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Foreign Affairs Committee

UK Government policy on the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

Eighth Report of Session 2014–15

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to the report*

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The current staff of the Committee are Kenneth Fox (Clerk), Peter McGrath (Second Clerk), Zoe Oliver-Watts (Senior Committee Specialist), Dr Ariella Huff, (Committee Specialist), Sen Rudran (Inquiry Manager), Louise Glen (Senior Committee Assistant), Su Panchanathan (Committee Assistant), and Alex Paterson (Media Officer).

Contacts

All correspondence should be addressed to the Clerk of the Foreign Affairs Committee, House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA. The telephone number for general enquiries is 020 7219 6105; the Committee's email address is FAC@parliament.uk

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Summary

The future of Iraq as a nation state is in question as never before. If its three main communities cannot find an effective formula for political cohabitation then the country may face partition (whether formal or otherwise) with unpredictable consequences for the wider region. Indeed, with ISIL terrorists occupying the west and centre of the country, it may be more accurate to say that Iraq is already broken, and that the question now is whether it can yet be stitched back into a functioning whole. The clock is ticking.

Key to Iraq's future will be the policies and actions of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). The Kurdistan Region is the best governed—and least dysfunctional—part of Iraq, with a developing democratic culture and relatively stable economy. It is professionally and effectively defended by its national guard, the Peshmerga, and is a haven of tolerance in a wider region where extremism and instability are on the rise. It has responded with great generosity to the sudden influx of hundreds of thousands of displaced Iraqis and Syrians, of different ethnicities and religions, seeking sanctuary there. There can be no solution to Iraq's current troubles unless the governments in Baghdad and in Erbil (the Region's capital) work together to overcome mutual suspicion and acrimony. We believe that there is a role for the UK Foreign Office, as a friend and supporter of both administrations, and with its long history of engagement in Iraq, to try quietly to help mend fences, although we have doubts as to whether the UK currently has the depth of diplomatic resources in Iraq that it would need to carry out this role fully.

The qualities that make the Kurdistan Region vital for Iraq's future also make it a key ally for the UK Government. It should respond positively to the KRG's invitation to be its "partner of choice" on trade, education and cultural exchange as well as defence and intelligence matters, mindful that if it does not, the KRG may feel compelled to deepen links with other powers who may not share our values. The UK Government should not allow the KRG's squabbles with the federal government in Iraq or question marks over its future constitutional status to stand in the way of deepening an already strong and trusting partnership. This requires a strengthening of the UK's diplomatic resources in the Region, as the Foreign Office appears to recognise. Its promise that it will upgrade its consular premises in Erbil is welcome, but it is time to see some progress made. Current consular arrangements are not adequate for the UK: a permanent Security Council member seeking to play a lead role in efforts to resolve the Iraqi and Syrian crises. We would also like to see progress in building stronger government-to-government links, to satisfy the KRG's enthusiasm for UK mentoring in matters such as public service reform and developing a human rights culture; in developing direct air links between the UK and Erbil; and (in the expectation that current security concerns will ultimately be overcome) in encouraging greater trade and business engagement between the UK and the Region.

We agree with the UK Government that for the time being it is far better that Arabs and Kurds in Iraq seek to be strong and united, to defeat the common enemy of ISIL. It is also rational to be concerned about the possible consequences of Iraq's break-up. But the Kurdistan Region's desire for increased self-governance, or even independence, is itself

rational, given its economic potential and demonstrable capacity for effective self-governance; and it is also understandable, given its recent history. We do not judge that independence is imminent, but it is a medium-term possibility, for which the UK Government should be prepared. Much will depend on the success of the KRG's export strategy for hydrocarbons, which the KRG clearly sees as a route to economic self-sufficiency, but which is highly dependent on global crude prices and on a "grand bargain" reached with the Turkish government; a state which (like another powerful neighbour, Iran) is not supportive of independence for the Kurdistan Region. It is for the Iraqi people to decide their future, but it appears to us that a looser federal model, permitting greater self-governance by its diverse mosaic of communities, offers best hope for Iraq remaining united and sovereign. Highly centralised rule under a "strongman" in Baghdad has not worked in Iraq's near-century of existence and never will. If the Kurdistan Region is to become independent, it should be with the consent of the rest of Iraq. But the UK and its international partners should stand ready to help ensure that any clear expression of will in favour of independence, and on reasonable terms, is accepted and respected. For the sake of wider energy security, it is also in the UK's interests that the Kurdistan Region, along with the rest of Iraq, should have a vibrant oil and gas export industry.

We strongly support the UK Government's decision to join the informal military coalition against ISIL in August, following appalling acts of violent persecution against innocent and defenceless people that called to mind the worst atrocities of the 20th century. The KRG has welcomed the arms, equipment, intelligence and training the UK and others have provided to the Peshmerga, but has called for this assistance to be increased, and in particular for more heavy weaponry. These pleas are understandable, but should be balanced carefully against the delicate constitutional situation in Iraq, as well as the continuing existence of political factionalism within the Peshmerga. We believe that the UK and its EU and NATO allies should be prepared to progressively increase their assistance (in the form of arms, military training and intelligence), provided this is linked to clear evidence of Peshmerga reform and of effective coordination between the Peshmerga and other officially recognised military forces taking on ISIL.

It is not for this report to comment in depth on UK policy on Iraq and Syria, but it is self-evident that there can be no real peace in the Kurdistan Region for as long as ISIL masses threateningly on its doorstep. With the assistance of allied aircraft, the Peshmerga have repulsed ISIL from the gates of Erbil and won back some territory from the terrorists in Iraq and Syria, but they require reliable partners on the ground if ISIL are to be comprehensively degraded. Whilst cognisant of FCO concerns about possible links to terrorism, we invite the UK Government to at least justify its policy of not recognising as a formal opposition movement the Syrian-Kurdish militias that are at the front line of resistance to the terrorists in the north and north-east of the country, but which it is currently the UK's policy not to assist.

In Baghdad, the new administration of Haider al-Abadi has made a promising start, following the disastrous rule of his predecessor Nouri al-Maliki; but the task of achieving national reconciliation, re-engaging grassroots Sunnis with discredited national

institutions, and building a truly national defence force is enormous and difficult. Equally challenging will be mobilising Shia militias to defend Iraq from ISIL without exacerbating sectarian tensions. Success is not guaranteed: the UK and its allies should do all they reasonably can to assist but should be quietly assessing the need for a “Plan B” should the federal government run into difficulties.

Much has changed in the Kurdistan Region since, in February 2014, we launched the inquiry that led to this report; mainly for the worse. Nevertheless, in the long term, the Kurdistan Region’s prospects remain bright, provided that the KRG’s energy export policy bears fruit; that corrupt practices and nepotism are not allowed to become entrenched in the economy and political system; that respect for human rights continues to develop; and that the harvest of a growing economy is shared out equitably. The people and government of the Kurdistan Region would warmly welcome the UK’s help along its path towards increased democracy, economic stability, pluralism and tolerance in a wider environment where those qualities are needed now more than ever.

Conclusions and recommendations

The Kurdistan Region's dispute with Baghdad, and the UK's role

1. It is for the people of Iraq, and their governments, to sort out their disagreements, and by constitutional means. Where the UK considers that Iraq's constitution is not being respected, by either the federal or Kurdistan Regional Government, it should not be afraid to express views, but should be mindful that the UK's complex history of involvement in Iraq may not always make it best placed to be a candid friend. We expect that in the vast majority of cases, it is best that advice and views are offered through private and informal channels, as appears to currently be the case. Whatever Iraq's long-term future, we agree with the UK Government that its current diplomatic priority should be to help all of Iraq's communities and democratic institutions, including the federal and Kurdistan Regional Governments, mend fences and unite against the threat from ISIL. (Paragraph 33)

The Kurdistan Regional Government as a partner for the UK Government, and its record on democracy and human rights

2. The Kurdistan Region of Iraq is a genuine democracy, albeit an imperfect and still developing one, and a beacon of tolerance and moderation in a wider region where extremism and instability are on the rise. Its values are broadly our values. The UK is fortunate to have in such a volatile part of the world a partner as relatively moderate, pragmatic, stable, democratic, secular and reflexively pro-Western as the KRG. It is emphatically in the best interests of the UK that the Kurdistan Region continues on its path of democratic development, and has friends and supporters as it does so, particularly at this time of crisis for the Region, when the progress it has achieved over the last 20 years is under threat. The UK Government should engage with it on that basis. (Paragraph 47)
3. The Kurdistan Regional Government acknowledges ongoing challenges in developing its democratic institutions and its human and civil rights culture, and in advancing gender equality, and should be judged on how it responds to these challenges. There are also concerns as to public corruption and media freedom that it must address. In addition, as the Kurdistan Regional Government has stated that it would welcome the UK's mentoring and support in connection with some of these areas, we urge the UK Government to respond positively to this invitation. (Paragraph 48)

Strategic value of the UK-Kurdistan Region relationship

4. The Kurdistan Regional Government has strategic value for the UK Government as a bridge to other regional powers with whom direct dialogue may be difficult, but which the UK must work with in order to achieve the policies to which it is committed. We urge the UK Government to be mindful that if it is unable fully to reciprocate the Kurdistan Regional Government's offer of closer partnership, the KRG might be reluctantly compelled to look elsewhere for support including to

regimes whose values and interests do not always match those of the UK. (Paragraph 55)

UK-Kurdistan Region governmental links

5. We request a progress report from the UK Government on whether the joint ministerial committee agreed with the KRG in May 2014 has yet met and has an agreed programme, and on progress made so far in mentoring the KRG in civil service and public sector reform. (Paragraph 58)

The FCO's presence in the Kurdistan Region

6. The FCO has stated that it is committed to having a permanent consular presence in Erbil for the foreseeable future. This is welcome, given the strategic importance of the Kurdistan Region and the importance of strengthening links with its government and people. However, current consular arrangements are simply not acceptable for the UK: a permanent Security Council member deeply involved in diplomatic and military efforts to repel Islamist terrorism in Iraq and Syria and to resolve both countries' political crises, particularly given that other states, less deeply involved in these issues than the UK government, have some time ago secured bespoke premises. The FCO must now make it its priority to ensure that work proceeds on new consular premises, as a concrete demonstration of the UK's commitment to relations with the Kurdistan Region and in recognition of the importance of the Region and its government to the UK, particularly as partners in the fight against terrorism. We also ask the UK Government to take steps to ensure that the Consulate General is staffed to a level commensurate with its current importance to UK interests. (Paragraph 64)

Direct air links

7. Given the interest there appears to be in establishing a direct UK-Erbil air link, it is disappointing that this may have been held up by the need for a UK Border Agency inspection of Erbil airport. We press for such an inspection to be made at the earliest opportunity. (Paragraph 71)

UK Government policy on the Anfal

8. The terrible events of the Anfal campaign conducted against the Kurdish people in the 1980s appear to meet the UN definition of "genocide". We understand the reasons that have caused the Government not to formally recognise the Anfal as a genocide, but also note that its approach has caused disappointment in the Kurdistan Region and that foreign governments have chosen to recognise past atrocities as genocide, notwithstanding the absence of a legal ruling by a recognised international tribunal. We encourage the UK Government to maintain a dialogue with the Kurdistan Regional Government on the issue, including on what judicial and non-judicial criteria the UK Government may use to determine whether acts constitute genocide. We welcome the Government's recognition of Anfal Day and would encourage it to continue to reflect on other ways in which it could help

commemorate the Anfal, in order to show its identification with the suffering endured by the Kurdish people. (Paragraph 79)

UK policy on combatting ISIL in Iraq

9. The overall impression given by the UK Government's policy on ISIL in Iraq during 2014 is one of caution, responding to events as they unfolded rather than anticipating them, and we note that UK military assistance has been limited. However, we recognise that it was not unreasonable for the Government to proceed with caution, given the complexities of Iraqi politics and the UK's Iraq War legacy. It was right for the UK Government to assist the Peshmerga and to join in air strikes; on strategic grounds, because it was vital to support our friends and allies in the Kurdistan Region and to help build their morale, and on humanitarian grounds; to prevent appalling acts of violence and cruelty against whole communities, that call to mind some of the worst atrocities of the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century. We encourage the UK Government to use its influence to ensure that there is a proper record of the atrocities that have been committed so that, in due course, offenders may be brought to justice. (Paragraph 86)
10. Allied countries, led by the US, are to be commended for responding urgently following the ISIL surge of early August 2014, but, with hindsight, it appears to have been a miscalculation for the UK Government and its allies not to have assessed that the Peshmerga would require military assistance in order to defend a border of over 1000 kilometres against ISIL. With allied support, the Peshmerga now, happily, appear to be recovering territory lost to ISIL in August. (Paragraph 87)

Iraq and Syria: one battlefield

11. Iraq and Syria are at present one indivisible battlefield and there is unlikely to be any real peace in the Kurdistan Region or the rest of Iraq unless ISIL in Syria is destroyed or, at the very least, badly degraded and starved of the capacity to move freely across the border. (Paragraph 90)

Assisting the Iraqi federal government against ISIL

12. There was a price to be paid for the UK and other governments opting not to provide military assistance to the Iraqi government more quickly, including the increase of Iranian influence in the country. However, on balance, we consider that the UK Government was correct not to assist the heavily discredited government of Nouri al-Maliki, assessing, rightly, that it was part of the problem, not part of the solution. The UK Government is correct to have placed emphasis on the importance of an "inclusive" political process in Iraq on the need for Sunnis to recover faith in the country's democratic institutions. Diagnosing the problem is, in this instance, likely to prove far easier than prescribing the cure. The task of rebuilding Sunni confidence in Iraq is a formidable one: it requires political leadership from within the Sunni community and collective engagement, across the sectarian and ethnic divide, from Baghdad's political elites. (Paragraph 95)

Helping the Peshmerga

13. The UK's offer of equipment and training for the Peshmerga has been warmly welcomed in the Kurdistan Region and is helping the Peshmerga take on ISIL. Military assistance should be continued, on the basis of evidence that progress on the unification of the Peshmerga is continuing satisfactorily. The Government may also be minded to take into account the extent to which the Peshmerga and the Iraqi army are co-ordinating to take on ISIL in contemplating future gifting of equipment. We appreciate that Iraq's delicate constitutional situation is an element that the UK Government must take into account in determining whether and in what manner to make future gifts of military equipment. (Paragraph 104)
14. We seek clarification from the UK Government as to whether it would be possible for gifts to the Kurdistan Regional Government to be made direct to territory of the KRG or whether the federal government is within its right to insist that all gifts are routed via Baghdad. (Paragraph 105)

Helping the Syrian Kurds

15. We ask the Government to clarify its policy on recognising and working with Syrian-Kurdish groups such as the PYD party that are resisting ISIL in northern Syria. We also ask it to clarify whether its categorisation of the Turkish-Kurdish PKK as a terrorist group or the PYD's decision not to join the Syrian National Coalition are considered reasons not to recognise or assist the PYD. (Paragraph 109)

The humanitarian crisis in the Kurdistan Region

16. The Kurdistan Regional Government and the people of the Region have responded with generosity and sacrifice to the influx of hundreds of thousands of displaced people from Syria and Iraq. Their continuing presence threatens to overwhelm the Region's economy and public service particularly if, as appears likely, conflict in Syria and Iraq continues for the foreseeable future. It would be disastrous if this ongoing crisis were to seriously destabilise the Region's economy or political system, and accordingly is in the foreign policy interests of the UK to work with allies in the UN, EU, NATO and other international organisations to ensure that the KRG is well-supported to deal with this crisis. Whilst we agree that patience is likely to be crucial in order to defeat ISIL, the UK Government should note that a "long war" carries its own risks, amongst these a prolonged and economically debilitating humanitarian crisis, with hundreds of thousands of people unable to return to their homes, and the possibility of increased tensions between displaced people and the host community. (Paragraph 113)

