vaccines.

As well as being concerned about the access of goods and therefore the behaviour of the coalition, we have to be very clear-eyed about what is happening on the ground with the Houthis and the control that they are exercising over areas. The Omani Government have been helpful in trying

to liaise and mediate in this whole issue. They are a channel of communication with Houthis and others, which is helpful, and we are doing our best to ensure that there is proper access for the humanitarian goods that need to get in. Mark Lowcock's view is that this remains a very serious humanitarian crisis, both in terms of nutrition and the potential for another wave of cholera, which is very real. The United Kingdom is playing a huge part both in providing supplies and in working diplomatically.

On the peace process, again, there is a bit of an opportunity here. There is a reasonably settled view, which of course does not mean that it is right, that a military solution in Yemen seems unlikely. The Houthis are well dug in, and the coalition forces, who have been protecting themselves against attacks and are there at the request of the Government of Yemen, who are facing a major insurgency, are engaged on the ground, but many people feel that there is unlikely to be a conclusive military end to it—hence the determination to work through the United Nations.

The new envoy, Martin Griffiths, has a better reach into all areas than his predecessor did, although that was not the fault of the previous envoy. Judging by the first report or first briefing of the envoy to the UN Security Council a couple of weeks ago, he believes that there are the elements of a political proposal and negotiation, which he is working on. We are supporting him through the Security Council and are encouraging all parties to the conflict to take the opportunity of the new envoy to look at what can be achieved by way of a proposal and then move forward.

Our role is to talk very directly to the coalition, urging it to make the best use of the negotiation possibility rather than pursue the military solution. We use whatever contacts we have with the Houthi authorities to send the message that they too should take the opportunity to work through the new envoy. We speak to those who have partnered the Houthi, including Iran, and urge them to play their part in supporting efforts through negotiation and not to make the military situation worse or more difficult. In that way, we are giving all the support we can.

As far as the UN is concerned—although my knowledge of the UN compared with yours is negligible—the view that we have taken at the Security Council is that trying to put through a resolution which would not achieve anything or not get through is not sufficient. A recent presidential statement followed on from one over a year earlier. We believe that that is the best way to use the Security Council. I am sure you are all aware that there is a question about whether the UN Security Council is effective in the current circumstances. It has to be used extremely carefully. We believe that the use of presidential statements, together with backing the envoy, urging him to bring forward his proposals for peace as quickly as possible, is the right way to proceed.

**Q4 Lord Balfe:** I have to start by saying that my question in no way reflects the view of the Committee that you are in front of. In Damascus I was struck by the way in which the Christian and minority communities felt that they had some protection, even at the worst times of the Assad regime, which of course is one that you would not take home to mother. At what

point might we consider reopening a diplomatic presence in Damascus as part of the rebuilding of that country on the grounds that we could have a little more influence, possibly at the right time, particularly if we go in in concert with our European colleagues? I say "European", not "American".

**Alistair Burt MP:** We may touch on European issues in due course and I shall be happy to give the Government's view on those. I understand this argument, although it is not one that I share. The argument is effectively that, because the Christian community and other minority communities felt a degree of protection under the Assad regime, in some way they owe the regime something, and those outside who support minority communities should take note of that. I find that a little difficult to understand, because at the same time that the Assad regime was doing that, others were persecuted, tortured and killed for being political opponents. I do not find it comfortable to say that, just because I am okay, I am not too worried about the others. I am not prepared to support a British foreign policy built on that assumption.

The protection of minorities in the region goes well beyond that, as we know, and it is a difficult issue. When I was in Iraq at the weekend, I met representatives of various political communities, as well as religious and ethnic communities—the returned minorities in the country. The truth is that it is only the rule of law, which guarantees protection for all, that means that any minority is protected. You cannot have a situation in which one feels protected at the expense of another. That only opens the way to further conflict in the future. Unless a Government, a state, a region or a community protects everyone, everyone is ultimately at risk.

Accordingly, the sort of Syria that we must work for for the future is one where not only the Christian community but anyone who expresses a view against the Government of the day and wants to seek a different political path feels protected by the rule of law. That is where some who have followed this argument have perhaps been persuaded into a false assumption that, if only the Assad regime were strengthened, everything would be okay. Let us be very clear: I do not think that the Assad regime wants to see a mass return of the refugees who have left—people who will come back and want a different future. Therefore, the regime will be quite content to keep people outside Syria. They will want people who express the view that you have suggested to come back. So long as they are okay with the Government, the Government will be okay with them. I do not think that that is the future for Syria or the region, and I do not think that the United Kingdom Government should have any truck with that.

