

THURSDAY 21 JANUARY 2016

Members present

Baroness Armstrong of Hill Top
Lord Balfe
Baroness Coussins
Lord Dubs
Lord Horam
Earl of Oxford and Asquith
Lord Risby
Lord Stirrup
Baroness Suttie
Lord Triesman
Lord Tugendhat (Chairman)

Examination of Witnesses

Mr Edward Hobart, Migration Envoy, Europe Directorate, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and **Mr Richard Lindsay**, Head of Security Policy Department, Defence and International Security Directorate, Foreign and Commonwealth Office

Q1 The Chairman: Thank you very much for coming this morning. There is a lot of interest in this subject, as you can imagine. It is, as I think you know, a public meeting and its purpose is to pave the way for the inquiry that we hope to do on Operation Sophia after we have finished the current inquiry we are dealing with, so it is looking ahead rather than a purely self-contained operation. You have received a whole list of questions, but my colleagues have a number of other questions as well, some of them arising from the most immediate news and some arising from the FRONTEX memorandum that we were sent. I will kick off. Can you give an update on the number of refugees and illegal migrants reported to have reached EU shores in 2015, and what can you say about the outlook for 2016, although I recognise at this stage that is subject to all kinds of known unknowns and unknown unknowns? Which of you would like to start?

Mr Edward Hobart: My Lord Chairman, if I may, I shall start by saying that, although I am from the Foreign Office, this is a multi-departmental area of responsibility. Indeed, much of it lies with the Home Office, which has supported me in providing some of the information. I shall be conscious and careful where I stray on to its territory, and make that clear as well. Upstream, DfID is, of course, an important player.

I am using primarily UNHCR figures to answer this question. Arrivals in 2015 across the Mediterranean were 1,015,078, according to the UNHCR. It may help you to know that the

breakdown is 48% Syrian, 21% Afghan, 9% Iraqi and 4% Eritrean. The great majority—887,000 of that number—came through what we call the Western Balkans route, crossing from Turkey to Greece, with about 150,000 crossing on the central Mediterranean route and a very few thousand crossing to the west in Spain. You are right to note great caution about forecasts. Two forecasts have been made public. The UNHCR estimates that one million refugees will cross into Greece in 2016, and the European Commission forecasts that three million will cross between 2015 and 2017. If you extrapolate from those figures, that would be about one million again this year, so they are fairly in line, but they are not based on a huge amount of back data, because that new route opened in the middle of last year. While people were previously crossing from Turkey to Greece, it was not in the kind of numbers that are occurring now, so we do not have a history of trends on which to base analysis, and new action is being taken to try to manage and address those flows. Again, those are very new actions, so it is difficult to know what impact they will have.

The Chairman: Thank you. Until the events in Cologne at the New Year, people tended to think of numbers and where refugees came from, and so forth, but since then a certain amount of attention has been paid to their gender and age make-up. Can you give us any sense as to whether unaccompanied young males have been an increasing proportion of the whole and are continuing to increase, or is it very difficult to have information about that?

Mr Edward Hobart: There is a fair amount of publicly available information. The UNHCR website is very good. It is a decreasing proportion, as it happens, but it still makes up quite a large number. Quite a large number of unaccompanied children are teenage males, so that is one particular demographic group, but overall there has been an increase in women and children crossing, and that will include quite a large number of males in their teens. Over the whole of last year, the demographic breakdown was 50% male adult, 19% female adult and 30% children, but that changed as time went on. For example, according to ECHO, the number of children crossing into Greece increased between December and January; currently it is between 28% and 35%. We are seeing a growing number of children, both accompanied and unaccompanied, and families travelling. We think that some of that is to do with changes in rules and regulations in European countries on family reunification, and some of it appears to be families travelling to join male members of the family who have travelled previously.

Q2 Baroness Suttie: My question was on main routes and main nationalities and has mostly been answered already. Could I ask a bit about the reliability of data? It is often said—in fact, we heard it at a different hearing earlier this week—that a lot of people are pretending to be Syrian. Could you say a little about reliability—about where people are coming from rather than where they say they are coming from?