Resolving the status of the disputed territories

17. The Kurdistan Regional Government deserves credit for swiftly directing the Peshmerga to occupy Kirkuk and other disputed areas of northern Iraq at a moment of crisis in June 2014. The question now is what happens next. The KRG is right to insist on adherence to the Iraqi constitution, and to votes on the status of the disputed territories finally going ahead. However, there is much that could go wrong

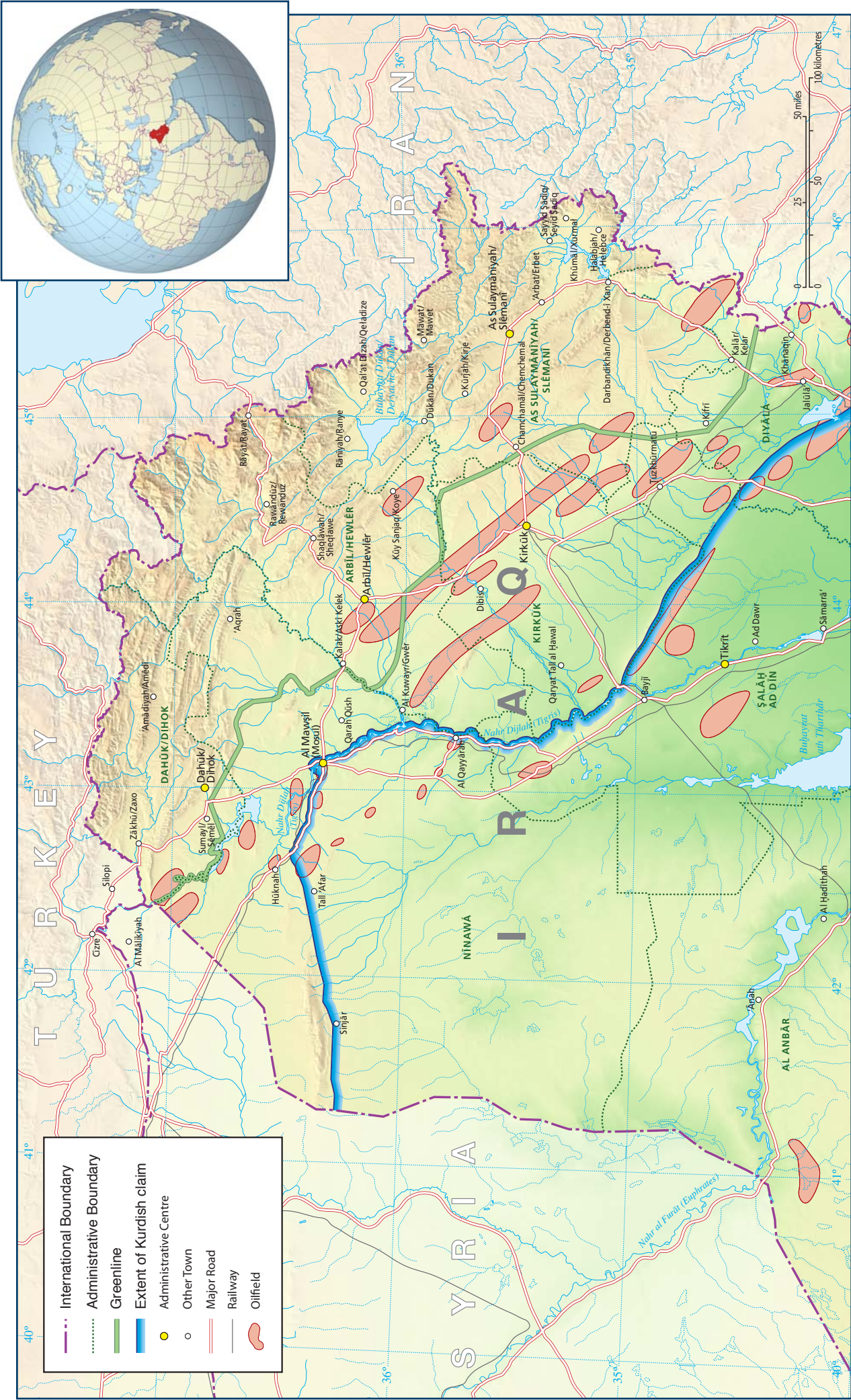
if the voting process is seen as unfair or lacking in transparency. The UK Government should use its influence to ensure that the voting process is transparent, addresses the various practical problems that the issue engages, is respectful of the rights of minorities as equal citizens of Iraq, and overall inspires the confidence of those taking part in it. Ideally the process would also proceed with the acceptance, or even involvement, of the federal government, and again we would encourage the UK Government to use what influence it has to this end. (Paragraph 124)

18. For the time being, much of the disputed territories are effectively a war zone, with entire communities still displaced from their homes. The KRG has rightly put back plans for local plebiscites for the time being, and we would encourage the UK Government to use its influence to try to prevent a peremptory vote. (Paragraph 125)

The constitutional future of the Kurdistan Region and of Iraq as a whole

19. We agree with the UK Government that for the time being it is far better that Iraq seeks to recover its unity and strength in order to defeat the common enemy of ISIL. It is also rational to be concerned about the possible consequences of Iraq's break-up. But the Kurdistan Region's desire for increased self-governance, or even independence, is itself rational, given its economic potential and demonstrable capacity for effective self-governance, and also understandable, given its recent history. We do not judge that independence is imminent, but it is a medium-term possibility, depending in large part on the Kurdistan Region's energy export strategy, for which the UK Government should be prepared. (Paragraph 141)
20. It is for the Iraqi people to decide their future, but it appears to us that a looser federal model, permitting greater self-governance by its diverse mosaic of communities, offers best hope for Iraq remaining united and sovereign. Highly centralised rule under a "strongman" in Baghdad will never work. (Paragraph 142)
21. If the Kurdistan Region is to become independent, it should be with the consent of the rest of Iraq. But the UK and its international partners should stand ready to help ensure that any clear expression of will in favour of independence, and on reasonable terms, is accepted and respected. (Paragraph 143)





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1 Introduction

The events of 2014

1. When, in February 2014, we began the inquiry that has led to this report, it was because we judged that the Kurdistan Region, and its relationship with the rest of Iraq, merited increased attention. Events since then have brought grim vindication of that judgment.

2. Following the surge of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)¹ into the northern Iraqi city of Mosul in June, the security and political landscape of the Kurdistan Region, and of Iraq as a whole, has been transformed. ISIL terrorists now control virtually the whole of Iraq's Sunni Arab heartland, from the Syrian border to the edge of greater Baghdad. ISIL's advance exposed catastrophic weakness in an Iraqi army strong on paper but hollowed out by years of corruption and political meddling under the authoritarian and sectarian government of Nouri al-Maliki. Shamefully, its leaders fled rather than take on ISIL. The army's sudden retreat left a vacuum along the Kurdistan Region's border with the rest of Iraq that Kurdish forces, the Peshmerga, rushed to fill literally overnight.

3. As a result, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) finds itself in control of swathes of territory bitterly disputed with Baghdad over many years, including the oil-rich city of Kirkuk; but the price of these gains is a tense 1000-kilometre frontier with the terrorists stretching across almost the entire breadth of northern Iraq, with only a short land corridor connecting the Kurdistan Region to Baghdad and the rest of unoccupied Iraq. ISIL's advances have forced hundreds of thousands of Iraqis to flee to the relative safety of the Kurdistan Region. The KRG's humane response to the influx has brought it great international credit, but, as we heard when we visited Iraq, it also risks "breaking" its slowing economy and over-stretched public services.

4. Meanwhile in Baghdad, ISIL's advance hastened the removal from office of the increasingly discredited Mr Maliki, after a period in which disputes over the budget and oil exports had brought relations between the Kurdistan Region and the federal government to a new low. There are early signs of improved and more inclusive governance under his successor, Haider al-Abadi. However, there are also fears that the new administration may have only limited time to assert its authority, repel ISIL, rebuild the army, and win the confidence of Iraq's diverse constituencies. With ISIL in control of most of Sunni Arab Iraq, Shia militias directed by Iranian commanders doing the work of the Iraqi army in much of the country, and the Kurdistan Region's President having tabled proposals for a referendum on independence, Iraq's future is in question as never before.

1 Also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and *al-Shams* (Arabic: literally, the sun) or ISIS: "Shams" is an historical geographical term denoting a region of "Greater Syria", usually translated into English as the *Levant*. In Arabic, ISIL is usually known by its acronym DAESH (or DA'ISH), which has derogatory connotations. Since early July 2014, ISIL has designated itself by the shorter title of "the Islamic State" to signify its ultimate ambition of a global caliphate.

Terms of reference and evidence gathered by the Committee

5. We launched our inquiry last year with these terms of reference: to consider the UK Government's policy on the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, in the wider Iraqi and regional context; and specifically to seek evidence on:

- The implications for UK foreign policy of the existence of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and the development of its relations with the rest of Iraq and with neighbouring countries;
- The role of the UK Government in facilitating the development of a relationship between the Kurdistan Region and the rest of Iraq which helps to realise the economic potential of both and to strengthen security and democratic government in Iraq and the wider region;
- The UK Government's approach to trade and investment with, in and from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, and the priorities that should be pursued there by the Prime Minister's new Trade Envoy to Iraq, Lady Nicholson of Winterbourne;
- The financial and other assistance being offered in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and associated public bodies (including the Westminster Foundation for Democracy and the British Council) to support the further development of parliamentary and governance capacity, democratic institutions (including a free media), civil society and the rights of ethnic and religious minorities, and to promote cultural and educational links with the UK;
- How the FCO is organising its presence and resources in Iraq, in the light of the developing relationship between the Kurdistan Region and the rest of the country.

6. Over the course of the inquiry, we held three formal evidence-taking sessions, along with a number of informal meetings relevant to the inquiry, all at Westminster. Full details of these meetings are listed in Annex A. We visited Iraq in October, meeting senior politicians in Baghdad and the Kurdistan Region, and representatives of the military, minorities, the UN, and humanitarian and human rights groups, amongst others. A full list of all meetings that took place during the visit is provided in Annex B. We also received 19 submissions of written evidence over the course of the inquiry.

7. We are grateful to all of those who took time to provide evidence and to all those who volunteered their time to meet and assist us on our visit to Iraq.

Key themes of the report

8. The fall of Mosul in June and the other events that it triggered clearly provoked a change of emphasis in our inquiry, and we found ourselves spending more time considering security and military issues than we might have anticipated at the outset. However, we consider that the terms of reference announced in February remain an effective prism through which to judge the effectiveness of relevant UK foreign policy and the

appropriateness of its resources. Three key, and inter-related, themes emerged during the inquiry and accordingly form the main aspects of this report:

- The nature of the bilateral relationship between the UK and the Kurdistan Region, and its strengths and weaknesses;
- The FCO's response to the current security crisis in and around the Kurdistan Region, and its support for the KRG;
- The FCO's approach to the KRG's disputes with the Iraqi federal government and its attitude as to the Region's constitutional status.

9. To put these issues in context, we begin with a brief survey of the Kurdistan Region and its history.

2 The Kurdistan Region of Iraq: background

The Kurds and Kurdistan

10. Kurds have been living in northern Iraq since ancient times, as they have been in the neighbouring, mainly mountainous parts of Iran, Syria and Turkey that together comprise Kurdistan, a territory with no formal boundaries or official status, sometimes described as the largest stateless nation in the world.² Kurds might thus be described as one of the indigenous peoples of Iraq. They have preserved their language and distinctive culture over the centuries, despite the spread of Islam (which most Kurds ultimately adopted), and, with it, the gradual penetration of Arabic language and culture over most of historic Mesopotamia, and despite, or perhaps because of, a history of marginalisation, living largely as a subject people at the mountainous fringes of more powerful empires: Turkish, Arab or Persian. More recently, Kurds endured the discriminatory ideology of religious or ethnic chauvinism that took hold in all four countries of Kurdistan during the 20th century, in response to which Kurdish political nationalism—the fight for cultural rights, for more control over local resources, for autonomy or even independence—increasingly flourished. State authorities' attitude to Kurdish nationalism has veered from official indifference, to denial of civil rights, to violent persecution. The latter was the course ultimately taken in Baathist Iraq.³

Kurds in Iraq

11. Within Iraq, Kurds make up around one fifth of the overall population: some 6 million Iraqis are thought to identify as Kurdish, making them one of the three most significant components (alongside Sunni and Shia Arabs) of the mosaic of communities that, since 1921, have made up the Iraqi state.⁴ Iraqi Kurdistan, or South (*Bushiri*) Kurdistan as some Kurds call it, comprises the north-east and extreme north of the country, next to the borders with Turkey and Iran. Most Iraqi Kurds are Sunni, some are Shia, and a minority follow indigenous Kurdish religions such as Yezidism. Non-Kurdish minorities living in Iraqi Kurdistan include the Assyrians, a Christian community with roots in northern Iraq just as deep as those of the Kurds, and the Turcomans, a mainly Muslim community (both Shia and Sunni) descended from a nomadic people culturally related to the Turks. Kurds,

2 There are no formal statistics on the population of Kurdistan but most sources indicate a figure in the region of 25–30 million. This would include non-Kurds living in Kurdistan but not the sizeable Kurdish diaspora.

3 Baathism is a political philosophy of socialist Arab nationalism that was the official ideology of Iraq during the Saddam era and remains that of Syria today. In both countries, Baathism has in practice led to authoritarian governance that (amongst other things) has tended to deny full cultural and civil rights to citizens expressing a non-Arab identity, seeing this as a threat to national cohesion.

4 Shia Arabs, living mainly in southern Iraq, make up around 55–60% of the population. Sunni Arabs, living mainly in the centre-west, comprise around 20% of the population (about the same as the Kurds). Minority communities, including Turcomans and Assyrians, make up the remainder. These figures are widely-accepted estimates, based partly on election results. Official data on ethnicity is not collected in Iraq.

Turcomans, Assyrians and Arabs mingle on Iraqi Kurdistan's southern border with the rest of Iraq.

12. Modern Iraq, rising from the ashes of the Ottoman Empire in 1921, was conceived as an Arab Kingdom, with only limited recognition of its part-Kurdish character.⁵ A Kurdish separatist movement in the early days of the Kingdom was crushed. Efforts by Kurdish leaders over succeeding decades to negotiate more self-government or civil rights generally failed, or else Baghdad was seen as having failed to honour the agreement; and where politics failed, the Kurds at times resorted to guerrilla tactics through their militias, the *Peshmerga* ("They who face death"). At times, they were backed by foreign powers, principally the US and Iran, largely for pragmatic, short-term reasons rather than out of principled support for Kurdish rights.

13. Matters came to a tragic head in the late 1980s, following a project by Saddam Hussein to forcibly "Arabise" parts of northern Iraq, and towards the end of a bloody and bitter war between Iran and Iraq, during which some Iraqi Kurdish factions had received support from Tehran. In 1987, Saddam commenced the *Anfal*,⁶ a systematic campaign to terrorise the Kurdish population and exterminate Kurdish resistance to his rule. By the time it ended in 1988, many thousands had been killed (including in chemical attacks), with many districts of rural Kurdistan cleared of their original populations and deliberately reduced to ruins.