The future of Syria will be decided by the Syrian people themselves. That is absolutely right and we hope that the political processes and the UN process will lead to that. But we should be unequivocally on a path that supports freedom of expression, not violence or an engagement in terror or anything similar. Countries and regions should be such that people feel that they have a reasonable opportunity of expression, which means that things are not repressed and thus the pressure cooker does not simply re-emerge.

**Lord Balfre:** Do you feel that the opposition represents that in Syria?

**Alistair Burt MP:** The opposition in Syria is multifaceted. It contains those with whom the United Kingdom would have no contact whatever because their aims are inimical to the values that I have just expressed, and they also contain those who express the values that every single Member of your House would be comfortable with. What are we to do? I met the people who were on the streets in 2011, and I have met them consistently since then. They are the same people. They are not jihadists; they are not violent extremists; they are not the people whom the regime paints as the opposition. The situation is much more varied than that. That is why our process has been so difficult there.

Ultimately, I think that the Christian community in Syria and other areas ought to work for the protection of their neighbour as well as themselves. If they see that there is a risk to their neighbour, they should not feel content that, because they are okay, somehow they should leave matters be and simply let a repressive system run. There are hard choices here, but there is a risk that some have taken in relation to the communities. No Christian community in the region should feel unsafe or unprotected, but there are better ways of doing it than supporting a regime that picks and chooses those whom it tortures and throws into jail.

Q5 **Lord Grocott:** I was very pleased to hear you say in your opening comments that, despite what else is going on in the region, Israel-Palestine has not disappeared from the radar. I want to follow up on our report and the Government's response to it. A year was a long time ago—and it certainly was in Middle East politics. The Government's response included this phrase: "We welcome President Trump's strong leadership on the issue of Middle East peace". Times were a bit different then and I very much doubt that it was your pen that produced those words, but I put this to you. Since then, as far as the United States is concerned, obviously the big issue of Jerusalem has arisen. As far as Israel-Palestine is concerned—I suppose you could say this about almost any year out of the last 20 at least—numbers of Palestinians have been shot by Israeli forces, perhaps not all but a number of them almost certainly unarmed.

One of our unanimous recommendations then was that the Government should consider recognition of the Palestinian state. The Government were pretty lukewarm to that suggestion, to put it mildly, given that the peace process has absolutely stalled at the moment and, if anything, is going backwards. Is that something that the Government are committed to, and, in the absence of that, what else might they consider doing?

**Alistair Burt MP:** The short answer to your question is that government policy has not changed. The phrase used in the response—that the UK will recognise a Palestinian state when it is in the best interests of peace—remains the position. That position, as you can all see, is very fluid. It means that such a decision could be taken at any time, but that remains the situation.

On the issue generally, we are clearly many tweets away from when the Government's response to your report was produced. The phrase that you used indicated that United States policy was of great interest and might change from moment to moment. I suspect that a couple of months ago none of us in this room would have given much credibility to the idea that North Korea and South Korea would be talking in the way that they are. We would all have been extremely concerned about the confrontational rhetoric and everything that we have seen. As we all know, foreign policy remains a business where things can appear out of nowhere very quickly.

On the Middle East peace process, we do not agree with the movement of the embassy to Jerusalem, although I have to say that the response to it has been interesting. I remain very concerned that the response on the streets in relation to the Middle East peace process is sometimes at odds with what we hear from Governments. In recent years Governments have been working with the reality, particularly in terms of relationships with Israel. It is true that over the years the situation between the Palestinians and Israel was not always at the top of the agenda in any bilateral conversation. However, it is certainly well up there now, because the announcement on Jerusalem proved to be a bit of a catalyst for considering the issue. There is also the work of the envoys in the background and a recognition that, on the streets in the Arab world, the Palestinian issue remains very, very important.

When we had the incident last year at Temple Mount, or Haram al-Sharif, and people came out on to the streets very quickly, they came out not because the politicians had asked them to do so but because they knew how important things were. It was a spontaneous response. It put a flicker of recognition in people's minds that what had previously been largely a nationalistic and secular issue between the Palestinians and Israel in relation to land and a recognition of statehood also had a religious dimension in the region that could be kindled and could grow at any time—hence the need to seek to resolve the issue and not to believe that it can be pushed into the distance.

Our determination remains to keep saying to all the parties how important a matter this is and to urge the United States envoys to come up with proposals that we can all get behind. It is true that the US position in relation to MEPP has changed to some degree because of the announcement on Jerusalem. It does not open the way for them to be excluded from this process, because they cannot be and will not be, but it enables others to come in on the back of any proposals and to work with both sides, saying, "Within the broad parameters that are known, we can surely get something".