Mr Edward Hobart: It is easy to agree that the data is subject to quite a lot of questioning, particularly on a nationality basis. On the total numbers arriving, the figures are probably in the right kind of ballpark. IOM, UNHCR and FRONTEX figures for arrivals in Greece and Italy, and for people travelling up through the Western Balkans, kind of match up. As to nationality, however, the vast majority are declaring as Syrian, Afghan or Iraqi: nationalities that are currently allowed to transit far more easily—indeed, their transit is facilitated through the Balkans—and are far more likely to get refugee status. We are detecting greater numbers of forged papers at the Macedonian border since the clampdown at that border on other nationalities getting through. A large number of people claim to be Syrians, particularly other Arab nationals. These forgeries are of the papers that they get on arrival in Greece, although how much questioning there is of their nationality at that point depends on when and where they arrive. I still think that the vast majority who arrived in the last year are

genuinely from those three groups, but the proportion has been going down and the number of people with false papers or who are falsely declaring their nationality will go up.

Another point where the data becomes inconsistent is when people claim asylum, primarily in Germany but elsewhere as well. Sometimes they claim asylum in more than one country. They do not in Greece or the Western Balkans, but they may be claiming asylum when they get to Austria, and they may claim asylum in more than one place in Germany as well. Some of those figures are a bit unreliable. They will eventually probably wash out because when people are claiming asylum they give their fingerprints. That information gets uploaded on to the Eurodac system and it should match up [identifying duplicates], but given the volume of claims that have been taking place in the last four or five months, I do not think it has fed through yet.

Lord Triesman: Some time ago, when I was responsible in the FCO for parts of the returns policy, one big problem was that a number of people who we thought were from Kenya would say they were from Mogadishu, for example; they destroyed their papers in transit. It was possible to interrogate that a bit better because the Metropolitan Police—the Serious Organised Crime Agency—was investigating the torso of a boy found in the Thames. I think he was called Jonathan. They found a whole raft of isotope measurements, DNA data and other physical stuff that is found in people’s pockets and so on. They were able to trace that boy to a very narrow valley—in Nigeria, I think—with just two villages in it. I make this point, Chairman, because although I recognise that doing that kind of testing on large numbers of people would be impractical, it might be possible to do it on a sample and to be very much more rigorous about where people were from. It can be done with much greater scientific precision in this country than we sometimes suppose.

Q3 Lord Stirrup: Closely allied to that, my question, in a similar vein, is: how competent is FRONTEX at analysing incoming people? For people coming from war-torn places such as Syria, documentation is a problem anyway, so it is an extraordinarily challenging prospect to try to filter them, especially when you add the numbers involved, but now it is being dealt with by FRONTEX. We have been talking about the reliability of the data. How much reliability can we place on the source of that data, the FRONTEX analysis and investigation itself?

Mr Edward Hobart: Huge numbers of genuine Syrian passports, coming out of Damascus, are available on the black market in Turkey and Greece, in which you can put your photograph and your name. Fraudulent documents are a major problem. Our immigration services, and indeed many others in Europe, are pretty good at being able to interview people and detect whether they are genuinely from where they say they are from. Without even having to go to that scientific forensic level [as described by Lord Triesman], we are pretty good at determining whether people are honest about where they declare they are from, including where they are from within Syria; we use native speakers to ask the right questions, to ask questions in dialect, et cetera. That is what happens in the UK, where we have manageable numbers of people claiming asylum, but when you are talking about 887,000 arriving in Greece, it has not happened and is not happening. It will happen occasionally; we have deployed interpreters and interviewers both to FRONTEX and, through the European Asylum Support Office, to the Greek islands. If they have the opportunity, they can detect some of those people and whether they are genuine or not, but it has not been happening with the vast majority of people who are arriving. At the moment there is more opportunity, with around 2,000 arriving a day. Indeed, two days ago only 32 people arrived because the weather was particularly bad. That provides an opportunity for those resources—Greek, FRONTEX and Member States’ in support of the Greeks—to do

that kind of interviewing at the moment, but generally speaking it has not been happening. My understanding is that the majority of people say where they are from; they have a very quick conversation and there is not a great deal of interrogation of that. The opportunity is there now, while the numbers are down a bit, to try to grab firmer control of the situation.

Baroness Armstrong of Hill Top: I want to follow that up with a couple of things arising from the Paris attacks. A lot of people in my area were very shocked that there seemed to be so little sharing of information between different countries about who was arriving where and what was happening, and so little co-operation on security issues. Is that developing now, because it is obviously part of the whole thing?