The formation of the Kurdistan Region

14. To the despair of Iraq's Kurds, international reaction to the Anfal was muted, but Saddam's move to crush another Kurdish uprising two years later took place in a changed political landscape. The Iran-Iraq and Cold Wars were over and Saddam's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 had turned Iraq into a pariah state. That the uprising followed an exhortation from President Bush, at the end of the first Gulf War, for Iraqis to rise up against the regime also placed moral pressure on the US and its allies to come to the Kurds' aid. Citing UN Security Council authority, the US, UK and France imposed and jointly policed a no-fly zone in northern Iraq.⁷ Saddam's reaction was to withdraw all government services from the zone,⁸ north of the so-called "Green Line", and to impose a blockade, in the expectation that resistance would soon collapse. The resistance would instead outlast the regime. Iraqi Kurdistan's two dominant forces, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) of Massoud Barzani and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) of Jalal Talabani buried their differences to organise elections for a new "Kurdistan Regional Government" (KRG)

5 See also Q123 [Peter Galbraith]

6 Literally "the spoils of war", taken from the title of a *sura* (chapter) in the Koran concerning a victory by the early Muslims over a numerically stronger band of warriors

7 This was on the basis of UN Security Council Resolution 688 to prevent internal repression by the Iraqi regime, although the Resolution does not expressly authorise a no-fly zone

8 The zone, which covered Iraq north of the 36th parallel in fact excluded some of the most populous parts of Iraqi Kurdistan, to the south and east, including the second city of Sulaymaniyah, but initial sorties into these areas by regime forces were repelled and Saddam thereafter made no serious effort to bring them back under control. However, Saddam retained control over some mixed or Kurdish-majority areas further to the south, including the city of Kirkuk.

and to make plans for enduring the blockade and providing basic public services. For the next 12 years, the region survived, despite food, energy and electricity shortages, and even a collapse in relations between the PUK and KDP in the mid-90s that led to civil war and to parallel governments in the Region's two main cities.

15. By 2003, the Kurdistan Region was reunited and at peace, and beginning to edge into modest prosperity. The Peshmerga played a key role in the Iraq war of that year, fighting alongside coalition forces to overthrow Saddam Hussein. Kurds seized on the new opportunities that initially arose in the democratic era. The PUK and KDP jointly bargained for the installation of a Kurd, Jalal Talabani, as the new democracy's first President: a matter of symbolic importance in a country governed for years under the quasi-racist ideology of Arab Baathism. More significantly, they secured formal recognition for the Kurdistan Region as a federal region of Iraq under a new Iraqi constitution approved by state-wide referendum in 2005.

The Kurdistan Region today

16. The Kurdistan Region comprises the greater part of Iraq's three northernmost governorates: Dohuk, Erbil and Sulaymaniyah,⁹ plus small parts of three neighbouring governorates to the south. Politically, it is a multi-party democracy, headed by an elected President, Massoud Barzani, long-term leader of the Kurdistan Democratic Party, and a Prime Minister, Nechirvan Barzani (nephew of the President, and also of the KDP), heading a cabinet drawn from the 111-member Kurdistan National Assembly, elected via a party list system.

17. The Kurdistan Region is mainly mountainous, and well watered by the standards of the Middle East, but falls away to the dry Mesopotamian plain in the south. It is here that the capital and largest city, Erbil (in Kurdish: Hewler) is situated, and here that the Peshmerga are now tasked with defending a largely flat and naturally defenceless frontier against ISIL. The population is around 6 million, including well over 1 million recently-arrived refugees and internally displaced people. South of the Green Line are the disputed territories: districts that are majority Kurdish or which the KRG considers to be historically Kurdish. Following the events of last summer, the Peshmerga now holds most of this area.

⁹ In March 2014, the KRG proclaimed Halabja as a fourth province of the Kurdistan Region, mainly comprising territory formerly part of Sulaymaniyah province

3 The UK, Iraq and the Kurdistan Region

18. The UK has been more than a bystander to the history outlined in the previous chapter. The UK is the midwife of modern Iraq: it was the UK that in 1921 decided to unite into one state the three Mesopotamian *vilayets* (governorates)—Mosul, Baghdad, and Basra—that it held under a League of Nations mandate following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War One. Shia and Sunni Arabs, Kurds, and smaller communities were thus melded into one nation. This in itself has drawn criticism; in any discussion of Iraq's troubled history, the charge that the UK (with the connivance of the other great powers of the time) created an “artificial” or weak state—perhaps deliberately so, so as to weaken the Arab people or the *Ummah* (the community or “nation” of Islamic believers)—is still sometimes levelled.¹⁰ It has been a feature of ISIL propaganda.¹¹

19. It was also the UK's decision that Iraq should be a monarchy ruled by a Sunni king and that its political class should be dominated by Sunni Arabs, the community which Foreign Office policymakers at the time considered the most politically mature, and with whom they could most readily do business. This was not good news for Iraq's Kurds¹² and, with hindsight, can be seen as setting a precedent of minority Sunni Arab rule that would last almost continuously until Saddam's overthrow in 2003.¹³ It may partially explain why Iraq has struggled ever since to forge a transcendent, unifying national identity, and also explain (though not excuse) Iraq's slide towards sectarian autocracy under Nouri al-Maliki, a long-delayed pendulum swing towards Shia majoritarian rule after decades of Sunni-led authoritarianism.

The UK and Iraq's Kurds

20. The UK was definitely no friend of Kurdish nationalism during the period in which it had significant influence in Iraq, which lasted up until the republican coup of 1958. Kurdish uprisings were crushed, whilst the UK put no pressure on the Iraqi government to implement 1925 League of Nations recommendations on the status of Kurds in the Mosul vilayet. This has not been forgotten in Iraqi Kurdistan, nor the collapse in 1923 of the Treaty of Sèvres, which had laid out putative proposals for the creation of an independent Kurdish state, in what is now south-east Turkey or the UK's role in the Sykes-Picot agreement, to divide much of the Middle East into French, British and Russian spheres of influence, with no proposal for a Kurdish state. (The agreement has not been forgotten in Baghdad or other Arab capitals either.) It should be added that the Sykes-Picot plan, which

10 See also London Kurdish Institute ([KUR 7](#)), paragraph 7 (providing a Kurdish rather than Arab perspective)

11 ISIL released a video titled *The End of Sykes-Picot* in late June 2014, around the same time that it proclaimed a new caliphate straddling the Iraq-Syria border (“[ISIS declares Caliphate in Iraq and Syria](#)”, *The Guardian*, 30 June 2014)

12 We acknowledge the view of one of our witnesses, Dr Ali Allawi (a biographer of Iraq's first king) that Kurdish leaders had had a voice within the political system during the monarchical period: it was after the 1958 revolution that Kurds (and Shia) became increasingly marginalised. (Q124)

13 See also Peter Galbraith ([KUR 017](#)), paragraph 7 and London Kurdish Institute ([KUR 7](#)), paragraph 2

would have split what is now Iraq in two, was never implemented (though the concept of French and British spheres of influence in the Middle East survived), and that Sèvres did not collapse because of the machinations of the UK or other European powers, but because of Turkey's victory in its War of Independence—in which, as it happens, many Ottoman Kurds fought for the Turks. The UK also mulled at length over the status of the Mosul governorate of Iraq because of its strong Kurdish character,¹⁴ and gave serious thought to uniting it with the new Kurdish state envisaged at Sèvres. When the UK finally decided, in 1925, that Mosul should remain part of Iraq, this decision aligned with UK interests at the time, but also followed the recommendations of a League of Nations commission. We make these comments to underline that, whilst UK policy at the time may legitimately be seen as flawed, and to have either created or exacerbated problems that have still not been solved today, the UK—even at the height of its imperial powers in the early 20th century—took decisions on the shape and future of Iraq not in a vacuum but in response to events on the ground over which it may have had little or no control. In a report published in 2015, it is necessary to underline these points because of the extent to which this history is still being contested in modern Iraq.

From the Baathist era to the present day

21. If Iraqi Kurds today take a largely positive view of the British, it is in large part thanks to the UK's more recent record.¹⁵ From the late 1970s, the UK began to acquire a reputation as a safe haven for Kurds (and other Iraqi dissidents) forced into exile by the increasingly brutal rule of Saddam Hussein. These exiles include several among the current generation of Kurdish leaders or their children. (Today there are thought to be tens of thousands of Kurds living in the UK, although many will be of Turkish origin. Over two out of every three Iraqi Kurds studying abroad are studying in the UK.¹⁶) The UK also takes much credit from Iraqi Kurds for another safe haven: that set up under UN auspices in 1991, and which ultimately evolved into today's Kurdistan Region.¹⁷ The UK's key role in the creation and policing of the zone is still remembered with much gratitude, as we noted on our visit to the Region. The UK is also thanked for the behind-the-scenes role our diplomats and politicians played in brokering peace and restoring trust after KDP-PUK relations violently collapsed in the mid-90s.¹⁸ There is also the 2003 Iraq War: it divides Iraqis as it divides the UK, but for Kurds it was a war of liberation and the UK was on the right side.¹⁹

14 Mosul was by far the most ethnically mixed of the three vilayets. Kurds were the largest ethnic grouping in Mosul although they may not have been in the majority.

15 Q8 [Professor Gareth Stansfield]; APPG Kurdistan Region of Iraq ([KUR 12](#)), paragraph 4

16 KRG High Representative to the UK ([KUR 15](#)), paragraph 45; APPG Kurdistan Region of Iraq ([KUR 12](#)), paragraph 15

17 Q11 [Professor Gareth Stansfield]; KRG High Representative to the UK ([KUR 15](#)), paragraph 9; Professor Gareth Stansfield ([KUR 14](#)), paragraph 1

18 Professor Gareth Stansfield ([KUR 14](#)), paragraph 3

19 KRG High Representative to the UK ([KUR 15](#)), paragraph 9

4 The constitutional disputes between Baghdad and Erbil

22. The launch of our inquiry in late February last year coincided with a point when relations between the KRG and the federal government of Nouri al-Maliki, seldom less than strained, were sliding into the abyss. In the eyes of the KRG, the main points of the dispute all relate to the proper interpretation of the 2005 constitution.

23. Kurds were by far the most enthusiastic supporters of Iraq's new constitution, with 99% of voters in the three mainly Kurdish governorates approving it by referendum. The then KRG High Representative to the UK told us that it was "the best document that had ever been produced in Iraq".²⁰ According to one of our witnesses, an adviser to the Kurdish leadership at the time, Kurds supported the constitution because they saw it as guaranteeing that the very strong autonomy they already enjoyed would continue.²¹ At the conclusion of the 2003 Iraq War, it was the instinct of many Kurds to press for independence. Whether that was a realistic prospect may be debated, but Kurds are likely to have seen the conditions they secured in the constitution as a necessary price for agreeing to be partners in a new, federal and democratic Iraq.²² It is unlikely that Iraq's Arabs would have seen it in those terms.

24. Over the course of the inquiry, the KRG has quite properly taken the opportunity to present its grievances to the Committee, and has been an articulate advocate in its own cause. Its fundamental charge is that the federal government has, in bad faith, consistently failed to honour the constitution, and that because of this, the KRG has been forced to reconsider whether it wishes to remain within Iraq on current terms.²³ Its specific complaints (some of which we return to in more detail in the report) include:

- That Baghdad has, since January 2014 failed to assign to the KRG the equitable proportion of the budget (fixed by statute at 17%) to which it is constitutionally entitled to help pay for public services;
- That Baghdad has wilfully misinterpreted relevant provisions of the constitution on hydrocarbons, wrongly insisting that they reserve to the federal government the sole right to export oil and gas;
- That Baghdad has not adequately supported the Peshmerga, as the constitutionally recognised national guard of the Kurdistan Region.

20 Q92

21 Peter W Galbraith, *The End of Iraq* (New York, 2006), pages 161-169 and 205. See also Q130 [Peter Galbraith]

22 APPG Kurdistan Region of Iraq ([KUR 12](#)), paragraphs 36-40

23 Q92-96 [KRG High Representative to the UK] KRG High Representative to the UK ([KUR 15](#)), paragraphs 14-15

- That Baghdad has failed to hold local plebiscites to determine whether disputed territories south of the Green Line wish to join the Kurdistan Region, as the constitution mandated should have been done by November 2007.

We note that significant progress has recently been made on a number of these issues, particularly on oil and gas and the national budget, and we deal with these issues in more detail in paragraphs 32 and elsewhere.

25. The intensification of these disputes, combined with ISIL's June offensive, cutting Iraq almost in half, led President Barzani of the KRG to announce in early July that Iraq's Kurds could no longer be prisoners of the country's "tragic situation" and that he would put a proposal for a formal referendum on independence before the Kurdistan National Assembly.²⁴ (The proposal is currently suspended following an intensification of the security crisis in August.)

26. It was perhaps a symptom of the turmoil and division of the federal administration during the time of the inquiry that we tended to lack interlocutors who could formally present the Iraqi Government's case, and its positions on the various constitutional disputes, although we are familiar with some of the arguments which it would deploy. We do not attempt to come to a definitive view about the proper interpretation of the constitution, but where it appears that the KRG has reason on its side, we say so in this report, and we suggest that this be reflected in the approach of the UK Government. In most cases, we expect that this would be best done through private and informal channels. From our discussions with the KRG's leadership, we sense a pragmatic acceptance that the UK Government is unlikely to take a strong public stance on what it may perceive (with some justification) to be the internal affairs of a sovereign country.

The UK as mediator?

27. We have sought views during this inquiry on whether it would be appropriate for the UK Government to help mediate any disputes between the federal and regional governments. We left Baghdad in October with an impression of a UK Embassy that is well connected to federal policy-makers at very senior level, and appears to have their confidence, indicating that it may be well placed to facilitate such a role, although such is the nature of Iraqi politics, with its many centres of power and bitter political enmities, that we do not imagine it to be easy for the UK's diplomats to simultaneously retain the confidence of all of the country's main power-brokers.²⁵ We are also uncertain as to whether the Embassy currently has the depth of human resources that would be required for the complex role of mediating between Baghdad and Erbil.

28. In order to act effectively as mediator the UK should ideally be perceived as an honest broker by all sides. As noted earlier, our blemished role in the earlier history of Iraq is still remembered, as is our much more recent role in the 2003 Iraq War and the period of

24 ["Iraq Kurdistan independence referendum planned"](#), BBC News Online, 1 July 2014

25 Q13; Q15; Q19 [Professor Charles Tripp]

occupation that followed. We have already mentioned that for the Kurds, the war was one of liberation. Shias take a more ambivalent view (and may be more cynical as to the motives of the Western powers) and for many Sunnis the war was a disaster.

29. It appears to be the Kurds who nowadays in Iraq hold the most uniformly positive view of the UK and its government. A strong message we have taken from the inquiry is that official representatives of the Kurdistan Region, politicians, soldiers, and public servants, respect the UK and see it as a valued partner.²⁶ We sense that this also reflects wider grassroots feeling. Senior interlocutors from the KRG told us in Erbil that if the UK wished to help mediate then it would be welcome. However, they said that they doubted whether Baghdad currently had the confidence or sense of unity to lay itself open to international mediation.

30. On our visit to Baghdad in October, we enjoyed constructive exchanges with senior federal politicians, who welcomed our interest; but we took away the message that they saw resolution of disputes between the two administrations as an internal matter and that the unity of Iraq was non-negotiable.