I persist in my belief that no good will come out of this issue not being settled, but all you can see is more misery for Gaza. We can talk more about that if you like, but Gaza remains a desperate situation. There is more hopelessness on the West Bank, as years of preparation for statehood appear to be getting nowhere. Both those situations can only give rise to something worse in those areas. By contrast, if there is an agreement

between the Palestinians and the Israelis, states that want a different relationship with Israel in the region will be able to get it. You plug the Israeli economy into the rest of the economy, where the demographics urgently require many more jobs; you take away the animus of both Hezbollah and Hamas in relation to their view of Israel and therefore of some of its partners; and you ease the tensions with Syria, Jordan and Lebanon. Only good can come out of an agreement. We should bend all our efforts to this as soon as the opportunity comes up. Into that at the right time clearly comes the possibility of statehood, which is something that the United Kingdom still very much wants to see in the terms that have regularly been set out.

**The Chairman:** Before we come to Lord Purvis's question, perhaps I could make a plea to my colleagues to keep the questions as short as possible because the time is precious.

**Alistair Burt MP:** I will try to truncate my answers but we could knock each and every one of your questions around for an hour.

**The Chairman:** You are covering them with great expertise, Minister, and it is very difficult to confine them to short sentences, but the shorter we can be, the more we will get through.

**Lord Purvis of Tweed:** Minister, I would like to follow up on one of your introductory remarks. Before I ask it, I refer to my entry in the register of interests. Ten days ago I too was in Baghdad—you mentioned that you have been there recently. It has been quite welcome to see the advances since our Committee report on both the military side and, now, on the reconstruction phase, and the election is now under way. I was able to get well beyond the Green Zone in Baghdad and see the improvements for myself.

Following the thread in our Committee report, I want to ask specifically about the opportunity that we have, beyond the security side, to support other non-state actors and to have a key role in the reconstruction in Iraq. What opportunities exist for the UK to open a presence in Mosul? That would send a very strong signal about co-ordinating our humanitarian assistance and our work with the British Council in supporting not only the reconstruction work but the reconciliation work. If successful in Mosul, that would provide a model across all the different complexities in the region that you have mentioned. Is that part of the consideration? It would reflect the broad thrust of our Committee report, which called for more of a whole-government response to the UK presence in the region, rather than just a piecemeal approach. In saying that, I pay tribute to our excellent ambassador in Iraq, who is very proactive and forward thinking.

**Alistair Burt MP:** Thank you for the question. In a way, the creation of a Minister for the Middle East—the same individual acting for both the FCO and DfID—is partly a response to one's own interest in bringing things together. I am very pleased to fulfil that role. It meant that when I was in Iraq last weekend, I was able to do both: I could have the political conversations, and I used the base in Erbil to go to Mosul.

Creating a permanent presence in Mosul may genuinely be very difficult. The costs of securing a post in that area are great. I hope to have a security team go with me to Mosul, whereas, as we know, the situation in Irbil is much more relaxed. There are considerable costs in setting up posts, but I found no great difficulty in getting from one to the other. We are active on the ground in Mosul through DfID and FCO personnel, and that demonstrates our commitment. It will be very important to be engaged in the reconstruction process there.

I visited two settlements in Nineveh Plains, where the United Kingdom had provided support, putting over £14 million into a UN pool fund. That is being used to assist the repatriation of people in the Nineveh Plains. Two and a half million people were displaced from there and 1.3 million have returned. There is a hospital serving a population of 500,000 and a group of 120 houses in a Christian enclave, which had been rebuilt, and DfID has been engaged in that. We are very present on the ground in playing a part in reconstruction. I am hesitant to suggest that at present we need a permanent base in Mosul, but, again, as the Committee will know and as I ought to make clear, there is a huge difference between eastern and western Mosul.

The worst hour I have spent in recent times I spent in western Mosul walking through the old city to the sacred al-Nuri mosque. It is as bad as anything any of you could possibly imagine. I said to one of the people I was with that all of us have had experience of and know conflict zones to a degree, and some are more dreadful than others, but what was shocking for me was to see the scale of the destruction. The old city of Mosul will not be reconstructed quickly. We are not talking about getting people back there in months; it will take a long time, and we are very heavily engaged. There are IEDs at every corner and dead bodies are still there, some with their suicide belts attached. This is long-term work and we should pay tribute to those in the United Nations Mines Advisory Group, who—again, with UK support—are working painstakingly through the rubble. There is a lot to be done, but the UK is very engaged there, with both DfID and FCO hats on, and I am grateful that you referred to it.

**Q6** **Baroness Helic:** Thank you, Minister, for your very good answers and for telling us what our Government's foreign policy is on these difficult questions.