Mr Edward Hobart: I will not answer that question too extensively as it is slightly beyond my remit, but the short answer is yes, and as a sad consequence of the attacks in Paris there has been a lot of pressure at the JHA Councils in Europe to improve the sharing of data and to overcome legal and national obstacles. For example, the Council has pushed through things on Passenger Name Record data on aircraft, et cetera; the European Parliamentary committees have agreed to better co-operation on passenger data, which is one of our key objectives in Europe. As to sharing the fingerprint data, which is being collected slightly better now than it was in Greece, fingerprints are being taken, but not enough are being uploaded to Eurodac, which is the asylum database. There are still obstacles to sharing data that is on one database for immigration purposes, with other databases that are there for criminal purposes, but the UK and other like-minded countries, including France, have more opportunity to push people on that front, given what happened in Paris.

Q4 Lord Horam: The European Union has been trying to reach agreements with non-European countries on how to manage the flows; as you say, it is very difficult to pin them down, and we hope that during this quieter period they may be getting a better grip. How do you see the situation as regards the sorts of agreements that are trying to be reached, or have been reached in the case of Turkey and Libya, et cetera?

Mr Edward Hobart: Probably the most important one in the current crisis is with Turkey. The first thing to say is that to expect the Turks to be able to deal with the 2.5 million Syrians who have sought refuge in Turkey plus the hundreds of thousands of other nationals who come mainly from the eastern and northern borders is quite a big challenge. We should not expect the Turks to be able to turn off the tap. There is some expectations management required. I know that the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary are very keen that that expectation is understood. Having said that, the Turks have taken quite a bit of action on the EU-Turkey Action Plan, which was agreed at the end of November. For example, they have passed legislation to allow Syrians to work in Turkey, which should make it a better place for Syrians to stay and then to be able to return from when, hopefully, we have a better environment in Syria. There is a clearly stated ambition by the Turkish leadership to get Syrian children, and indeed all Turkish children, into proper schools, which will be a priority also for the—

Lord Horam: Are they able to do that?

Mr Edward Hobart: I do not have the figures here, but they have hundreds of thousands in schools already, and about half the Syrian children [in Turkey] are in schools.¹

Lord Horam: In Turkey.

¹ Turkey is providing education to 310,000 Syrian children and has committed to enrolling 460,000 Syrian children by the end of this school year.

Mr Edward Hobart: In Turkey. The main constraint is physical, and we have identified a potential use for the €3 billion refugee facility, which the European Union is putting forward, is to secure the infrastructure for the rest of those children to get into school, plus 200,000 Turkish children who are not in school at the moment. That is a realistic and not a long-term ambition. The target is to achieve that for the new academic year, which is like ours, after the summer.

The work permit legislation has now passed through the Turkish parliament. The Turks have deployed more police on the borders, they have taken action to stop the sale of rubber dinghies in some places and they have arrested 1,800 facilitators in the last few weeks. There are things that the Turks are doing and there are things that they are expecting from the EU in return, not only the [refugee] facility but summits and progress on visa liberalisation, which is a Schengen thing rather than a UK thing.

Lord Horam: How about Libya?

Mr Edward Hobart: In the short to medium term, alongside action in Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon, it could have the biggest impact on migration flows and is therefore worth a great deal of attention rather than some of the other action upstream in African source countries, which we should be doing but which may not have such immediate impact. It is a very challenging environment. The Government of National Accord, or the progress towards one—although I think they missed a target at the weekend; Richard can update me on that in a minute—will provide a potential partner. We believe that working with municipalities may help to tackle some of the smugglers and therefore departures from Libya. We think absolutely that it is an important area of action, but a very challenging one given the security situation in Libya.

Lord Dubs: I should probably have asked this in an earlier question, but here goes. How many of the Syrians reaching the EU have previously been in camps in Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon, and how many of them have simply fled Syria, not having been in camps?