31. An additional consideration is whether there is anything for the UK to be gained from holding itself out as a mediator. Amongst witnesses, there was some doubt, because of the level of bitterness between the two sides and because of the UK's history in Iraq.²⁷ Professor Charles Tripp contrasted perceptions of that history within Iraq: for Kurds, it was, in part, a "history of the letting down of the Kurdish people at various moments", whereas in Baghdad, the UK was seen as a more devious presence: "you can never displease people by casting the British as a sinister force in Iraq".²⁸ Professor Tripp remarked that the UK's relations with the Kurdistan Region would be carefully analysed by politicians in Baghdad, and that any gesture appearing to confer legitimacy on the now avowedly separatist KRG would be "seized upon in the rest of Iraq".²⁹ We note that the UK Government has been consistently clear throughout the unfolding crisis that it wishes Iraq to remain strong and united, but that it wishes to see a more "inclusive" government in Baghdad.³⁰

The deal on oil and gas

32. Towards the end of our inquiry, the KRG and the new federal administration reached what appears to have been a breakthrough agreement in relation to the first three of the four points of dispute set out in paragraph 24; oil, the national budget, and federal support

26 Q8 [Professor Gareth Stansfield]

27 Q17 [Professor Gareth Stansfield] John Roberts cautioned against the UK Government becoming too involved on the ground that "We have too much of a history in Iraq to be regarded either as a neutral arbiter in any way or as a disinterested absentee" (Q39)

28 Q9

29 Q9

30 HC Deb, 14 July 2014, [col 563](#) [Commons Chamber]; "[Iraq is in last-chance saloon as a single state, says Philip Hammond](#)", *The Telegraph*, 14 October 2014. Tweet by Foreign Secretary, 5 January 2014: "[Good meeting with Iraqi Foreign Minister al-Jaafari to discuss fight against #ISIL. UK supports inclusive, sovereign & democratic #Iraq](#)"

for the Peshmerga.³¹ We note, and welcome, the evidence of the Minister Mr Ellwood (addressing us after the announcement of the first, interim, deal rather than the second agreement, which would last for a year³²) that UK diplomats had had some involvement in helping the two sides reach agreement.³³ It is to be hoped that the agreement holds, as it would appear to benefit both sides, and to contribute to the strengthening of Iraq.³⁴ The KRG is in need of federal support to shore up its crisis-hit economy, whereas a vigorous oil export industry, with revenues accruing both to the KRG and to the state coffers in Baghdad is in the interest of all Iraqis.³⁵ Financial support for the Peshmerga as they hold the line against ISIL is likewise to the benefit of all Iraqis, and of the wider world. In view of the evidence we received that the release of the Kurdistan Region's natural gas reserves onto the international market could help strengthen continental Europe's energy security,³⁶ and reduce its dependency on other sources, it is in the wider interests of the UK, and Europe, that Baghdad and Erbil come to a mutually acceptable and more permanent arrangement on hydrocarbon resources, and we hope that UK diplomatic efforts continue to be directed towards helping achieve this outcome.

33. It is for the people of Iraq, and their governments, to sort out their disagreements, and by constitutional means. Where the UK considers that Iraq's constitution is not being respected, by either the federal or Kurdistan Regional Government, it should not be afraid to express views, but should be mindful that the UK's complex history of involvement in Iraq may not always make it best placed to be a candid friend. We expect that in the vast majority of cases, it is best that advice and views are offered through private and informal channels, as appears to currently be the case. Whatever Iraq's long-term future, we agree with the UK Government that its current diplomatic priority should be to help all of Iraq's communities and democratic institutions, including the federal and Kurdistan Regional Governments, mend fences and unite against the threat from ISIL.

31 Under the deal, the KRG will provide the federal government with 550,000 BPD, for sale by the state seller SOMO: 250,000 from fields in the Kurdistan Region and 300,000 from Kirkuk fields controlled by the North Oil Company. (It appears that the KRG is free to trade surplus oil on the international markets, although this is not expressly spelt out in the formal communiqué.) In return, the federal government will resume paying the KRG the 17% of the national budget to which it is entitled, plus additional funds for withheld budget payments. Baghdad has agreed to make payments to help cover the Peshmerga's expenses for fighting ISIL

32 We note that, as at the time of agreeing to publish this report, the Iraqi Parliament has yet to formally ratify the 12-month deal

33 Q143

34 See also Genel Energy ([KUR 2](#)) paragraphs 9-14 (submitted before the agreement was reached)

35 Q38 [John Roberts]

36 KRG High Representative to the UK ([KUR 15](#)), paragraph 20; British Council ([KUR 4](#)) paragraph 1; John Roberts ([KUR 19](#)), page 11; Q36 [John Roberts]

5 The Kurdistan Regional Government as a partner for the UK Government

34. During the inquiry, the KRG informed us that it views the UK Government as its “partner of choice”.³⁷ It is debatable what this would mean in practice, but we take from it that the KRG views its relationship with the UK as important and in some way special, because of our intertwined histories and diaspora links: because of the UK’s practical help for the Iraqi Kurds at difficult times in the recent past; and because the KRG considers that the UK Government may be especially well-placed to contribute to the Region’s development as a stable and thriving democracy.³⁸ This section of the report considers the evidence and information we have gathered during the inquiry on the strategic value and strength of that relationship.

Working with the KRG

35. In previous work during the course of the 2010-15 Parliament, we have given consideration to what is sometimes summarised as the “interests versus values” debate in foreign policy; whether there may be instances where, for all that we may have interests in common with a foreign government, we do not share its values and may seriously compromise our own by working or trading with it.³⁹

36. It is very clear that the KRG is not such a government: it is the government of a society that remains traditional, conservative and patriarchal in many ways, and its level of political probity are, as one of our witnesses put it, “not Scandinavian”⁴⁰ but the values of the government and its people are not so very different from ours, and any shortcomings there may be are of a lesser order of magnitude than those of some other governments with which the UK does business. Any observations or criticisms we make below should be considered in that context. Anyone who has visited the Kurdistan Region will have been struck, as we were, by most Kurds’ evident openness to the rest of the world, and their keenness to stress their democratic, and “modern” credentials (in contrast, by implication, to some of their neighbours). English is increasingly the second language of choice amongst the political class and the younger generation.⁴¹ It is a matter of pride to Iraqi Kurds that home-bred extremism is a relatively marginal problem, and that the violent targeting of Westerners is practically unknown. The advent of ISIL has placed renewed and urgent emphasis on Iraqi Kurds’ insistence that they are on the same side as the West, with the same common enemy. As a KRG Minister told us in Erbil, there is probably nowhere

37 KRG High Representative to the UK ([KUR 15](#)), paragraph 44

38 KRG High Representative to the UK ([KUR 15](#)), paragraphs 48-56. See also Dlawer Ala’Aldeen ([KUR 1](#)), paragraphs 7 and 14

39 Foreign Affairs Committee, Third Report of Session 2012-13, *The FCO’s Human Rights Work in 2011*, HC 116, paragraph 45; Foreign Affairs Committee, Fifth Report of Session 2013-14, *The UK’s Relations with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain*, HC 88, paragraph 134. See also Professor Gareth Stansfield ([KUR 14](#)), paragraph 8

40 Q137 [Dr Ali Allawi]

41 See also Dlawer Ala’Aldeen ([KUR 1](#)), paragraphs 14 and 15; British Council ([KUR 4](#)) paragraphs 4.1 and 4.2

else in the wider region where, at almost every level of society, there is a more positive view of the West in general, and of the UK in particular.⁴² We found this attitude reflected in our dealings with the KRG itself—not that the KRG was without criticism of some aspects of the bilateral relationship.

The Kurdistan Region's politics and democratic culture

37. The Kurdistan Region's three main parties are the moderate nationalist KDP, the ostensibly more left-leaning PUK, and Goran ("Change"), a new party that has recently emerged to challenge corruption and campaign for institutional and public sector reform. In elections in 2013, Goran supplanted the PUK as second party, winning the most votes in the Region's second city of Sulaymaniyah, formerly a PUK stronghold. Previously the sole opposition party, in 2014 Goran agreed to take up posts in government, including the critical ministries of Finance and Peshmerga Affairs.

38. "Big tent" government has been the norm in the Region since the advent of democracy, with practically every party having a seat at the cabinet table. We understand that this has been seen as a means of building consensus and delivering greater political stability in a society with painful memories of splits in the past that other powers had exploited, and which caused civil war as recently as the mid-1990s.

39. Aspects of the Region's political culture give rise to concerns. One is that the PUK and KDP, nowadays ostensibly "normal" and constitutional political parties, both retain militias, an issue to which we will return.⁴³ Others include the existence of multi-party coalition government, and with it the apparent absence of an effective opposition to hold Ministers to account; a very clear tendency towards dynastic political rule and towards voting on the basis of tribal or regional allegiance rather than informed policy choice; and evidence of much of the Region's new wealth accruing to a politically connected elite or of patronage being used as an instrument of political power.⁴⁴ These should certainly concern the UK and other Western partners of the Kurdistan Region, but it is not trite to observe that if these are defects then they are not absent from the UK or other Western democracies.⁴⁵ Any objective assessment of the Region's politics must also make allowances for the unstable environment in which the Kurdistan Region has had to operate for much of its history, and its neighbours' poor record in developing effective democratic cultures by comparison.

42 See also British Council ([KUR 4](#)) paragraph 3.3; Professor Dlawer Ala'Aldeen ([KUR 1](#)), paragraph 7

43 See also Ranj Alaaldin ([KUR 18](#)), page 3

44 Q6-7 [Professor Gareth Stansfield and Professor Charles Tripp]

45 The multi-party system of government that has evolved informally in the Kurdistan Region is similar to the system formally enshrined in procedures for the Northern Ireland Assembly. In both cases, an unusually inclusive form of governance, though recognised as imperfect, was thought to be necessary in order to shore up an inherently fragile political process, in part by ensuring that the "spoils" of government are shared out widely. In Germany, a governing "grand coalition" currently holds 80% of Bundestag seats.

40. Most evidence we have received portrays the Kurdistan Region as an imperfect but genuine and developing democracy,⁴⁶ with systems for relatively effective scrutiny, elections that are generally free and fair, respect for the general separation of religion and state, and sufficient dynamism in the political system to enable new movements, such as Goran, to emerge. We were also pleased to note, on our visit to Erbil, that the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, which has, since late 2010, been running a programme to help parliamentary committees and individual deputies improve their audit, scrutiny and consultative capacities, provided a positive report of the extent to which politicians in the Region engaged with the programme.⁴⁷

41. However, in the words of one witness (addressing us in May 2014, shortly before the current security crisis), the Region's politics have reached "an important inflection point",⁴⁸ following elections in 2013, in which Goran had broken the two party KDP-PUK hegemony, and amidst signs of rising public discontent with corruption, nepotism and public sector inefficiency that the KRG itself acknowledges are all problematic.⁴⁹ The test would be what the Region's political establishment did next: would it respond positively to such public demands, with political and public sector reforms, or would it try to put the genie of protest politics back in the bottle, seeing it as a threat to its own interests?⁵⁰

42. The security crisis that erupted in summer 2014 has put domestic political concerns largely on a back-burner, as political factions united to fight a common enemy but it was made clear to us on our visit in October that an increasingly sophisticated electorate is unlikely to allow the debate over what sort of politics people want to have to be postponed indefinitely.

Human and civil rights and gender equality

43. In Erbil, we met representatives of local human rights organisations and NGOs, and of the KRG's High Council for Women's Affairs, who largely corroborated the evidence we received during the inquiry of a government and society on the right trajectory with regards to human and civil rights and gender equality.⁵¹ They told us that this was in part down to reforms instigated by the KRG (for instance, laws on press freedom or for the criminalisation of domestic violence) and in part to wider societal changes over which the KRG has had only partial control: the impacts of globalisation and digital media, and the growth of a young urban middle class, better educated and more travelled than their parents. We were also informed, however, that these liberalisations had encouraged conservative and reactionary forces in the Kurdistan Region to mobilise in response, and to

46 Q1-5 [Professor Gareth Stansfield and Professor Charles Tripp]; Q7 [Professor Gareth Stansfield]; APPG Kurdistan Region of Iraq ([KUR 12](#)) paragraphs 48-51; Genel Energy ([KUR 2](#)), paragraph 5; Professor Dlawer Ala'Aldeen ([KUR 1](#)), paragraph 4

47 See also KRG High Representative to the UK ([KUR 15](#)), paragraph 51; Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([KUR 6](#)), paragraphs 19-21

48 Q2 [Professor Gareth Stansfield]

49 Q136 [KRG High Representative to the UK]

50 Q1-3 [Professor Gareth Stansfield] Professor Gareth Stansfield ([KUR 14](#)), paragraph 8. See also Q136 [Peter Galbraith]

51 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([KUR 6](#)), paragraphs 4 and 25

seek to resist further reforms. A number of outstanding concerns were brought to our attention: the continuing presence (though apparently in marked decline) of female genital mutilation;⁵² instances of differential treatment of men and women by the criminal justice system because of the continuing influence of Islamic or customary law, including instances, albeit apparently now rare, of women being imprisoned for the “crime” of adultery; and the use of violence by the police against peaceful protestors or people in detention.⁵³ There have occasionally been disturbing cases of investigative reporters or editors being murdered or “disappeared”.⁵⁴ It was also disappointing to note the extent to which the political process remains overwhelmingly male-dominated, with just one woman in a cabinet of 27.⁵⁵ In a meeting with the KRG’s High Council for Women’s Affairs, we were informed that progress was being made in tackling discrimination and violence against women, but that the passing of progressive laws did not always lead to grassroots changes or to new laws actually being enforced in the courts, and that more education was needed. The KRG has told us that it recognises its promotion of better human rights as a work in progress, and would welcome the UK’s mentoring and support in addressing some of the issues.⁵⁶ The (female) then KRG High Representative to the UK singled out help from the UK in advancing gender equality as something the KRG would particularly welcome.⁵⁷

Minority communities

44. The image of the Kurdistan Region that the KRG projects to the wider world is of a haven of tolerance and moderation in the wider Middle East.⁵⁸ We found this to be largely confirmed in the evidence we received.⁵⁹ Centuries of uneasy co-existence between Kurds and their Assyrian and Turcoman neighbours that on occasion led to tragic violence appear to have been replaced with relative harmony, and members of both minorities sit at the cabinet table. Christians appear to be largely free from the intimidation and persecution that has been a dismal feature of life in the rest of Iraq since 2003: we understand that a significant component of the Christian community is in fact made up of post-2003 arrivals from the rest of Iraq, seeking a more tolerant environment in which they can live in peace.⁶⁰ Witnesses also told us that there was, if anything increasing respect for Yezidism and other local religions as indigenous, ancient and authentic expressions of the faith of the Kurdish people.⁶¹ We do not doubt that there may still be some religious or

52 Q103 [KRG High Representative to the UK]

53 See also [“Anger Lingers in Iraqi Kurdistan After a Crackdown”](#), *New York Times*, 18 May 2011

54 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([KUR 6](#)), paragraph 26; HC Deb, 15 January 2014, [cols 286WH and 294WH](#) [Westminster Hall]

55 Q103 [KRG High Representative to the UK]

56 KRG High Representative to the UK ([KUR 15](#)), paragraphs 60 and 61

57 Q104-105

58 Q75 [KRG High Representative to the UK]

59 Q28 [Professor Gareth Stansfield]; Genel Energy ([KUR 2](#)), paragraph 4

60 KRG High Representative to the UK ([KUR 15](#)), paragraph 34

61 Q28-29 [Professor Gareth Stansfield]

ethnic-based discrimination at the grassroots,⁶² but if there is any institutionalised discrimination within the Kurdistan Region then it was not brought to our attention during the inquiry. We have more concerns as regards relations between Kurds and Sunni Arabs in borderland districts, as discussed later in the report.

45. Islam is a background presence in the law and in the conservative culture of wider Kurdish society, but we found there to be a general respect for the separation of religion and state, particularly among the political elite, who made clear to us that they view the intrusion of literalist and ultra-conservative versions of Islam into party politics as toxic.⁶³ There are Islamist parties with seats in the Kurdistan National Assembly but they are a more marginal presence than in the rest of Iraq or in most other countries of the Middle East.

46. The KRG's response to the recent massive influx of displaced people—including persecuted Yezidis, Christians, Shabaks⁶⁴ and Shia—escaping violence in Syria and Iraq also speaks for the generosity and openness of the KRG, and of the people of the Kurdistan Region in general.