**Alistair Burt MP:** I was well schooled in the past.

**Baroness Helic:** I was particularly taken by your description of the consequences of the actions taken by the Syrian leadership, presumably both militarily and politically, against its own people, such as torture, killing and persecution. Presumably we also take into account actions such as the use of barrel bombs, chemical weapons, torture and prisons.

Now that we are clear that our policy is to see President Assad and presumably the people around him engaged in the shorter term in playing some part in the future of Syria, what thought has been given by your department to establishing an ad hoc court for Syria in order for these

crimes to be addressed at some point in the future, so that someone at some point takes responsibility for what has been done to this country and to the people of this country, when you take into account the fact that almost half a million have been killed and millions resettled? You yourself talked about the enormous burdens that Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan have taken on in order to address this.

My second very short point is about Jerusalem and the American embassy being moved there. What thought has been given to working with our American allies to make a commitment to the Palestinians that their future state will also have an embassy based in Jerusalem?

**Alistair Burt MP:** I have twice met those leading the independent international investigative mechanism that has been set up through the United Nations for Syria. Again, as you will know particularly well, right from the beginning of the Syria conflict we sought to work with NGOs on the ground in the collection of evidence that at some stage in the future might be capable of being used in some international forum in order to prove accountability.

This is an exceptionally difficult process, and we are giving the IIIM mechanism technical support. I met this group once in Geneva and once in the United Kingdom; it had come over to work with lawyers here and see how it could create the structures.

In honesty, we are some way from reaching the point where we know what sort of court will ultimately hold people accountable. This Committee will know the structure as well as I do: the International Criminal Court, which is available for those who have signed up to a particular provision and is available in other circumstances only when the UN Security Council sends people to it.

Whether or not another court of accountability could be constructed is unclear at present. What has to be very clear, though, is that there is a determination on the part of the international community to hold people accountable. The list of crimes in the region is huge. In Iraq, again, the United Kingdom, with the Government of Iraq, has led a United Nations resolution to set up the appropriate investigative structures, and we are engaged on that now to deal with the crimes committed by Daesh. So the principle of establishing accountability for crimes has to be very clear.

The practicalities are extremely difficult, and we are yet to be able to overcome all that. What we have from the United Kingdom is determination with regard to that accountability, support for the structures and the technical processes that will be necessary, the financial assistance for those who will be involved in the investigation, and a clear determination to see that through. Only last week, Radovan Karadzic's appeal in relation to Srebrenica was heard, 22 years after the atrocities. It has to be clear that, even though the wheels of justice grind long, they still grind, and the UK is very determined on that.

On Jerusalem, the United Kingdom believes that the final status of Jerusalem has not yet been settled. It is not "off the table" as the United

States' statements have suggested. We are quite clear that Jerusalem is to be a shared capital, and if, at any stage in the future, the United Kingdom embassy is to move to west Jerusalem, there will also be one in east Jerusalem for a Palestinian state, I would imagine. That is our view. The final status of Jerusalem will be settled in the discussions that we hope will take place.

It would have been very interesting if, when the United States announced the move to Jerusalem, it had included something about east Jerusalem. Even when the embassy moves next week, if there was a further statement by the United States illustrating what it thought about the future, I think that would still be welcome in the region and an opportunity to move forward.

That is a matter for them. Our position has not changed in relation to that. Nor has our determination to use anything in this new opportunity which the United States has opened up, which does not close doors but raises further questions. There is a role for the United Kingdom and European and other partners to take part in that.

**Q7 Lord Wood of Anfield:** I want to follow your very clear answer on Yemen with a question about our relationship with Saudi Arabia and its role in the Yemen conflict.

Since 2015, we have sold over £4 billion of weapons to Saudi Arabia. The UN estimates that the Saudi-led coalition has caused well over 5,000 civilian deaths. I know it is a complicated situation, and I appreciate that it is very ingenuous of you to say that we seek an end to a military conflict that is going nowhere and is just causing misery. But how is it possible for our support for Saudi Arabia, which goes wider than just arms sales and involves military support and training, to be consistent with our peacemaking role in the region?

**Alistair Burt MP:** We have tried to be clear and consistent in this very difficult situation. As I referred to earlier, we take the view that the involvement of the coalition at the request of the Government of Yemen was a legitimate concern, and, as time has gone on, the understanding that elements of the coalition have also been under direct attack from Houthi forces has been clear.

Accordingly, not to stand with an ally being attacked in these circumstances and respond to the requests of a legitimate Government would seem strange. Our support has been designed both to help in the protection of those who have been under attack and to do whatever we could in the case of military strikes. We are not involved in the individual direction of targeting or anything similar. UK personnel play no part in relation to this. Overall training has been given to try to make sure that those who are engaged in the conduct of operations do so understanding international humanitarian law, the rules of engagement and the like.