Mr Edward Hobart: That is an important question in understanding where to take action. I have something on that; let me have a quick look. The answer is that the majority are not coming from an established presence in Turkey, or even in Jordan and Lebanon, although we want to make those places easier to stay in. Most, when they are interviewed, have spent between one and three months on their journey from Syria. According to UNHCR, 37% of interviewees stated that they did not reside in a third country before coming to Europe. In addition, 18% stayed between one and three months. The journey from northern Syria to Greece can be a couple of days. Over 50% say that they spent either between one and three months or that they came directly from Syria, so our action in Syria to make Syria more hospitable is also important. There are smaller numbers coming from third countries via Turkey. An important action the Turks took last week was to put a visa regime in place for Syrians coming from third countries, so if you arrive in Turkey from Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon or Jordan, you no longer have visa-free entry. That is also a way of controlling flows.

Lord Dubs: Of the ones leaving Syria, from which territory are they leaving—government or occupied? You said they are leaving northern Syria for Greece.

Mr Edward Hobart: We have seen a greater flow from the Aleppo area since the Russian bombing, but I do not have a detailed answer to that question. I do not know how much data we have on it, but I can take it away and see if there is more that we know.

Earl of Oxford and Asquith: I would like to dwell a bit more on what you were saying about the arrest in the last two weeks by the Turks of facilitators and about its taking just

two days to get from Syria to Macedonia. Do you think that the economics of the Turkish and other refugee industries, to put it in a general sense, are likely in fact to prove much stronger than the political commitment—implicit or otherwise, bearing in mind all the Turkish Government's problems—to stem the flow? How can the actual sanctions against criminal activities be maintained?

Mr Edward Hobart: I think we are going to see an increase in criminal activity. At the moment across that route we do not see large-scale organised crime groups. We see plenty of activity that is in the grey market or illegal or irresponsible—for example, the selling of lifejackets and rubber dinghies in Turkey—but it is not necessarily organised crime, although there are elements of organised crime. We took apart quite a large organised crime group smuggling Syrians into the UK and Germany in December, and I asked our NCA people what their business model was. Given the fact that you could travel pretty rapidly through that area without paying, why were people paying thousands of dollars or euros to a criminal group? Part of it is because they had the money and they offered a package. I fear that, as we become more effective at managing the border, the opportunity for criminals will go up, which I think is why we are seeing more fraudulent documents at the Macedonian border; the Macedonians, alongside other Western Balkan countries, started taking action to control the flows of nationals not from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan. Where those who are being turned back are going is a bit of a mystery. I expect a lot of them cross the border by illicit means. I think we are going to see a symptom of better control, primary control at the border, will be an increased opportunity for organised crime. We see organised criminal groups bringing Afghans and Pakistanis across Turkey as well.

Lord Risby: Lady Armstrong alluded to domestic reactions to the situation, and we are seeing that all over Europe. The thing that has been put to me, flowing from the fact that the vetting of people is somewhat imperfect, is the security consideration. To what extent is there any process at all for screening people in the migratory flows who might be being sent with malevolent ambition? Is there any way of screening for that, and is it happening? It is something that people are concerned about.

Mr Edward Hobart: This is where you build up the blocks of immigration controls. Given the volumes arriving, it is very challenging, but one of the first things to do is to make sure that everybody is fingerprinted. That allows you to know who has entered, and once that fingerprinting is uploaded on to systems you can track people through the various borders and potentially associate fingerprints taken for immigration purposes with databases of known extremists. A major problem would be that many people would be so-called clean skins; we would have no previous knowledge of them. There is no reason why Europeans who may have gone to Syria to fight would necessarily use that small risky route to cross from Greece, because they could probably travel in other ways, although, separately, we have that data at our border as well in order to intercept people who are known foreign fighters. The answer is that it is not happening effectively at the moment. It is recognised by the Commission and by European Member States that this is a shortcoming, and fingerprinting effectively and getting criminal and terrorist databases operating on the Greek islands and in hotspots in Italy is an important action.

Q5 Lord Stirrup: Can I turn to Operation Sophia? What assessment would you make of its effectiveness so far? We have seen some figures cited by the headquarters of the numbers of people rescued, and presumably it is being reasonably successful in that sphere, but one of its principal purposes was to disrupt the business model of the people smugglers. What impact has it had on that particular business model? The UK contribution is something we do not hear much about. Could you say something about that? The operation's remit is, I

believe, due to expire in July this year. What is going to happen then? Where does the mission go from there?