47. The Kurdistan Region of Iraq is a genuine democracy, albeit an imperfect and still developing one, and a beacon of tolerance and moderation in a wider region where extremism and instability are on the rise. Its values are broadly our values. The UK is fortunate to have in such a volatile part of the world a partner as relatively moderate, pragmatic, stable, democratic, secular and reflexively pro-Western as the KRG. It is emphatically in the best interests of the UK that the Kurdistan Region continues on its path of democratic development, and has friends and supporters as it does so, particularly at this time of crisis for the Region, when the progress it has achieved over the last 20 years is under threat. The UK Government should engage with it on that basis.

48. The Kurdistan Regional Government acknowledges ongoing challenges in developing its democratic institutions and its human and civil rights culture, and in advancing gender equality, and should be judged on how it responds to these challenges. There are also concerns as to public corruption and media freedom that it must address. In addition, as the Kurdistan Regional Government has stated that it would welcome the UK's mentoring and support in connection with some of these areas, we urge the UK Government to respond positively to this invitation.

Strategic aspects of the relationship

49. The KRG's use of the term “partner of choice” implies awareness, and perhaps carries an implicit warning to the UK Government, that there are other potential partners

62 Q28 [Professor Gareth Stansfield]

63 Q62-63 [KRG High Representative to the UK]

64 Shabaks are an ethno-religious community of northern Iraq, speaking a language related to Kurdish. Their religious practice is syncretic, containing elements of Islamic and pre-Islamic beliefs. ISIL have persecuted them

available for the KRG and that, if the UK were not to reciprocate the offer of closer ties, the KRG might be reluctantly compelled to look elsewhere, including to regimes whose values and interests do not always match ours.⁶⁵ The Kurdistan Region's positioning, at the crossroads of Turkey, Iran, the Arab world and the Caucasus, its access to water resources, growing economy and relatively educated workforce, and its status as a rising energy power mean that it is unlikely to lack potential suitors, at least for as long as the Iraqi federal government remains weak and unable to fully assert its authority over Iraq's foreign relations.⁶⁶ These same factors make the KRG a potentially valued intermediary for dialogue with regional powers with whom the UK has sometimes struggled to communicate, but which it needs to work with in order to achieve some of its core policies.⁶⁷

Relations with Iran

50. We noted during the inquiry that the KRG's relationship with Iran is strong and, if anything, appears to be growing, despite ideological differences and the Islamic Republic's opposition to Kurdish nationalism (including public rhetoric opposing the separation of the Kurdistan Region from Iraq⁶⁸) and perceived poor record in recognising the civil rights of its Kurdish minority. Iran has been the main buyer so far of the KRG's oil products,⁶⁹ and the two governments signed a long-term energy deal in April 2014 (although details of the deal remain somewhat vague⁷⁰). We noted when we visited the Kurdistan Region that Tehran's prompt offer of humanitarian, military and intelligence support to the KRG in June whilst the Western world, including the UK, equivocated over how to respond had had a powerful positive impact at governmental level.

51. It is only rational for the KRG to seek to have effective relations with its powerful neighbour and we do not consider that the apparent deepening of relations should be concerning in itself. The UK Government is itself in a phase of relative optimism over future relations with the Islamic Republic, as we noted in a report last year;⁷¹ however, a return to more normal diplomatic relations continues to be delayed, meaning that, in the run-up to what it is hoped will be a landmark deal on Iran's nuclear programme in 2015, channels of communication between the UK and Iran are still not fully open. Iran is also an ally, of sorts, for the West in the conflict with ISIL, although it is in the current interests of both sides to play that relationship down. We are under no illusions that Tehran is

65 See also KRG High Representative to the UK ([KUR 15](#)), paragraphs 45 and 62

66 British Council ([KUR 4](#)) paragraph 3.2

67 The FCO is currently committed, amongst other things, to "leading international efforts to resolve concerns about Iran's nuclear programme", "protecting the UK against terrorism, and "working for peace and long-term stability in the Middle East and North Africa", including, in Syria, "supporting diplomatic efforts that lead to an end to violence and process of genuine political transition, and investigations into the grave human rights situation." (Foreign and Commonwealth Office, "[FCO Policies](#)" [accessed January 2015])

68 "[Iran warns of fallout from Iraq disintegration](#)", *Press TV Online*, 30 June 2014. See also APPG Kurdistan Region of Iraq ([KUR 16](#)), paragraph 20

69 Q35 [John Roberts]

70 Q49 [John Roberts]

71 Foreign Affairs Committee, Third Report of Session 2013-14, [UK Policy Towards Iran](#), HC 547

ultimately pursuing its own interests in the Kurdistan Region, as it is in Iraq as a whole. Sources in Baghdad told us that elements at very senior levels of the Iranian regime would prefer Iraq as an Iranian satrapy rather than a sovereign state in control of its foreign policy.⁷²

Relations with Turkey

52. In a report published in 2012, we noted that Turkish democracy had reached a “critical phase”;⁷³ a view that subsequent developments have confirmed. Questions have also been raised as to its foreign policy: Ankara’s conviction that Syria has no future under Assad is widely shared (including by the UK Government), but the manner in which it has pursued this aim has raised concerns that its regional goals have become increasingly divergent from those of its NATO partners and other Western allies. There are also concerns as to the extent to which Western diplomats still have purchase on the Erdogan government.⁷⁴ There is no doubt, however, that Turkish involvement would be crucial if the Syrian crisis is ever to be resolved.

53. Turkey is by far the Kurdistan Region’s most important foreign trading partner.⁷⁵ Tens of thousands of Turkish expatriates—ethnic Turks and Kurds alike—live and work in the Region. Presidents Barzani and Erdogan have both invested personally in the relationship, with the former on one occasion even appearing at an election rally for then Prime Minister Erdogan and his AKP party in a Kurdish district of southern Turkey. Ankara and Erbil are also joint signatories (against the express opposition of the Iraqi federal government) of what the governments’ publicity describes as a “50-year deal”⁷⁶ to make Turkey the main client for the Region’s gas, and provide the Region with a sea route to market for its oil. The development of relations between the Kurdistan Region and Turkey, a state which has its own Kurdish “problem” and which, until comparatively recently, did not even formally recognise the Kurds as a people, is superficially remarkable. However, as witnesses told us, the relationship is grounded on both sides in hard-headed self-interest, with each seeing the energy deal as potentially transformative: for Turkey’s energy security, and ambitions to be the energy hub of the eastern Mediterranean region, and for the Kurdistan Region’s economic self-sufficiency.⁷⁷

54. Turkey has come under fire from many Iraqi Kurds for its perceived failure to support the besieged Kurds of northern Syria against ISIL. At the root of the problem, for many Iraqi Kurds, is Turkey’s ideological objection to formally recognising the full rights of its

72 Edward Oakden of the FCO told us that “the sort of Iraq that Iran wants to see is very different from the sort of inclusive Iraq ... which we want to see” (Q155)

73 Foreign Affairs Committee, Twelfth Report of Session 2010-12, [UK-Turkey relations and Turkey’s Regional Role](#), summary. HC 1567

74 [“Biden to meet with Erdogan as divide between US and Turkey widens”](#), *The Guardian*, 21 November 2014

75 Q134 [Dr Ali Allawi]; KRG High Representative to the UK ([KUR 15](#)), paragraph 24

76 [“Turkey’s Best Ally: The Kurds”](#), *New York Times*, 22 June 2014

77 Q23-24 [Professor Gareth Stansfield] Q36 and Q44 [John Roberts]; Q90-91 [KRG High Representative to the UK] Q133 [Peter Galbraith]; Professor Gareth Stansfield ([KUR 14](#)), paragraph 10; APPG Kurdistan Region of Iraq ([KUR 12](#)), paragraph 41

Kurdish citizens, including the right to local autonomy, and its criminalisation of the Turkish-Kurdish PKK Party, which is allied to Kurdish resistance leaders in Syria. We understand that within the KRG itself tensions at times arise between the KDP and other political factions as to whether the relationship with the Erdogan administration has become too close, or whether there should be a more public discussion of discontent with Turkey's Syria policy⁷⁸ but KRG ministers made clear to us on our visit to Erbil that the relationship between the KRG and Turkey remains solid and that both sides are committed to the full implementation of the energy agreement.⁷⁹ It was also made clear that there is frequent dialogue on wider issues, including the war against ISIL and developments in Syria.⁸⁰ Our visit to Erbil in October coincided with a diplomatic breakthrough in relation to the siege of Kobane, the mainly Kurdish city on Syria's border with Turkey, which had been encircled by ISIL forces since the summer and had appeared to be on the point of falling. Turkey apparently withdrew objections to the US air-dropping weapons to Kurdish resistance fighters in the city, and also agreed to open its borders to let Peshmerga in from Iraq to help defend the city. We understand that the KRG was closely involved in the relevant discussions.⁸¹ As we publish this report three months later, Kobane remains besieged, but it has not fallen to ISIL, and scores of ISIL fighters have been killed. This marks a relatively rare setback in ISIL's Syrian ground war.

55. The Kurdistan Regional Government has strategic value for the UK Government as a bridge to other regional powers with whom direct dialogue may be difficult, but which the UK must work with in order to achieve the policies to which it is committed. We urge the UK Government to be mindful that if it is unable fully to reciprocate the Kurdistan Regional Government's offer of closer partnership, the KRG might be reluctantly compelled to look elsewhere for support including to regimes whose values and interests do not always match those of the UK.

Strength of current UK Government relations with the KRG

56. The KRG clearly thinks highly of the UK and is grateful for the support present and past governments have offered. But it also took the opportunity afforded by the inquiry to raise with us some concerns about aspects of the bilateral relationship. The underlying message we received was of concerns that the relationship is not deepening at the rate that the KRG would like it to, and of some frustration that some relatively obvious obstacles to improved links between the UK and the Kurdistan Region have not yet been cleared.⁸² This

78 We understand that the KDP tends to share Ankara's hostility to and suspicion of the PKK's Syrian-Kurdish sister party, the PYD, whilst other parties in the coalition want the PYD to be given more support in its fight with ISIL.

79 In June, the KRG Representatives told us that recent events in Mosul and Syria had made the bilateral relationship with Ankara stronger, not weaker (Q106)

80 See also KRG High Representative to the UK ([KUR 15](#)), paragraphs 24-27

81 See also Ranj Alaaldin ([KUR 18](#)), page 2

82 See also Dlawer Ala'Aldeen, a former KRG Minister ([KUR 1](#)), paragraph 8

is despite the UK Government stating in evidence that it too sees the KRG at its “partner of choice”.⁸³

57. In its written evidence, the KRG raised diverse concerns about a number of matters, such as the perceived lack of visibility of the British Council in Erbil and a perceived failure by the UK to reciprocate the Kurdistan Region’s significant investment in and support for UK universities.⁸⁴ The KRG also commented on a visa system for entry into the UK that appeared to be needlessly cumbersome, despite the opening in 2013 of a Visa Application Centre in Erbil.⁸⁵ (Written evidence from other organisations noted the unusually high number of rejections produced by the UK’s visa application process in the Kurdistan Region, suggesting that the UK Government look into it.⁸⁶). On our visit to Erbil, the KRG also remarked to us on a lack of progress in establishing a joint ministerial committee that had been agreed to during a KRG visit to London in May 2014 led by Prime Minister Barzani. When we put these comments to the FCO, the rather unconvincing response was that the committee was now in existence but (as of November) had not yet met.⁸⁷ KRG representatives also expressed some disappointment that a proposed collaboration with the National School of Government International for mentoring in public service reform had not yet come to anything. The Minister, Mr Ellwood, told us that the UK Government was “training civil servants in various ministries and working with them in order to improve the Government’s transparency and accountability”.⁸⁸

58. We request a progress report from the UK Government on whether the joint ministerial committee agreed with the KRG in May 2014 has yet met and has an agreed programme, and on progress made so far in mentoring the KRG in civil service and public sector reform.

The FCO’s presence in the Kurdistan Region

59. There is a UK Consulate-General in Erbil, the only permanently-staffed FCO premises in Iraq other than the Embassy in Baghdad’s Green Zone. In October 2012, after a period of uncertainty, the FCO decided to retain the Erbil CG. (The Basra CG in the south of Iraq was closed.⁸⁹)

83 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([KUR 6](#)), paragraph 3

84 KRG High Representative to the UK ([KUR 15](#)), paragraphs 45 and 54 Cf British Council ([KUR 4](#)), paragraphs 5.3-5.4 and Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([KUR 6](#)), paragraph 31

85 KRG High Representative to the UK ([KUR 15](#)), paragraph 58

86 APPG Kurdistan Region of Iraq ([KUR 12](#)) paragraphs 28-32; British Expertise ([KUR 3](#)), paragraph 10

87 Q198-199

88 Q201. The FCO’s written evidence states that the National School of Government International has, since 2007, been working at senior levels of the KRG civil service to help improve service delivery. (Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([KUR 6](#)), paragraphs 15-18)

89 HC Deb 16 October 2012, cols 18-9 WS. See also APPG Kurdistan Region of Iraq ([KUR 12](#)), paragraph 27

60. The Erbil Consulate-General, which has fewer than 5 UK-based staff,⁹⁰ is run out of a business hotel on the outskirts of the city: staff occupy one floor. We visited the Consulate-General in October: it is evident that it is not optimal either as a working consulate, as the UK's window on the Kurdistan Region, or as a shop-window for the UK in Erbil. The FCO acknowledged this when it gave evidence in November.⁹¹ We do accept that security concerns partly dictate the Consulate-General's set-up, and that the safety of staff must come first, particularly in a city situated so close to the border with ISIL-held territory.

61. The FCO's written evidence, submitted in April 2014, stated that a purpose-built Consulate-General was on schedule to open in the first half of 2015, on land gifted by the KRG.⁹² By the time of our visit, it was clear that this deadline would not be met. When we questioned the FCO in November, we were informed that the deteriorating security situation, plus a desire for larger premises to reflect Erbil's growing strategic importance, had sent the FCO back to the drawing board. It told us that it was still committed to opening a bespoke Consulate-General, but that it would not open in 2015.⁹³

62. The blunt view of senior KRG figures we met in Erbil was that the UK's failure to secure proper premises gave a poor impression of the UK, and signalled a deeper ambivalence about its commitment to the Kurdistan Region, this in a culture where first impressions matter. They told us that other countries had long ago opened permanent consular offices, and said that over-cautiousness and excessive bureaucracy on the part of the FCO appeared to be partly behind the delay. When we took evidence in London in November, the FCO implied that any bureaucratic problems were more on the Kurdish side.⁹⁴ Wherever the truth lies, we would like to see some progress being made. It is very welcome that the UK Government is now committed not only to retaining the Consulate-General but to expanding it. It is difficult to conceive of consular premises anywhere else in the FCO's network that are more strategically important to the UK than those at Erbil, close to the terrorist frontier and to the Syrian border (a country in which we currently have no diplomatic presence), and in the regional capital of one of our most reliable and militarily robust local allies.

63. In a number of previous reports, we have queried whether the FCO has allocated sufficient human resources to a particular embassy or office, or has achieved the right balance of expertise, including specialist country knowledge or language skills. We acknowledge that the FCO has faced an almost impossible challenge in maintaining adequately staffed embassies and consulates in the face of the cuts that have been forced upon it following the 2010 Spending Review. It is welcome that the UK has strengthened human resources in Erbil in response to recent developments,⁹⁵ although it was a matter of

90 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([KUR 6](#)), paragraph 39. (As of April 2014, when the evidence was submitted). Where UK-based staff number fewer than 5, the FCO does not, for operational and security reasons, disclose exact numbers

91 Q191 and 197 [Tobias Ellwood MP]

92 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([KUR 6](#)), paragraph 38

93 Q192-197 [Tobias Ellwood MP and Edward Oakden]

94 Q193

95 Q191 [Tobias Ellwood MP]

concern to note, during our visit to Iraq that a long-term vacancy in the Erbil office was being covered only on a part-time basis by existing UK diplomatic staff in Iraq: this at a period of critical importance for the future of the Kurdistan Region, Iraq and Syria. We also take the opportunity to pass on concerns of senior KRG figures that the FCO's rotation policy for Iraq staff had tended to inhibit the development of effective working relationships at government-to-government level. We are aware that Iraq is a difficult posting and that the FCO has a pastoral duty to its staff, but these observations should be taken seriously.