The Saudis have set up an investigative system, which they did not have before, in order that, should there be strikes of concern that raise questions, there is a process that can be gone through in which they need

to report to explain what has happened and how. We all know that once a conflict begins, and even in relation to any engagement, there are occasions when things go wrong. The United Kingdom has had to admit this at times. We need a process to find out what went wrong in order to make sure that such things do not happen again. That is our determination in relation to those conducting air strikes in Yemen.

It is an imprecise process, as we all know. I do not think it is inappropriate for us to recognise the reasons why the coalition has been there, or to make the case, because it is rarely made, that there are two sides. The coalition did not begin this conflict in Yemen, which is often forgotten in the media and in the public comment. It is not unreasonable for us to understand the reasons for engaging, and at the same time to urge every effort to bring the issue in Yemen to a conclusion in a way that we believe is correct.

People must still protect themselves and take action to protect their forces, which is what the coalition is doing. I do not think it is inconsistent to say that even through this process the determination should be to work towards the political settlement that will end the need for engagement.

**Q8 Lord Reid of Cardowan:** What assessment have the Government made of the likely balance of forces in Syria post Assad? As you properly point out, the forces ranged against Assad include people committed to values that we would recognise and wish to nurture, and you have met many of them, but they also include people who will take absolutely anti-democratic stances—presumably people whom you do not meet. From numerous examples—from Iraq, Libya and so on—we have come to realise that, no matter how difficult it is to remove a dictator, assuring that pro-democratic forces replace that dictator and give a better position is in some ways a lot more difficult. Have the Government estimated the likely balance of such forces in a post-Assad scenario?

**Alistair Burt MP:** That is difficult. In a way, there is a constant assessment. I should be clear that the determination to remove those more extreme forces—those connected with Daesh—or a philosophy that we stand against continues. In Kuwait recently, the 75 nations engaged in the anti-Daesh coalition met to reconfirm that they were continuing with that. We know that those forces are still in Syria, and therefore that active work goes on. The Daesh forces have been pushed out of Iraq. What remains is a nucleus of those forces and other terrorist groups in isolated parts of Syria. In relation to that, again, the coalition against Daesh will remain active.

With regard to other aspects of Daesh's evil work and ideology, the United Kingdom is proud to be the host of the communications cell that is fighting against the ideology and the ways in which it is spread, and that will continue. But ultimately the determination is that those forces should be removed and that efforts should be made to prevent their re-emergence. At the same time, forces which can be considered as political but non-violent opponents and which seek a place at the table for a discussion about the future of Syria should be encouraged to do so, and we hope that the

UN process will support that. In the future we would all like to see a political settlement which takes that into account and ultimately gives the people of Syria the opportunity to choose the structure of government they wish to have.

I suppose the short answer to your question is that we would want to do everything we can to ensure that no forces are connected to Daesh or act contrary to international humanitarian values—the values of democracy and tolerance of religions. We want there to be no intolerance of religions. We would want other forces there to come together in a political structure to form part of the negotiations, which are now represented by the High Negotiations Committee of the Syrian opposition, led by Nasr al-Hariri. That is the Geneva process, and that is what we would like to see.

**The Chairman:** Let us now concentrate on the specific issue of Iran, Netanyahu and Trump, and the JCPOA.

Q9 **Lord Hannay of Chiswick:** On the JCPOA, we of course read your comments the other day and, personally, I strongly endorse what you said. Could we look a little into the future—not very far—to when President Trump takes a decision on, I think, 12 May? First, could you say a little about the contacts that have taken place in advance of that decision process between, I understand, the British, French and German political directors and their US opposite numbers about a number of issues that could be taken up with the Iranians outside the JCPOA? In terms of the decision on 12 May, if the President pulls out—that is a polite term; “reneges” is a more accurate word—of the commitments entered into in the JCPOA, can we take it that the British Government will stand by their commitments under the JCPOA? I am talking about their commitments with regard to both Iran’s nuclear programme and sanctions. Could you also give us some idea of how you think Iran would react to the US reneging on the agreement? Is there any prospect that it could stick with the agreement with the rest of the P5+1, or should we take literally what it is saying—that the agreement would be dead?

**Alistair Burt MP:** Another hour’s worth. I will take the questions in sequence. The United States has continually been concerned that the JCPOA agreement does not deal with what it considers to be three significant issues: first, the testing and involvement of ballistic missiles; secondly, the involvement of Iran in disruption throughout the region; and, thirdly, what are known as sunset clauses—what happens when the JCPOA comes to an end.