Mr Richard Lindsay: As the noble Lord said, the objective of Operation Sophia was to tackle the business case of the smugglers. It launched on 22 June and transitioned to its operational phase on 7 October, so between June and October there was an information-gathering and intelligence-assessment period, and we contributed significantly to that. I will say a little more about our contribution in a minute. Since its transition on 7 October, which was an operation on the high seas, it has succeeded in capturing and destroying 69 smuggling vessels and apprehending 46 suspected smugglers who are now detained by the Italian authorities pending prosecution. Over 8,400 migrants were saved at sea during that process, and 3,000 of those were saved by Royal Navy assets.

To go back to the nub of your question, which is about the operation's effectiveness, the operational commander recently assessed that it has had a deterrent effect. He had a surge in resources over October and November and there was an impact on the numbers of migrants flowing through the central Mediterranean route. Some of that might be attributed to the opening up of other routes, but there is a deterrent effect in that smugglers are being apprehended and their boats are being destroyed. From the outset, we have always said that the most important parts of the operation are phase 2b and phase 3; phase 2b is to operate within Libyan territorial waters and phase 3 is to operate ashore. That has been constrained by our inability to work with a Government in Libya, because there has been none.

The Government of National Accord was agreed in December, and over the weekend the presidential council agreed the 32 names who will now form that Government. We are waiting for the House of Representatives to vote on that in the next 10 days. If the vote goes through successfully, as we all hope it will, we will then have a GNA in Libya with a mandate for two years with whom we should be able to work. Tackling migration will not be their very top priority, but it will be an important element of our engagement with the new GNA. We will be working very closely with them to ensure that they give permission for us to operate in Libyan territorial waters, and subsequently we can work to achieve a UN Security Council resolution that would allow us to do that. There is a choreography for us to get to the phase we want to reach so that Operation Sophia can tackle the business model at its heart.

You also asked about the Royal Navy or UK contribution as a whole. We have contributed HMS Enterprise, a survey vessel, to the mission since 4 July. It contributed in the assessment phase and more recently in the operational phase. During the surge period we also contributed HMS Richmond. Both those ships have at different times had helicopters and UAV capability with them. On top of that, a number of officers have been seconded to the Italian-led operational headquarters, so we have had a disproportionately significant participation in the mission. Before the mission started last summer, we offered HMS Bulwark as a significant part of search and rescue. Taken together, those three vessels have rescued over 7,700 migrants in that period.

Lord Stirrup: You cited numbers of boats and smugglers, but much depends on the nature of the boats and the nature of the people. Are they people at the bottom end, or are they significant movers within the criminal enterprise? Allied to that, what lessons are being learned? What best practice is being crossed over from Operation Atalanta, which has been going on for a considerable time? Although that is focused on piracy rather than on people smuggling, in both cases you are trying to get at the business model of a criminal enterprise. I would have thought that, between the two, much could be learned.

Richard Lindsay: They are very different business models but there are clear linkages. From the outset, we have encouraged the operational commander to link with Atalanta, but not to try to make parallels where they do not exist. The operational commander, Admiral Credendino, was in Northwood before Christmas to hear about our command of Operation Atalanta and the lessons we have learned there. There are parallels. The current stage of Operation Atalanta's counterpiracy mission and the fact there have been no significant pirate attacks for the last four years has put us in a very different situation from the counter-migration operation. What Atalanta has done in Somalia has been combined with a very intense effort onshore to build Somali capacity to tackle the business model of piracy. We have not had the same thing in Libya, and that is why in my comments I focused a bit on the politics of Libya, which is so important for us in getting to grips with tackling the business model.

Earl of Oxford and Asquith: The Government supports any actions to break the link between the rescue of refugees, and the permanent settlement of refugees in the EU. In practical terms, given what you are describing, is that possible until you move to stage 2B or stage 3 in Libya?

Richard Lindsay: I will leave the settlement question to Mr Hobart. We anticipate the move between phases should not change the way in which migrants are treated once they are rescued. If they are rescued, they are taken to the nearest place of safety - in Italy, where they move into the same process. That should not change whether they are rescued in territorial waters or, as at the moment, on the high seas.

Baroness Coussins: You mentioned that 8,000 lives had been saved through the operation that put the smugglers out of business. Is that figure one that you arrived at as a statistical model based on the number of vessels that would have been operated by the number of smugglers you put out of business, or have 8,000 real people been rescued? If it is the latter, what happened to them? Were they offered safe and efficient passage, or were they left to wait to see whether they will turn to one of the smugglers you have not yet put out of business?