64. The FCO has stated that it is committed to having a permanent consular presence in Erbil for the foreseeable future. This is welcome, given the strategic importance of the Kurdistan Region and the importance of strengthening links with its government and people. However, current consular arrangements are simply not acceptable for the UK: a permanent Security Council member deeply involved in diplomatic and military efforts to repel Islamist terrorism in Iraq and Syria and to resolve both countries' political crises, particularly given that other states, less deeply involved in these issues than the UK government, have some time ago secured bespoke premises. The FCO must now make it its priority to ensure that work proceeds on new consular premises, as a concrete demonstration of the UK's commitment to relations with the Kurdistan Region and in recognition of the importance of the Region and its government to the UK, particularly as partners in the fight against terrorism. We also ask the UK Government to take steps to ensure that the Consulate General is staffed to a level commensurate with its current importance to UK interests.

Trade and economic links

65. The development of the Kurdistan Region's democratic culture has been achieved in parallel with swift and impressive economic development.⁹⁶ The crisis of the last year has struck the economy hard, but annual growth had averaged over 8% for most of the preceding decade,⁹⁷ with major urban centres such as Erbil and Sulaymaniyah physically transformed by an almost non-stop construction boom, and the appearance of downtown apartment blocks, hotels and shopping malls. There is, or until recently was, a growing tourism industry. Unemployment is around half that in the rest of Iraq.⁹⁸ Two international airports have been built almost from scratch, and the higher education sector has flourished, with 12 public universities in the Region where, prior to 2003, there were just two.⁹⁹ We note evidence describing the Region as one of the most business-friendly places for foreign investors in the Middle East, thanks to its light tax regime and regulatory framework, stable political climate and safe working environment.¹⁰⁰

96 Genel Energy ([KUR 2](#)), paragraph 2

97 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([KUR 6](#)), paragraph 8

98 "[Unemployment Increases in Kurdistan Region](#)", *Iraq Business News*, 12 September 2014. UNDP in Iraq [website](#) provides national figures. [Accessed January 2015]

99 Ebiz Guides, "*Kurdistan Region of Iraq*" (2012), page 195. See also Dlawer Ala'Aldeen ([KUR 1](#)),

100 Genel Energy ([KUR 2](#)), page 1

66. We sought evidence and views on whether the UK has been making the most of these opportunities, and we spoke to a number of representatives of the business sector in Erbil who were either British expatriates themselves or had connections to British-based businesses. The overall impression conveyed was of a sense of under-achievement, and of UK-based businesses failing to take advantage of the opportunities on offer, though whether the blame for this should attach primarily to the UK Government for insufficient dynamism or to a risk-averse British business community was less clear.¹⁰¹ Written evidence noted that, whilst British companies could not expect to undercut competitors from countries such as Turkey or China, the UK was considered to have the edge when it came to providing high quality goods and services.¹⁰² Areas including banking, agriculture and food technology, tourism and services, and IT were all seen as offering significant opportunities for UK businesses in the Kurdistan Region, but there were calls for the UK Government to do more to publicise them.¹⁰³ It was suggested that the UK Government's sensitivity to the delicate constitutional position in Iraq may have led it, perhaps over-cautiously, to hold back from committing to a deepening of trade links, allowing other countries to steal a march.¹⁰⁴ KRG ministers spoke of a general sense of UK businesses hanging back from full engagement in the Kurdistan Region, but they were uncertain what the underlying causes were. Some aspects of the economy were brought to our attention that may not attract investors; difficulties in borrowing because of the Region's non-sovereign status and the uncertainty over its future, past crashes in the property market, the perceived need for political patronage, and a public sector that is still apparently monopolistic in some areas and resistant to reform.¹⁰⁵ We are also aware of concerns that the Region's economic fortunes are too closely linked to the political and trading relationship with the Erdogan government in Turkey,¹⁰⁶ although to a large extent this is a relationship borne of necessity, given the Region's lack of reliable local partners.¹⁰⁷

67. The UK Government has pointed, amongst other things to its sponsorship of the Iraq-British Business Council, to a number of UK trade initiatives in Erbil, and to the appointment of Baroness Nicholson as UK Trade Envoy to Iraq in early 2014 as policies intended to maximise British trade with the Kurdistan Region,¹⁰⁸ but we sense from the lack of feedback we received on these initiatives that their impact thus far has been relatively low.¹⁰⁹

101 Q10 [Professor Gareth Stansfield]

102 KRG High Representative to the UK ([KUR 15](#)), paragraph 44 Professor Gareth Stansfield ([KUR 14](#)), paragraphs 15 and 16; APPG Kurdistan Region of Iraq ([KUR 12](#)), paragraphs 18-24

103 Genel Energy ([KUR 2](#)), paragraph 16

104 Q10-11 [Professor Gareth Stansfield]

105 APPG Kurdistan Region of Iraq ([KUR 12](#)) paragraph 6; Genel Energy ([KUR 2](#)), paragraph 17; Q135-136 [Peter Galbraith]

106 Q24 [Professor Gareth Stansfield]; Q 134 [Dr Ali Allawi]

107 Q 132 [Peter Galbraith]

108 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([KUR 6](#)), paragraphs 10-12

109 See also KRG High Representative to the UK ([KUR 15](#)), paragraphs 42, 46 and 47; APPG Kurdistan Region of Iraq ([KUR 12](#)), paragraphs 13 and 14

68. In relation to the Kurdistan Region's burgeoning oil and gas industry (discussed in more detail later), the only major British, or part-British, business investor in the sector is the British-Turkish joint venture, Genel Energy. With most of the main drilling contracts now apparently signed, and the local giant KAR dominating the downstream sector, it would appear that significant opportunities for UK companies are now limited, although when we had an informal meeting with the KRG's natural resources minister, Dr Hawrami in the summer, he told us that there were still plenty of opportunities for niche service providers, a sector in which the UK was seen as a leader. He expressed surprise at the relative absence of UK firms in the sector. In November, the Minister, Mr Ellwood, told us that the dispute over oil and exports between Baghdad and Erbil may have led British companies to focus their attention on the south of Iraq.¹¹⁰

Travel advice and direct air links

69. Several business representatives we spoke in Erbil referred to what they perceived as a false and unhelpful perception that the Kurdistan Region was insecure and unsafe; and they and interlocutors from the KRG suggested that the FCO's Iraq travel advice, which in 2014 was amended to advise against all but essential travel to the Region, sent out the wrong message and hurt businesses. When we put this to the Minister in November, he acknowledged these concerns, noting that travel advice was under frequent review.¹¹¹ It is salutary to note that on the day following Mr Ellwood's testimony, a suicide bomber killed six people close to the historic citadel at the centre of Erbil. We understand this to be the most lethal terrorist attack to have struck the city in many years,¹¹² but it underlines both the fragility of the relative peace in Erbil at present and the challenge of getting travel advice right. We acknowledge that the FCO faces a difficult task in providing travel advice that, on the one hand, acknowledges that the Kurdistan Region has not yet returned to normal, and is unlikely to do so for some time, and on the other does not become one of the very factors that prevents the Region from getting back to normal, by inhibiting business engagement.

70. An issue that was raised with us several times during the inquiry, in particular by various representatives of the KRG, was the absence of direct flights between the UK and the Kurdistan Region.¹¹³ We had understood the UK Government's general position to be that it does not see it as its role to promote the setting-up of particular routes, and to leave decisions to commercial carriers. (We understand that at least one carrier has, in the recent past, expressed potential interest in launching a London-Erbil route.) However, when the Minister gave evidence, he told us that the absence of direct links was "frustrating", and that "direct air links need to happen".¹¹⁴ We learned during the inquiry that there is a technical barrier to setting up a direct route in that the UK Border Agency

110 See also KRG High Representative to the UK ([KUR 15](#)), paragraph 43

111 Q207

112 APPG Kurdistan Region of Iraq ([KUR 12](#)), paragraph 8; Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([KUR 6](#)), paragraph 4

113 APPG Kurdistan Region of Iraq ([KUR 12](#)), paragraph 33

114 Q206

must first inspect Erbil airport and satisfy itself that it meets UK border security requirements.¹¹⁵ As of November, when Mr Ellwood gave evidence, this was yet to happen.

71. Given the interest there appears to be in establishing a direct UK-Erbil air link, it is disappointing that this may have been held up by the need for a UK Border Agency inspection of Erbil airport. We press for such an inspection to be made at the earliest opportunity.

UK Government policy on the Anfal

72. The UK Government's formal stance on the Anfal has been raised with us during the inquiry as relevant to consideration of the UK-KRG bilateral relationship. In the words of one of our witnesses, Professor Gareth Stansfield, UK policy on this issue is "not only insulting but deeply upsetting" and damages the UK's standing in the Kurdistan Region.¹¹⁶

73. The Anfal campaign of 1987-88 was a deliberate strategy to terrorise the Kurdish population of northern Iraq through a mass collective punishment, and to destroy Kurdish resistance to Saddam Hussein's regime once and for all. There were several strands to the campaign; the destruction of thousands of villages and collectivisation of the rural population; sexual violence against women and girls; the forced recruitment of some working-age males as *jash* (government collaborators) and the mass execution of many men and boys. In the most notorious single incident of the Anfal, Iraqi planes dropped poison gas on the town of Halabja on 16-17 March 1987, indiscriminately killing some 4000 men, women and children. Official estimates put the total number of people killed in the campaign upwards of 50,000: the KRG considers that it may be as much as 182,000.¹¹⁷ The vast majority of victims were Kurds, but Assyrians and other minorities were also killed.

74. The UN defines "genocide" as, in summary, an intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group.¹¹⁸ For the KRG, as for ordinary Iraqi Kurds, it is self-evident that a campaign of such brutality and enormity as the Anfal, directed primarily at the Kurdish people was a genocide. Indeed, in the KRG's view, it was merely the culmination of a sequence of genocidal policies pursued by Baathist Iraq over three decades.¹¹⁹ For Kurds today, the Anfal is an event not yet confined to the history books: it is a continuing source of pain, particularly for families whose relatives were "disappeared" and whose bodies have never been found. As we learned in Erbil, where we heard from the International Commission on Missing Persons, the work of identifying the hundreds of thousands of anonymous victims of Saddam's tyranny, buried all over the country has

115 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([KUR 6](#)), paragraph 13

116 Q30

117 KRG High Representative to the UK ([KUR 15](#)), paragraph 7. The UK Government considers that up to around 100,000 Kurds may have died (HC Debs, 28 February 2013, [col 559](#))

118 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (adopted in 1948).

119 Q108 [KRG High Representative to the UK] [Wesminster Hall]

barely begun, despite considerable international investment in the previous decade, including by the UK, to help Iraq improve its forensic identification techniques.¹²⁰

75. A small number of parliaments, governments and other international bodies have in recent years come to formally recognise the Anfal as genocide, as have various Iraqi tribunals and federal institutions. On 28 February 2013, the UK House of Commons agreed to a motion “that this House formally recognises the genocide against the people of Iraqi Kurdistan”.¹²¹

76. The UK Government chose not to divide the House when the motion was debated, but its formal stance is not to take a view on whether the Anfal was a genocide. This is in line with long-standing UK policy that the recognition of genocide is, in the words of the FCO’s submission to this inquiry, “primarily a matter for judicial decision, rather than for Government or non-judicial bodies”.¹²² As genocide recognition is not part of UK jurisprudence, this means that in practice the UK would be likely to take its lead from the International Criminal Court, the only international tribunal vested with authority to determine whether particular events were genocide. The ICC, which heard its first case in 2003, is not empowered to make determinations on events dating before its creation. As the KRG and others have pointed out to us, it would therefore appear that, unless there is some unexpected legal change (most obviously, if the ICC’s jurisdiction were made retrospective), there is little prospect of the UK Government formally recognising the Anfal as genocide under its current policy.¹²³ This was confirmed in the Minister’s oral evidence in November, when he appeared to imply that the UK Government’s hands were tied on the question of genocide recognition, as it was an issue of international law.¹²⁴ We suggest that this view is not strictly correct. It would be open for the UK Government to decide to recognise historic events as genocide, notwithstanding the absence of an ICC verdict, as other governments have done in the case of other historic events, and as the Minister’s predecessor, Alistair Burt, effectively acknowledged when he spoke in the Commons debate on 28 February 2013.¹²⁵

77. A further question is whether the Government’s precautionary approach is understandable and justified. Mr Burt’s speech in February 2013 referred to “implications for both today and yesterday” were the Government to agree to recognise the Anfal as genocide, echoing similar views from the opposition front bench. He did not elaborate further, but it could be argued that the UK’s current position at least has the virtue of clarity, and that recognising one series of historic events as genocide, absent a judgment from the ICC, would put pressure on the UK Government, in the interests of consistency, to recognise others.¹²⁶ These are potentially manifold. In an Iraqi and Kurdish context

120 See also KRG High Representative to the UK ([KUR 15](#)), paragraph 59

121 HC Debs, 28 February 2013, [cols 529-565WS](#) [Westminster Hall]

122 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([KUR 6](#)), paragraph 40

123 KRG High Representative to the UK ([KUR 15](#)), paragraph 37; Professor Michael Bohlander ([KUR 5](#)), paragraphs 3 and 16-23

124 Q216

125 See also Professor Michael Bohlander ([KUR 5](#)), paragraph 5-15

126 Q30 [Professor Charles Tripp]

alone, this would include the terrible suffering of the Armenian and Assyrian communities in the first half of the 20th century; Saddam's persecution of the Marsh Arabs and Mandaeans of southern Iraq in the 1990s; and ISIL's deliberately targeted attacks on the Assyrian and Yezidi communities of northern Iraq only a few months ago. We cannot but note that the issue of genocide recognition has at times proven diplomatically problematic, particularly with regard to Ottoman Turkey's treatment of its Armenian and Assyrian communities. We learned during the inquiry that the KRG itself refrains from taking a formal view on whether these events were acts of genocide, even though descendants of those caught up in that tragedy (both protagonists and victims) are living in the Kurdistan Region today.¹²⁷

78. The KRG is clearly disappointed with the UK's policy, with the then High Representative to the UK telling us that it was "crucial" for the Kurdish people that the Anfal be recognised as genocide. However, the KRG's written evidence welcomed the FCO for being active in marking Anfal Day¹²⁸ and other commemorative events, and commended Mr Burt's "finessing" of the UK Government's position during the February 2013 debate.¹²⁹ In his speech Mr Burt had acknowledged that the Government's position was "clear" but "not necessarily comfortable or sufficient" and had indicated willingness, on behalf of the FCO, to continue the discussion with the KRG. In this connection, we note that the government's position, quoted in paragraph 76 above, is that genocide recognition is "*primarily* a matter for judicial decision" [emphasis added] indicating that the Government may be open to dialogue about whether non-judicial factors could be taken into consideration.

79. The terrible events of the Anfal campaign conducted against the Kurdish people in the 1980s appear to meet the UN definition of "genocide". We understand the reasons that have caused the Government not to formally recognise the Anfal as a genocide, but also note that its approach has caused disappointment in the Kurdistan Region and that foreign governments have chosen to recognise past atrocities as genocide, notwithstanding the absence of a legal ruling by a recognised international tribunal. We encourage the UK Government to maintain a dialogue with the Kurdistan Regional Government on the issue, including on what judicial and non-judicial criteria the UK Government may use to determine whether acts constitute genocide. We welcome the Government's recognition of Anfal Day and would encourage it to continue to reflect on other ways in which it could help commemorate the Anfal, in order to show its identification with the suffering endured by the Kurdish people.