The efforts of the E3, as UK, Germany and France are described, plus the US have recently been designed to seek an accommodation with the United States so that it recognises that other states share its concerns about these issues but they are not, and will not become, part of the JCPOA but can be dealt with outside it. We have the same determination as the United States to do that. Our belief is that the JCPOA will not be changed in order to accommodate them, for two main reasons: first, the Iranians will not agree to the JCPOA being changed and, secondly, nor will the other parties to the agreement.

From all we know, it is not unreasonable to believe that the Iranians were correct in saying that if people had wanted an all-encompassing agreement that covered all these things, nothing would ever have been agreed—there would have been too much to be included in the agreement. In answer to the United States saying that it wants these things to be included, the Iranians can legitimately say that they want other things to be included, and we will end up with nothing.

The JCPOA does the job it was designed to do: it deals with the nuclear issue. Two-thirds of centrifuges have been destroyed, 95% of the Iranian stockpile has gone, and access has been accepted and agreed by the IAEA and certified as recently as February. All these things have been done under the agreement. The United Kingdom believes that it is possible both to keep the agreement and the work done on the nuclear side and to deal with these other issues. Efforts have been made to encourage the United States to believe that these issues can be tackled in the future, and it will involve direct engagement with the Iranians and the like. That is the process that is going on and we hope that the United States will agree with it, although we do not yet know.

In answer to your second question, the longer, diplomatic answer that you will expect me to give is that we hope that the circumstances do not arise in which the United States feels that it should withdraw from the agreement, so we cannot really say what the United Kingdom would do. The shorter answer to your question is, yes, we are going to stick with the JCPOA, because we think that that is the right thing to do. However, I still hope that the United States will be able to see matters in the same way.

As to what Iran will do, again, we are into the area where people are marking out their positions and saying what they need to say. Iran feels very strongly that it delivered some obligations in the process, and it queries the response of others on the relief of economic sanctions and other matters. I think that your Committee looked quite hard at this issue. Your recommendations indicated that you understood this process very well. You want to see more from the UK in our response to Iran and probably others. The Iranians' case is: "If the JCPOA goes, or the United States walks away, why should we stick to it? Why should we sign an agreement"—well, not sign it; it was not signed—"Why should we make an agreement that others walk away from?"

In a world where we want people to stick to what they have said, where international peace and security depend on multilateral organisations continuing, and where states have to make commitments and stick to them, even though that is sometimes difficult, ending an agreement like the JCPOA in the manner suggested by the United States would be uncomfortable. That is why we can understand why all the other parties want to stick to it.

We are as determined as the United States and Israel to make sure that the obligations in relation to Iran outside the JCPOA are worked through. Israel's determination as regards its security is a significant priority for the United Kingdom as well. What Prime Minister Netanyahu demonstrated the

other day was Israel's anxiety about the situation. We think that he made a case for why there should be a JCPOA, but his fundamental concern about Israel's security is shared by us all. That can be guaranteed only by constant work among all those in the region, including Iran, which needs to recognise that what it sees as its defensive position is not always seen in the same way by others. I think we have a role in trying to work with all sides to decrease the tensions there. The United Kingdom should argue strongly against anything that adds to the tension, as that would be a change in the nature of the JCPOA.

If we can keep the JCPOA, address the other issues and see how they can be used to de-escalate tensions, as each agrees that there is something they can do, we might be able to make progress, even in what seems to be an acutely difficult situation.

**The Chairman:** Minister, in the remaining few minutes that we are going to steal—we are cheating; we have already gone over an hour—there is the question of the UK's interests and friendships in the area generally and how we are going to push our own hard interests. Lord Reid has some questions on that.

Q10 **Lord Reid of Cardowan:** What moves have we made to strengthen links with potential friends in the region? You mentioned some of them in your introductory remarks, Minister. For example, what steps have we taken to improve relationships with Jordan, Lebanon or Egypt?

**Alistair Burt MP:** With regard to Jordan, you will be aware that the Prime Minister signed a new strategic partnership in December last year. That will go across government and will look at ways of addressing not only Jordan's immediate issues in relation to refugees but the long-term issues of strengthening trade relationships, the technical capacity to assist in its economic processes and the difficult steps of fiscal and economic reform that have to be taken.

On Lebanon, there is no such formal agreement but, again, there are clear contacts between us covering many of the same issues. We have been present at each of the recent conferences with the Government of Lebanon in Paris, looking at its economic future. I was present at the recent CEDRE conference. It is a question of providing economic and technical support on the issues that Lebanon has and, in return, getting a clear disassociation commitment from it that one of its parties to government should not be engaged in activities elsewhere in the region. That partnership, again, remains very strong.

I pay tribute, as I should at this stage, to all our ambassadors in the region. We have exceptional ambassadors in each of the countries that you have mentioned.