Richard Lindsay: The answer is the latter: they were rescued at sea and taken on board vessels operated by Operation Sophia. As part of that, they are then taken to the nearest place of safety. They are on the high seas at the point at which they are rescued. Their vessels are destroyed and they are taken to the nearest place of safety, where they move into the Italian system Mr Hobart talked about earlier.

Q6 Lord Risby: The route that has been used through the Western Balkans, which you mentioned, has created huge pressures on the countries involved. I would be very interested to know what discussions have been taking place between the EU and the countries involved. To what extent has any assistance been offered to those countries for the migratory flows coming through, which have created great social pressures—food and everything else—with the European Union and others working together? Has there been co-operation at that sort of level?

Edward Hobart: There has, and in some ways it has provided an opportunity for engagement on a common challenge. It is also an opportunity, for example, for Serbia to demonstrate that it can act as a responsible future member and be positive in its accession negotiations. There was a conference on a Sunday in October involving the EU countries affected by that route and the Balkan countries that are not part of the EU. It agreed various processes for communication between different countries—for example, Croatia and

Serbia—and a series of different interventions to help to support the countries as people pass through.

To date, the EU has released in the region of €21 million of humanitarian aid to support refugees along that route. It has deployed FRONTEX staff to help to manage the Macedonian-Greek border and—although I am not sure whether they are there yet—to the Croatian-Serbian border. Through the European emergency response mechanism there have been various provisions of material, such as blankets and tents. The UK's bilateral assistance to those Western Balkan countries is substantial; it is about £20 million so far, probably with more to be announced imminently. There has been a lot of support for the Western Balkan countries and engagement with them. There was a lot of preparation for winter, which came fairly late this year, to ensure that people do not get stuck in freezing conditions along that route.

Q7 Lord Balfre: We have recently seen the proposals of President Juncker of the Commission for amending the Dublin convention. How do you view the change in the sharing of responsibility for processing applications and resettling? From the point of view of HMG, what more should they do, or do differently, and what more should the European Union do, or do differently? What about the interface between the 'out' countries—Britain and Ireland—and all the 'in' countries?

Edward Hobart: This is where I need to be careful, as it is most definitely a lead for the Home Secretary. There are two reasons to be careful: first, it is a Home Office rather than a Foreign Office lead; and, secondly, we have not actually seen the proposal, although it has been mooted for several months, for reform of the Dublin regulation. We expect Dublin IV, as it would be, to come before the March European Council.

We think that the current responsibility of the first safe country—to some degree that extends beyond the European Union to countries such as Turkey—to offer refuge, and for us to support refugees in those first countries is critical. For us, the primary intervention is to work with Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan to support Syrian refugees there. It is more effective for them, it reduces the risk of travel, it enhances the potential to return to Syria and rebuild it, and the support we can give is more cost-effective. That is why the Syria pledging conference on 4 February in London is so critical. The WFP and UNHCR were massively underfunded last year, which was probably one of the push factors in the growth in the migration of Syrian refugees.

We have always questioned the policy of relocation around Europe that is mooted. It is clear from the statements not only of Mr Juncker but of Mr Tusk, President of the Council, that this is part of what they intend to propose. Relocation has not worked so far; 160,000 were meant to be relocated from Greece and Italy around Europe, but so far only about 300—I can give you the exact figure—have been, in a period when the UK resettled 1,000 registered refugees directly from camps in Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon. We think that is the right approach because it ensures that the most vulnerable people are protected where they need to have particular support, whether it be medical, social or psychological, and where there are families to unify in the UK. That is a manageable flow and the right thing to be doing while we focus on supporting the majority who need to stay in the region.

We will look at the proposals very carefully. We will maintain our view that people should seek refuge in the first safe country. We seek to maintain our ability to return [to the first safe country], which we think is an important part of the overall system. It does not necessarily get used much, but it is how people understand the system to operate [and so acts as a deterrent].

Q8 Lord Balfre: Have you made any assessment of how many extra refugees you will get, particularly from the Christian and Alawite communities, if Assad falls?