127 Q110 [KRG High Representative to the UK]

128 The KRG declared Anfal Day in 2007 as a commemorative event for victims of the campaign, taking place each year on 14 April. It is marked by expatriate Kurdish communities and their friends and supporters around the world.

129 KRG High Representative to the UK ([KUR 15](#)), paragraphs 37 and 38

6 Iraq's security crisis and its impact on the Kurdistan Region

80. ISIL's surge into northern Iraq in the summer of 2014 has had a massive impact on the Kurdistan Region. In this chapter we discuss how the KRG has responded and the implications for UK foreign policy. Our colleagues in the Defence Committee are preparing a report on the UK Government's response to ISIL, which is likely to discuss in some detail the UK's military support for the KRG and the federal government in Baghdad. These issues are touched on below, but with the main focus on foreign policy considerations, taking into account Iraq's complex and combustible political environment.

UK Government policy

81. We understand the key aspects of UK policy to remain those announced to the House by the Prime Minister when he reported to the House on 8 September 2014 on the recent NATO summit in south Wales: to press for the formation of a truly inclusive Iraqi government; to provide the Peshmerga with arms and, if requested, training to fight ISIL (we note that the UK has also recently begun to offer training to the Iraqi army¹³⁰); and to help build a regional anti-IS alliance that would include Sunni states.¹³¹ Following an affirmatory Commons vote on 26 September, UK military engagement has expanded to include RAF sorties in northern Iraq, attacking ISIL positions, although on a far smaller scale than the US air force. The resolution of 26 September also set out commitments not to deploy troops in "ground combat operations" in either Iraq or Syria, and not to carry out air strikes into Syria without further Commons debate.¹³² The Government has acknowledged that UK drones have flown over Syrian airspace.¹³³

Evolution of UK policy

82. This was not a policy that emerged fully formed but which evolved in response to unfolding events on the ground over the summer. It is evident that the UK has been careful to remain publicly in step with its allies, in particular the US. Throughout this period of evolution, one constant has been the UK Government's insistence that there will be no UK troops deployed in ground combat operations in Iraq;¹³⁴ and we should add that we took

130 Ministry of Defence, "[UK to provide further support to forces fighting ISIL](#)", 5 November 2014

131 HC Debs, 8 September 2014, cols 653-656 [cols 653-656](#)

132 The Relevant part of the resolution reads that the House "acknowledges the request of the Government of Iraq for international support to defend itself against the threat ISIL poses to Iraq and its citizens and the clear legal basis that this provides for action in Iraq; notes that this motion does not endorse UK air strikes in Syria as part of this campaign and any proposal to do so would be subject to a separate vote in Parliament; accordingly supports Her Majesty's Government, working with allies, in supporting the Government of Iraq in protecting civilians and restoring its territorial integrity, including the use of UK air strikes to support Iraqi, including Kurdish, security forces' efforts against ISIL in Iraq; notes that Her Majesty's Government will not deploy UK troops in ground combat operations..."

133 Q162 [Edward Oakden]

134 Q159 [Tobias Ellwood MP]

from our visit to Iraq in October the message that Iraqi politicians and military leaders (Arabs and Kurds alike) are not asking the UK or its western allies to send their soldiers to fight in Iraq.

83. In outline, following the fall of Mosul (an event which the KRG told us they had warned both the Iraqi government and Western governments was imminent¹³⁵), the UK limited itself to urging Iraqis to come together to fight ISIL under an inclusive political process, and made clear that there would be no UK military intervention or assistance offered.¹³⁶ A further ISIL surge in August exposed the Peshmerga as much more vulnerable than had apparently been realised by Western intelligence,¹³⁷ raising the prospect of ISIL reaching the gates of Erbil, and led to the broadcast round the world, over many days, of horrifying images of ISIL besieging tens of thousands of defenceless Yazidis on Mount Sinjar. The US decided to begin attacking ISIL from the air; initially only for the narrow purpose of protecting its “assets” in Iraq,¹³⁸ and UK policy shifted in parallel. The RAF was made available for humanitarian missions on Mount Sinjar (in the end, very few RAF sorties were made¹³⁹), and the UK Government began publicly to explore the possibility of assisting the Peshmerga.¹⁴⁰ Initially, the UK’s involvement was limited to helping courier Soviet-era weaponry to the Peshmerga because, according to briefings given to journalists over the summer, this was what they were more accustomed to using.¹⁴¹ (We should add that at no point during our visit to the Kurdistan Region did anyone from the KRG or the Peshmerga tell us that their preference had ever been to be supplied with Soviet-era weaponry: they wanted the best and most up-to-date weapons available in order to take on ISIL.) By early September, senior military staff were being sent to Erbil to advise and co-ordinate with the Peshmerga, 40 heavy machine guns had been gifted to them, and a training programme on using the weapons was being put in place.¹⁴² (By December, training was being offered, and on a larger scale, to the Iraqi army as well.¹⁴³) By this point UK Ministers were publicly echoing President Obama’s language of the need to “degrade and destroy” ISIL,¹⁴⁴ in Syria as well as in Iraq, with the Prime Minister indicating that air

135 Q58-59 [KRG High Representative to the UK]. In May 2014, Professors Stansfield and Tripp also warned us of spiralling violence in northern Iraq and of ISIL’s growing strength there. Professor Stansfield warned that Iraq’s integrity was threatened (Q19). See also APPG Kurdistan Region of Iraq ([KUR 16](#)), paragraph 5

136 HC Deb 16 June 2014, [cols 852-853](#)

137 See also APPG Kurdistan Region of Iraq ([KUR 16](#)), paragraphs 11-16 (submission provided late June); Ranj Alaaldin ([KUR 18](#)), page 3

138 “Obama Allows Limited Airstrikes on ISIS”, *New York Times*, 7 August 2014

139 HC Deb, Written Question 211264, [answered](#) 28 October 2014

140 HC (Debs), 1 September 2014, [col 47](#) [Commons Chamber]

141 “UK prepares to supply arms directly to Kurdish forces fighting Isis” *The Guardian*, 14 August 2014. In his first Commons statement on ISIL following the events of the summer, the Prime Minister said that the UK had acted as a courier for weapons from Albania and Jordan but stood ready to provide UK weapons if asked (HC (Debs), 1 September 2014, [col 35](#)). See also APPG Kurdistan Region of Iraq ([KUR 16](#)), paragraph 12

142 HC Deb, 9 September 2014, [col 33WS](#) [Commons written ministerial statement]; HC Deb, 13 October 2014, [col 9WS](#) [Commons written ministerial statement];

143 Ministry of Defence, “UK to provide further support to forces fighting ISIL”, 5 November 2014

144 Oral evidence taken on 9 September 2014, HC (2014-15), [Q2](#) [Foreign Secretary]; Ministry of Defence, “Defence Secretary discusses ISIL threat” 23 September 2014. See also “David Haines: David Cameron statement on killing” *BBC News Online*, 14 September 2014,

strikes in both countries would be lawful.¹⁴⁵ The last major shift in policy occurred in late September, when the Commons endorsed the Government's position that the RAF should join the air campaign against ISIL in Iraq.¹⁴⁶ According to the Ministry of Defence, RAF jets have made a number of decisive interventions since they joined the campaign, although the RAF's involvement is by any yardstick limited and is dwarfed by that of the US air force.¹⁴⁷ Allied intervention has clearly succeeded in repelling ISIL's advances and some territory has been recovered from them in Iraq, mainly of their more peripheral conquests, in or on the edge of Kurdish or Shia-majority districts. Few inroads have yet been made into Sunni-majority districts held by ISIL

The case for intervention

84. The grounds for UK military involvement in Iraq have been discussed in the House on a number of occasions since the current crisis broke, in particular in the debate on 26 September, when the House, by a clear majority, voted to endorse UK Government policy. We do not rehearse the discussion in this report, other than to note that information we have gathered during the second half of the inquiry confirms that the risk of an ISIL land invasion of the Kurdistan Region in August was real. The aerial intervention spear-headed by the US in August undoubtedly arrested ISIL's advance, helping to avert the risk of a land war in the heart of the Kurdistan Region, with all the potentially catastrophic consequences that might have entailed, for the Region's economy and energy supplies, and for the people of the Region, including the over 1 million displaced people living in sanctuary there. Politicians and soldiers we met in the Kurdistan Region were united in welcoming the UK's assistance in the defence of their land. We encountered similar support and thanks from politicians, of all backgrounds, in Baghdad. The effect on morale of the allies' decision to engage in the war and to begin attacking ISIL targets from the air was seen as particularly vital.

85. As regards ISIL, again there has been much debate already as to its origins, strength, aims, and so on, as well as how best to combat the movement, and again we do not propose here to add extensively to the discussion. Gathering information for this inquiry has, however, underlined for us the unusual cruelty of a movement whose main apparent motivation appears to be inflicting suffering on the innocent, in pursuit of its totalitarian world view. For example, in a camp near Sulaymaniyah, we met Yezidi families whose wives and daughters had been stolen from them earlier in the summer to be used as slaves. It is chilling to contemplate that cruelty of this nature has been inflicted on entire communities across Iraq and Syria, with religious minorities such as Yezidis, Shia Turcomans and Christian Assyrians facing extermination in their ancient homeland, on the basis simply of their beliefs and backgrounds. It was accordingly a surprise to note the Foreign Secretary's recent description of ISIL as an organisation that "makes no distinction

145 "[Cameron 'not ruling out' air strikes on IS](#)", *BBC News Online*, 4 September 2014

146 HC Debs, 26 September 2014, [cols 1255-1360](#)

147 As of 24 November 2014, the UK had conducted 16 airstrikes in Iraq (HC Debs, Commons written [answer](#) to question 210712). It appears that strikes by RAF jets have continued at a rate of roughly two or three times a week since then: Ministry of Defence, "[Update: air strikes in Iraq](#)" [accessed January 2015]

between cultures, countries and religions”¹⁴⁸ as the evidence clearly shows that ISIL adopts an avowedly sectarian ideology.¹⁴⁹

86. The overall impression given by the UK Government’s policy on ISIL in Iraq during 2014 is one of caution, responding to events as they unfolded rather than anticipating them, and we note that UK military assistance has been limited. However, we recognise that it was not unreasonable for the Government to proceed with caution, given the complexities of Iraqi politics and the UK’s Iraq War legacy. It was right for the UK Government to assist the Peshmerga and to join in air strikes; on strategic grounds, because it was vital to support our friends and allies in the Kurdistan Region and to help build their morale, and on humanitarian grounds; to prevent appalling acts of violence and cruelty against whole communities, that call to mind some of the worst atrocities of the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century. We encourage the UK Government to use its influence to ensure that there is a proper record of the atrocities that have been committed so that, in due course, offenders may be brought to justice.

87. Allied countries, led by the US, are to be commended for responding urgently following the ISIL surge of early August 2014, but, with hindsight, it appears to have been a miscalculation for the UK Government and its allies not to have assessed that the Peshmerga would require military assistance in order to defend a border of over 1000 kilometres against ISIL. With allied support, the Peshmerga now, happily, appear to be recovering territory lost to ISIL in August.

Iraq and Syria: one battlefield

88. Given this inquiry’s terms of reference, our focus is on the impact of ISIL on the Kurdistan Region, but there is clearly a wider context. At least until US-led airstrikes began to check their progress, ISIL had been moving up and down the Euphrates valley from their main base in the Syrian city of Raqqa, underlining that the Iraq-Syria border is practically non-existent. Politicians and military leaders we met both in Baghdad and in the Kurdistan Region told us that at present Iraq and Syria are one battlefield and said they would welcome the UK joining any military strategy against ISIL within Syria.¹⁵⁰

89. That Iraq and Syria are effectively one battlefield is not denied by the UK Government; and we recognise the web of factors, including UK domestic politics, that has led the UK to restrict its current aerial engagement to Iraq, and not to arm militias in Syria. The Minister, Mr Ellwood, sought to argue that the UK’s position of bombing ISIL in Iraq but not Syria is not inconsistent, in that the campaign to degrade ISIL in both countries is a common effort, and that the UK’s allies had not requested RAF engagement in Syria.¹⁵¹ We note that

148 HC Debs, 18 December 2014, [col 128WS](#) [Commons Written Ministerial Statement]

149 Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, [“Iraqi civilians suffering “horrific” widespread and systematic persecution – Pillay”](#), 25 August 2014

150 In June, the then KRG High Representative also told us that she saw the security and political crises in Iraq and Syria as inextricably linked (Q77)

151 Q177-178

the UK Government has undertaken to return to the Commons should it decide that the UK should join airstrikes in Syria.¹⁵²

90. Iraq and Syria are at present one indivisible battlefield and there is unlikely to be any real peace in the Kurdistan Region or the rest of Iraq unless ISIL in Syria is destroyed or, at the very least, badly degraded and starved of the capacity to move freely across the border.

Sunni disengagement and the need for an “inclusive” political process

91. Another wider aspect of the conflict that it is relevant to mention is Sunni Arab disengagement. Evidence and information we have gathered during the inquiry have made disconcertingly clear that the common factor that has enabled ISIL to thrive in both Iraq and Syria is demographic: the presence of a bitter and alienated local Sunni Arab population. ISIL’s rise to power in Iraq is neither an invasion by a foreign army nor a grassroots uprising but a lethal combination of the two.¹⁵³ Whether ISIL is actively or tacitly supported by 5%, 20% or 50% of any given community of Iraqi or Syrian Sunnis is practically unknowable, but it is clear that it would not have had the success it has had unless it had been able to take advantage of popular grassroots anger with a political system perceived as illegitimate and broken.¹⁵⁴ In Iraq as in Syria, this has involved ISIL forming alliances with local power brokers, such as Sunni tribal leaders (it should be added that some other tribes have fought ISIL and made enormous sacrifices in so doing) and with neo-Baathist militias, such as the Naqshbandi Army, led by one of the senior figures in the ostensibly “secular” regime of Saddam Hussein. These apparent alliances of convenience may well break in time, but one of the main messages that we took from our visit to Iraq was not to under-estimate either the strength and resilience of ISIL (including its ability, once entrenched to maintain power predominantly through the use of fear) or the degree of alienation present in the Sunni Arab community.