On Egypt, support has been provided through a recent loan from the World Bank for Egypt's education processes and systems. The Prime Minister rang President Sisi after the election to express her hope that his election success would be used to strengthen the country. She gave a very clear

statement that the United Kingdom's support in strengthening those institutions would continue.

I hope that what I have said on those three countries and on other links in the region has helped.

**Lord Reid of Cardowan:** Lord Chairman, I was remiss; I should have declared an interest. The institute that I chair is helping Lebanon develop a tech hub. I thought that I had better put that on the record, having asked a question.

**Alistair Burt MP:** Perhaps I could say just a tiny bit more on that. We developed a particular friendship with Education Minister Hamade, whom I have met a number of times. Just to give an indication of how he and Lebanon see us, he came over some months ago to talk to those involved in edtech—people in education with technical expertise. He knows that Lebanon needs to measure the quality of what is delivered in schools. There is a recognition throughout the region that it is not sufficient simply to get pupils into schools; the important thing is how they are taught, what they are taught and the quality of what they are taught. They need to be taught critical analysis and problem solving. It is no use producing more young people for jobs that are disappearing; they have to be prepared for the new jobs. In education particularly in Lebanon, we are developing a very strong partnership.

Q11 **Lord Jopling:** Minister, the one thing that unites the United States, Israel and Saudi Arabia is their mutual loathing of Iran. I was surprised recently to become aware—I am sure that you are aware of it—of a report in the Jerusalem press of a recent secret visit by a senior member of the Saudi royal family to Israel. There was speculation that it might have been the Crown Prince himself. Do you see any danger of those three states ganging up and taking measures against Iran which are much more belligerent than scrapping the JCPOA?

**Alistair Burt MP:** I spoke earlier of my concern about an increasing binary sense in the region—that you are on either one side or the other—through which prism every single piece of action is placed in one bracket or another. I worry that this inevitably leads to a process of confrontation rather than anything else. It is naive to suggest that Iran's actions in the region are not designed sometimes to unsettle its enemies and sometimes to provoke. As I said earlier, measures which one state sees as defensive or protective of its own position can be seen as a threat to another and therefore create the very threat that states are determined to avoid.

There are deep issues between the states that you have mentioned—Saudi, Israel, Iran and the United States—but, while the rhetoric might be significant, there are also elements in each of these states that recognise the danger of communications being closed and an inability to talk. In each and every one of these cases, there are people who talk to each other in a way that is familiar to a number of colleagues around the table here—away from the public gaze in order to try to find out what will reduce the risk of more cities ending up like the old city of Mosul, which I visited last week.

The United Kingdom absolutely has to play its part in encouraging those relationships to de-escalate whatever tensions there might be. That should be our job.

So, yes, the rhetoric can sometimes be strong, but we have to play our part in making sure that people see the risks of what they are saying and the risks of their actions. Those should be prevented—we should be clear on that—and opportunities should be used to create a rather different region.

**Q12** **Baroness Coussins:** I want to return to the topic of education, which you just touched on in relation to Lebanon. One of our conclusions—I am sure it is one that the Government strongly share—was that stability across the region can be assisted by strengthening educational opportunities and reforms. The British Council, not least, has been doing sterling work across the region, including with the refugee communities to which you referred earlier. What else, in addition to what you have already mentioned, can the Government do in Lebanon? Can you also say something about the educational opportunities the other way?

We recommended that Britain should do more to encourage students across the region to come to study in the UK so that we can get the most out of our soft power influence with people who might be decision-makers and leaders in the region in the future. We also recommended that we should stop seeing students as economic migrants and should remove them from the immigration figures. That is one recommendation that the Government continue to resist. I wonder whether, in the light of developments over the last year since our report and the need to step up our soft power influence, the Government might be prepared to look again at that recommendation in relation to students as economic migrants in the official figures.

**Alistair Burt MP:** I have enough to do with my portfolio in the Middle East without stepping into Home Office areas, particularly at the moment. I appreciate the invitation to step into this area. Again, as the Committee knows, we are the second most valued destination for international students seeking higher education. We have the second highest number of those coming to the United Kingdom. We are still strongly determined to bring the brightest and the best, and they come. Perhaps I could leave that technical aspect to one side. It is a current debate, as I know the Committee is well aware, but it is a Home Office position.

We want to make sure that our message is loud and clear in the way that the Committee would wish about the UK as a possible destination. I will turn to my notes for the first time because I have some figures. I think they will be helpful. The Chevening programme has funded 660 scholarships for candidates across the MENA region over the past three years. Many of us will have met Chevening scholars. They are the leaders of the future and they are terrific. Whenever I meet these groups, I tell them that they are the engine room for Algeria or Iraq—or wherever I meet them—because they are. They have been immensely influenced in the UK

and they are determined to bring good values to those they are working with.