Edward Hobart: No. UNHCR looks at flows of refugees. We have the macro figure I mentioned earlier of an expected 1 million. A large number come directly from Syria. A proportionate number are Christian. I do not know about the Alawites. I guess there are not so many at the moment. The numbers of refugees we have taken into resettlement programmes are proportionate to the numbers who have registered with UNHCR, although we are also working with UNHCR to make sure that those who come from minority groups in Syria have equal access and feel equally able to register with them in Jordan and Lebanon in particular.

Lord Balfre: As we are on the public record, can I make the point that we should be very careful what we wish for?

Lord Stirrup: Can I ask a question that certainly is within the purview of the FCO and not the Home Office? I understand the rationale of the first safe country, but having Jordan turned into, essentially, a massive refugee camp, even if we provide lots of financial and other support, is enormously destabilising, politically and socially, in a country of enormous importance to us and to broader stability in the region. Surely, we have to take a broader view than the one you have just enumerated.

Edward Hobart: Our view is very similar. Jordan absolutely needs our support and broader international support because of its importance for the stability of the region. We are determined that it gets that support through the Syria conference on 3 and 4 February—the key date is 4 February. We are working closely with the Jordanians to support the people who are in camps there. The Lebanese have the greatest ratio of refugees to nationals; it is greater than Jordan's. In Lebanon they are not really in camps. Lebanon is already an complex country without a real Presidency at the moment, but we still think it is best to support people there. Some of the proposals that hopefully will come out of the conference in February have the potential to benefit Jordan as well as the refugee population there by stimulating their economy and trade.

We are very conscious of the noble Lord's point, but we still believe that refugees need to be supported in the region. That is why the UK's attention so far has focused primarily on giving development and humanitarian assistance in Jordan and Lebanon, rather than in Turkey where the proportion of refugees is far smaller.

Baroness Suttie: To a large degree you have just answered the question I was going to ask, but I want to understand a little more about the practical assistance we are giving Jordan and Lebanon. Is it just financial assistance, or are we helping with education, et cetera?

Edward Hobart: I can give you a fuller answer. It absolutely includes education and looking at economic stimuli and long-term support. I will try to find the figures for the amount we have contributed in both countries, or I can revert to you on them. Overall, our humanitarian support amounts to £1.1 billion directly, before we look at the Turkey refugee facility, plus the promise of another £1 billion, focused on Syria I suppose, for infrastructure rebuilding once that is possible. About half of the £1.1 billion, if I remember correctly, is focused on humanitarian aid in Syria and about half is in Jordan and Lebanon.

Q9 Lord Dubs: Could we turn to the question of returning people to their countries of origin, or wherever? In July, the Minister for Europe said that he thought it was important that the UK, along with our EU partners, should be able to return greater numbers of migrants who do not have a legal right to be in Europe either to their own or to other safe

countries. How is that going? What steps have been taken? Do you know how many have been returned? Are we able to negotiate admission arrangements with the countries of origin, and what about the point that sometimes those countries are not safe to return to anyway? I am sorry; that is an awful lot.

Edward Hobart: Starting at the back, if countries are not safe, we cannot return people to them; our courts will not allow that. As you will probably be aware from other conversations, there is often debate about whether a country is or is not safe—Afghanistan is a prime example at the moment—and cases go through our courts to make those judgments.

I do not have a complete breakdown of overall EU returns, but Eurostat says that, of the 470,000 third-country nationals in the EU last year who were ordered to leave, 190,000 were returned. A large number of those were returned from Germany to the Balkans, primarily Albania and Kosovo and some to Macedonia. I do not have a breakdown as to whether those were returns under return arrangements, voluntary returns, or the visa overstayers, who were the primary group of irregular migrants in the EU until 2015. The UK had 12,000 enforced returns in the year to September 2015.

As I understand it, since the Minister for Europe spoke to you there have been no new return and readmission agreements. I think there are 23 in place under the European scheme, and the UK participates in the majority of them. We work closely with our European allies to help to implement them and to share our experience. We are seen as relatively successful, probably along with Spain, in managing return arrangements. For example, we have had lots of bilateral conversations with many countries, including the Germans and the Greeks, about how to build up confidence in the countries of origin in order to manage returns effectively. We have made the point that this is not something that just happens because you have an MoU; you need to have that kind of confidence, and it takes a lot of detailed work and resource to achieve even the numbers we are achieving, let alone those that Germany in particular would like to achieve over the coming months and years.

Lord Dubs: Is it not possible that some of those who have no legal right to be in Britain under the Geneva convention, or whatever, disappear—leave the country, and go to another EU country—rather than face compulsory return, so we do not know the scale of the problem?

Edward Hobart: I am definitely straying on to Home Office territory now. In the UK, we identify about 40,000 people as needing to be returned who do subsequently leave the country every year. The greater number return voluntarily, having come into contact in some way [with UK authorities]. For example, we identify them as visa overstayers and then they leave. We are relatively confident about the fact that they have left the country and gone somewhere they are allowed to go, which could be a European country, because it is done in part by matching manifests on passenger records. That is how we know they have left. That would include those crossing the channel and those flying out of an airport internationally. I do not think that [entering another EU country illegally] is a major risk, although clearly it is a possibility.

Q10 Lord Triesman: One of the elements of managing returns in general is the issue of voluntary returns. That is obviously very important. Is a scheme of incentives still offered to people to return?

Edward Hobart: Yes. It depends on the country, and it is not meant to be an incentive to the person. We call them reintegration packages. That is not meant to be a euphemism; it is the kind of cost that an individual has in returning, to make their return to the community from which they came something that is seen as positive by all involved. They are delivered, generally speaking, by NGOs in countries of origin. It was an important aspect in the negotiations with African source countries as part of the Valletta Action Plan. The balance between voluntary and compulsory returns was a very contentious area. All those countries signed up to the concept of compulsory returns, both under the Valletta Action Plan and the Cotonou Treaty. If somebody is proven to be a national of a country and has no right to be here, the country is meant to accept them back, but many countries find that difficult to agree to. Clearly, it is better for all concerned if we can get to a point where it is voluntary. Packages to help people reintegrate and to support their return are an important part of that overall process, clearly being careful that they do not have perverse incentives where people are making money out of the system.

Q11 Baroness Armstrong of Hill Top: We were told yesterday that a review is going on of how we deal with children. How long do you think that will take, and what do you think are the objectives of the review, because there is quite a lot of concern about children in the midst of all of this?

Edward Hobart: May I ask whether the question is specifically about our resettlement scheme and the Save the Children request for 3,000 children to be relocated in the UK?

Baroness Armstrong of Hill Top: Yes.

Edward Hobart: The decision is being reviewed by the Prime Minister, and I am not in a position to comment further. I know no more. What I do know is that it is a complex question, and we need to make sure that we put at the heart of it the interests of the child—the child not being separated from family members, et cetera. We have to wait for the Prime Minister to review that. Understanding exactly what the situation is for some of those children is a more complicated question than it can appear superficially.

Baroness Armstrong of Hill Top: It certainly is complex. They are, however, still children.

Q12 The Chairman: We have covered a great many things. To ask one final question, I imagine that in this age of instant communication, people in northern Syria and elsewhere are quite well informed about the debate over refugees that is taking place in Europe. To what extent is the backlash against Chancellor Merkel's welcome, the events in Cologne and all the rest of it leading people to feel they had better get in before the gate comes down?

Edward Hobart: You are absolutely right, Lord Chairman. One of the facilitating forces of this particular migration crisis is the speed of communications. We cannot prove it, but we see, for example, that the profile of people passing through—such as the increase in the groups of families—appears to change according to policies in different European countries, as does people's country of destination. There is also a huge amount of misinformation flowing down the same communication routes, like any media route nowadays.

At the moment, I do not think that we have seen any direct impact of the change in atmospherics in, for example, Germany. We have not picked up anything yet. The Dutch and the Danes both felt they had seen a decrease in arrivals in their countries following some fairly clear and stern messages given in October and November, but it is quite hard to prove some of those linkages. Giving clearer messages is possibly beneficial in deterring those who are more opportunistic, driven by economics rather than genuine fear of persecution.

Lord Chairman, perhaps I might return to an earlier question about DfID's humanitarian assistance to Jordan and Lebanon that I did not manage to answer completely. Of the £1.1 billion, £304 million has been in Lebanon and £193 million in Jordan.

The Chairman: We have bombarded you with questions, many of which were not easy for you to foresee. Thank you for the way in which you have answered them.