Young Arab Voices was a British Council initiative. There is a £163.8 million grant in aid from the FCO to the British Council this year. Young Arab Voices has a question time programme—I have taken part in some of these—for Ministers and leading figures in Maghreb countries and by and large they are not used to this, on either side. This provides an opportunity for free expression from the communicators, the young and those in official positions who are answerable to them.

We supported a professional development programme for teachers, run by Goldsmiths. We have also tried to reach more groups through social media in order to help persuade them. There is an astonishing statistic from our ambassador in Egypt. We think there are 1.34 million people on Twitter in Egypt and he has 1 million followers. He describes it in an entertaining way. He talks about speaking Egyptian on Twitter and social media in order to engage people in a different way.

Your point about making sure that the United Kingdom remains an attractive destination is well made. The Foreign Office and DfID would like to encourage that. We still have programmes to encourage that. We support work by the British Council and the World Service. There are other opportunities in sport, music and fashion. The UK is involved right across the board.

On your specific technical question, again, I must refer that to others, but the large number of young people coming here is a good thing and you can be sure that in each and every capital we are doing our best to make sure that people know it is something that we value.

**Q13 The Chairman:** Minister, that is a marvellously detailed answer, as many of your answers have been. I have one final geopolitical question and then we will let you go. There are those who say that the Middle East and north Africa region and its problems are no longer just western questions. Obviously, we know the Russians are involved. The Turks are involved all over Syria and so on. The Chinese are also becoming much more involved with a forward, outward foreign policy in the area, and indeed have a major presence in many of the Middle Eastern countries, both through investment and increasingly in other ways as well. Is that understood in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office? Are we talking to the Chinese? Do we realise that these are becoming global issues and not just the old business of the West—America, Britain, France and anyone else who will join—riding out and that in this new digital age we have to reckon on everybody being involved, both peoples and Governments, on a scale and in a way that never happened before?

**Alistair Burt MP:** To my regret, the one conversation I have not yet had is with the Chinese representatives on Middle East policy. It is something we intend to correct. I have spoken to all the others, I think, and I look forward to re-engaging with Mikhail Bogdanov in relation to the Russian view of the Middle East, because I think that is important. To be true to

what I said in an earlier answer, we need to make sure that we have all the links open, even to those with whom we have difficulties—Russia being a very present one at the moment. Again, I do not think that, partly because of the policies of others in the past, we can ignore Russian engagement in the Middle East. That is important for me.

You are right about China. It just has not come up. I have not met the Chinese representatives at any of the conferences we have been to but I need to and I want to. You are quite correct: of course China has an influence and I want to see that the FCO is properly engaged in that. I know that directors have done so, so the short answer to your question about whether the FCO recognises this is: yes. But in my position I want that personal engagement. As we all know from our experience, these personal contacts really matter. I have been able to build up relationships, with the support of the Foreign Secretary and the Secretary of State for International Development, at my level with key individuals in these areas. My next port of call is the Chinese to understand how they see some of the issues. I recognise that there is a bit more to do. The Foreign Office does understand this.

Looking back at history and everything else, how our significant engagement with the Middle East started reflected its time, when the United Kingdom had the position it did and other states were not in the same position. That world has gone. It has changed. It has left a different influence for the United Kingdom, as I indicated. All of us know that humility, when we go somewhere and are treated in a particular way. That should not be just because of the past, it should be about our influence now. But that influence will be limited if we do not understand the influence of others. The world is not going to go back to where it was; it is going to go forward and the influence of others is going to be greater. We have to manage that. We have to make sure that the values we hold to remain important because not all those who want to enter into the situation may share our values. As I indicated before, we need to be involved with those who seek the opportunity to express themselves and work in a region where, although governance will vary, it will not be the same as the UK's. We cannot and should not insist on a governance system exactly like ours. It is absolutely vital to the security of the area and states that there should be consent to government and an ability to express opportunities for internal change, and we should play a part with other partners in looking at that.

I entirely agree with the Committee on that and, should I have the happy opportunity to speak to you again, I look forward to saying a little more about how my engagement with the Chinese has progressed. But they are partners for the FCO, the Committee can be assured of that.

**The Chairman:** Minister, that is an excellent way to end. This has been a marathon. You have served our purposes. That is extremely welcome and we are very grateful to you. It is a world of aspirations as well as realities and it sounds like the two have been married. You have covered both areas—what ought to be happening and what in the long term might be

happening compared with the very ugly realities before us. Thank you for striking that balance. Thank you for your comments and your detailed replies. We are grateful to you for such a long session. Thank you very much.