92. The deep roots of Sunni discontent cannot be discussed in detail here, and are perhaps partially irrelevant: that the anger exists is a “fact on the ground” which policymakers must deal with, rather than asking whether it is reasonable or justifiable. Many in Western diplomatic circles have privately cited the second term of Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki as disastrous, particularly for national unity, a view with which most interlocutors we met in Iraq (of all backgrounds) did not demur.¹⁵⁵ The sectarian, centralising and increasingly paranoiacal manner in which Mr Maliki had exercised power had led an increasingly poisonous climate of mutual contempt between the administration and the Sunni and Kurdish political leaderships. Many also hold Maliki personally to blame for the

152 HC Debs, 26 September 2014, [cols 1255 and 1266](#) [Commons Chamber]

153 Q61 [KRG High Representative to the UK]; Q126 [Dr Ali Allawi]

154 Q189 [Tobias Ellwood MP and Edward Oakden]

155 In his evidence in November, the Minister, Mr Ellwood, spoke openly of the UK Government’s relief that Mr Maliki was no longer Prime Minister, replaced by a more “inclusive” government (Q139) Mr Ellwood also acknowledged the problem of Mr Maliki remaining a presence on the political scene (Q148)

Iraqi army's catastrophic decline in morale and professionalism.¹⁵⁶ However, the roots of Sunni discontent clearly precede any political figure on the stage today. The advent of democracy in Iraq has, if anything, entrenched sectarian and ethnic identities in Iraq at the expense of national identity, with a political system that thus far appears to have reinforced rather than healed divisions.¹⁵⁷ The Sunni community has from the outset been, at best, ambivalent about Iraq's post-Baathist dispensation, and it could certainly be argued that many within the community have never come to terms with the loss of privilege that attended the advent of democracy. Whereas Kurdish political leaders have in key debates and negotiations usually presented a united front in the federal arena, Sunni politicians have been more divided.¹⁵⁸ Following ISIL's takeover by stealth of Anbar province in 2013 and its 2014 surge over much of the rest of Sunni Iraq, most Sunni leaders are now physically alienated from the communities they purport to represent.¹⁵⁹

93. The UK (and US) government's support for a more "inclusive" political process over the summer, when Iraq's politician were negotiating the post-electoral settlement, was widely interpreted as a thinly coded message to the main power-brokers to look past Maliki when choosing a new Prime Minister if they wanted Western help in beating ISIL.¹⁶⁰ The price of that policy included lost time, during which ISIL were able to continue their advance without hindrance from aerial attacks, an impression (rightly or wrongly) of hesitancy or vacillation on the part of Western powers whilst ISIL ran riot in the heart of Iraq, which may have helped ISIL morale, and a golden opportunity for Iran to increase its military and intelligence presence within Iraq and its influence within the Shia political bloc, which it unhesitatingly took.¹⁶¹ Balanced against this is the likelihood of the US, UK and other powers being seen in the Sunni Arab world, including Sunni Iraq, as (in the words of General David Petraeus) "the air force of Shia militias" had they agreed to come to Mr Maliki's aid.¹⁶² Mr Maliki is also now out of office as Prime Minister, replaced by a more conciliatory figure, Haider al-Abadi. and we consider it likely that the UK and other governments' policy of withholding military and practical support for the federal administration pending the advent of a more inclusive government would have been a factor in the political bargaining that went on in Baghdad before the appointment of a new Prime Minister.

94. We are under no illusions as to the political and military obstacles Mr Abadi will face as Prime Minister of a deeply divided Iraq. Toxic political divisions, both between and within the main sectarian blocs, still remain; and some familiar faces from the past, including Mr

156 Q 152. Mr Maliki appointed himself to the new position of commander-in-chief and deliberately left vacancies in the Defence and Interior Ministries unfilled. In May 2014, well before the fall of Mosul, Professor Tripp referred to the recent performance of the Iraqi army under Maliki's leadership as "hopeless" (Q18), accusing him of politicising the armed forces at great cost to their effectiveness and professionalism

157 Q19 [Professor Gareth Stansfield and Professor Charles Tripp]

158 Q140 [Tobias Ellwood]; APPG Kurdistan Region of Iraq ([KUR 16](#)), paragraph 29

159 Q128 [Peter Galbraith]; Q149 [Tobias Ellwood MP]

160 HC Deb 16 June 2014, cols [cols 852-853](#)

161 Q155 [Tobias Ellwood MP and Edward Oakden]

162 "[Petraeus: U.S. Must Not Become the Shia Militia's Air Force](#)", *The Daily Beast*, 18 June 2014

Maliki (now one of three Vice-Presidents, and apparently now a very rich man, as many whom we met in Iraq pointedly noted) remain on the political scene. Mr Abadi must also find a way to defend and, it is to be hoped, recover territory from ISIL without over-reliance on Shia militias and on Iranian military intelligence, which in the longer term is only likely to increase national divisions. But he has made a good start; building a more balanced cabinet, filling the Defence and Interior Minister posts that Mr Maliki had left vacant, and reaching a deal on oil with the KRG that it is to be hoped may signal the start of better relations between the two administrations. He has also agreed to sponsor a programme for national reconciliation in Iraq, headed by Vice-President Ayad Allawi, likely to include measures to reach out to the Sunni community (for instance by seeking to repeal aspects of the controversial anti-Baathist and anti-terrorism statutes that many Sunni see as unfairly targeting them, and to rebuild the army on a non-sectarian basis), as Dr Allawi himself told us on our visit to Baghdad.

95. There was a price to be paid for the UK and other governments opting not to provide military assistance to the Iraqi government more quickly, including the increase of Iranian influence in the country. However, on balance, we consider that the UK Government was correct not to assist the heavily discredited government of Nouri al-Maliki, assessing, rightly, that it was part of the problem, not part of the solution. The UK Government is correct to have placed emphasis on the importance of an “inclusive” political process in Iraq on the need for Sunnis to recover faith in the country’s democratic institutions. Diagnosing the problem is, in this instance, likely to prove far easier than prescribing the cure. The task of rebuilding Sunni confidence in Iraq is a formidable one: it requires political leadership from within the Sunni community and collective engagement, across the sectarian and ethnic divide, from Baghdad’s political elites.

Helping the Peshmerga

96. As noted earlier, the UK gifted 40 heavy machine guns to the Peshmerga in September sending army trainers to train local fighters on how to use them. The Defence Secretary announced in November that the pilot programme would be continued, and extended to include infantry skills. He also said that the UK planned to issue more equipment to the Peshmerga and to offer training in countering improvised explosive devices. The UK Government appointed a security envoy to the Kurdistan Region in August: in November, the Defence Secretary announced that further “advisory personnel” from the UK military would be sent to Iraqi headquarters.¹⁶³

97. We met the trainers, at that time from the Yorkshire Regiment, when we visited Erbil in October, and they provided us with an upbeat assessment of the how the training programme was progressing, praising the attitude of Peshmerga trainees. We were also pleased to note that the training programme was being made available not only to Kurdish

163 Ministry of Defence, [“UK to provide further support to forces fighting ISIL”](#), 5 November 2014

Peshmerga, but to Yezidi and Christians volunteers tasked with defending their communities from ISIL. This aspect of the scheme should be maintained.

98. The Peshmerga's reputation for competence and bravery was borne out in their initial response to the ISIL takeover of Mosul in June, where it held the line against ISIL advances all across its long southern border. However, we were told on our visit to Iraq that its inability to hold the line in Sinjar and the Ninevah Plains in August, combined with the perceived wobble in resistance to ISIL advances on the road to Erbil at around the same time, had provoked some internal debate about its discipline, chain of command, and battle-readiness. Political and military leaders in the Kurdistan Region told us that most internal concerns had since been addressed, and that the Peshmerga were in good morale, in part because they knew that they were no longer alone in the fight against ISIL. Practically everyone we spoke to about the Peshmerga told us that the key problem at that time was a lack of military hardware, and in particular that the Peshmerga lacked the heavy weaponry they needed to take out captured armoured cars and tanks that had been key to ISIL's military advance over the summer.

99. We understand that the events of August also led to fresh questions about the continuing existence of political factionalism within the Peshmerga. Soldiers allied to the KDP and PUK parties, who receive state salaries, outnumber by around three to one so-called "government" Peshmerga, a legacy of both parties' long histories as resistance movements and guerrilla fighters in the pre-democratic era, and sometimes as antagonists in internal conflicts (for instance in the Kurdistan Region's brief civil war in the mid-1990s, the last time violence between the two sides erupted on a significant scale).¹⁶⁴

100. Following the formation of a new KRG government in June 2014, the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs is now in the hands of the Goran party, a party committed to uniting the Peshmerga. We met both the Minister, Mr Qadir (a respected former Peshmerga leader) and the head of Goran, Mr Mustafa, at separate meetings in the Kurdistan Region in October. Both told us that the de-factionalisation of the Peshmerga remained a priority to which all parties in government were committed and that a programme for reform was in place, including of the Peshmerga's opaque finances. The end result would be a truly united national guard with a single chain of command. Sources in Erbil told us that there did appear to be a genuine cross-party commitment to achieve reform, but also remarked that factionalism within the Peshmerga was deeply ingrained and would not easily be removed, as it was almost as much a quasi-tribal mindset as an institutional phenomenon.

101. Mr Qadir told us that the Peshmerga would be willing to co-ordinate with the Iraqi army to take on ISIL on Iraqi territory, but said that the Peshmerga would not, in general, work with the Iraqi army in territory that it does not consider to be part of Iraqi Kurdistan, as the Peshmerga have no role defending non-Kurdish territory. (We note that there are exceptions: the Peshmerga played a key role in taking the Mosul dam off ISIL, and, we understand, continue to defend it, even though the dam is not in territory claimed by the

164 See also Ranj Alaaldin ([KUR 18](#)), page 3

KRG.). The Minister, Mr Ellwood, told us in November that the UK Government wanted to see more evidence of “synergy” between the Peshmerga and the Iraqi army.¹⁶⁵

102. Another issue raised with us by KRG politicians was the current requirement for any equipment (lethal or non-lethal) gifted to the KRG to be first checked by federal government inspectors in Baghdad, putting back receipt of the gift by several days. They said there was no reason why such inspections could not go ahead at an airport in the Kurdistan Region on the day of inspection.¹⁶⁶ In an evidence session with the Foreign Secretary in September, he implied that this was normal practice, as the federal government is the sovereign power.¹⁶⁷

103. We put the Peshmerga’s request for more weaponry to Mr Ellwood when he gave evidence in November. He agreed that military support should continue, but appeared to express a degree of scepticism about whether the Peshmerga were as short of adequate weaponry as was being claimed. The Minister identified factionalism as a problem that needed to be addressed, remarking that the emergence of Goran as a major political player raised at least the potential of the problem becoming worse not better. Mr Ellwood referred to Libya as an extreme example of a country where arms proliferation had helped ruin its political system. The Minister appeared to agree with the proposition that there should be a degree of linkage between continuing military support for the Peshmerga and evidence of progress in Peshmerga reform.¹⁶⁸

104. The UK’s offer of equipment and training for the Peshmerga has been warmly welcomed in the Kurdistan Region and is helping the Peshmerga take on ISIL. Military assistance should be continued, on the basis of evidence that progress on the unification of the Peshmerga is continuing satisfactorily. The Government may also be minded to take into account the extent to which the Peshmerga and the Iraqi army are co-ordinating to take on ISIL in contemplating future gifting of equipment. We appreciate that Iraq’s delicate constitutional situation is an element that the UK Government must take into account in determining whether and in what manner to make future gifts of military equipment.

105. We seek clarification from the UK Government as to whether it would be possible for gifts to the Kurdistan Regional Government to be made direct to territory of the KRG or whether the federal government is within its right to insist that all gifts are routed via Baghdad.

Helping the Syrian Kurds

106. The Kurdistan Region’s formal land border with Syria is tiny but it currently controls a larger area of border territory to the west of Mosul, an area that has been fiercely

¹⁶⁵ Q176

¹⁶⁶ See also KRG High Representative to the UK ([KUR 15](#)), paragraph 62

¹⁶⁷ Oral evidence taken on 9 September 2014, HC (2014-15), [Q5-6; Q16](#)

¹⁶⁸ Q171-174

contested with ISIL since the summer. We understand that up until the summer, the KRG's approach to the Syrian conflict had been to insulate itself as best it could.¹⁶⁹ A berm was erected close to the border; its purpose, the then KRG High Representative to the UK told us, was to keep Islamist militants out rather than Syrian refugees.¹⁷⁰ (The KRG has in fact accepted some 250,000 Syrian refugees, mainly ethnic Kurds.¹⁷¹) This strategy became increasingly difficult to maintain throughout 2014, as ISIL became increasingly an Iraqi as well as a Syrian problem. This is illustrated by two events from the second half of the year: first, at Sinjar in August, when territory held, as we understand it, by KDP factions of the Peshmerga, fell to ISIL. When the siege was eventually lifted, it was militias attached to the Syrian-Kurdish PYD Party, who relieved it, liberating trapped civilians, as well as a few KDP Peshmerga trapped with them, via a land corridor into Kurdish-held territory in Syria.¹⁷² The second event was the KRG's agreement to assist the Syrian Kurdish resistance to ISIL in Kobane, by sending around 200 Peshmerga via the Turkish border to help defend the town; amounting to a small but symbolically important recognition by the KRG that engagement in Syria had become practically unavoidable.

107. The events of the past year have placed increased focus on the PYD. The party controls three non-contiguous pockets of Kurdish-majority in northern Syria—the so-called “cantons”—that amount to practically the only significant non-regime resistance to ISIL and other Islamist militias in northern Syria. The eastern-most and largest canton, centred on the Kurdish-Syriac town of Qamishli, borders the Kurdistan Region, and has a significant population of recently displaced people. When we met the PYD leadership during the inquiry, they told us that foreign governments, including the UK had offered them little help in their fight against ISIL. The FCO confirmed to us in informal briefings that it has given the PYD only very limited recognition.¹⁷³ We understand that the PYD's refusal to join the official Syrian opposition (which it sees as unrepresentative and dominated by Arab nationalists) counts against it in the UK Government's eyes. The PYD's acknowledged links to the Turkish-Kurdish PKK party, which the EU, as well as Turkey, formally proscribes as a terrorist organisation, may not help.¹⁷⁴

108. The PYD describes itself as a social democratic, secular and cross-communal movement; no longer Kurdish nationalist in orientation but instead favouring the decentralisation of Syria. Those who are suspicious of the PYD, including the KDP of President Barzani, have accused it of observing an informal truce with the Assad regime, an allegation it strongly denies, and of having a monopolistic approach to power. There have been allegations made of human rights abuses within the cantons. While the democratic

169 Q27 [Professor Gareth Stansfield]

170 Q112

171 UN Development Program, “[Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan \(3RP\) for Iraq](#)”, [accessed January 2015]

172 “[Analysis: Could support for the 'other' Kurds stall Islamic State?](#)”, *BBC News Online*, 25 August 2014

173 None of the gifts of non-lethal equipment and training that the UK Government has provided to opposition groups in Syria has gone to the PYD in the three cantons.

174 In September, the Foreign Secretary told us that it would be for the Home Office to decide on whether to move to de-proscribe the PKK. As of the time of the publication of this report, there have been no such moves by the Home Office (Oral evidence taken on 9 September 2014, HC (2014-15), [Q19-20](#))

credentials of the PYD may be disputed, it is undoubtedly a secular movement that has absolutely no truck with the extremism of ISIL and is its only serious adversary in much of northern Syria.¹⁷⁵ Its fighters played an honourable and brave role in relieving the crisis on Mount Sinjar. For most of the past year it has been on the back foot against ISIL, with the central canton of Kobane all but falling. Were Qamishli also to be threatened this could have serious consequences for the strategic balance in the wider region, as well as making the Kurdistan Region more vulnerable.

109. We ask the Government to clarify its policy on recognising and working with Syrian-Kurdish groups such as the PYD party that are resisting ISIL in northern Syria. We also ask it to clarify whether its categorisation of the Turkish-Kurdish PKK as a terrorist group or the PYD's decision not to join the Syrian National Coalition are considered reasons not to recognise or assist the PYD.

The humanitarian crisis in the Kurdistan Region

110. Since 2003, the KRG and the people of the Kurdistan Region have responded generously to an influx of displaced people, of various religions or ethnicities, escaping conflict or persecution elsewhere in Iraq or, increasingly, Syria. The steady flow of refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs) in 2014 became a flood, with hundreds of thousands of Iraqis, of many ethnicities and religions escaping instability in the rest of Iraq for the relative safety of the Kurdistan Region. Well over one million refugees and IDPs¹⁷⁶ are living all over the Region, in camps, private homes and hotels, schools, churches and temples, parks, building sites and waste ground. The condition of the refugees and IDPs, and the effect of their presence on the Region, was a subject raised constantly with us on our visit to Iraq. We also visited an IDP camp near Sulaymaniyah, speaking to the camp administration and briefly to the Yezidis who had been living there since ISIL forced them to flee their homes in the summer.

111. The views of relevant NGOs and agencies that we spoke to was that the KRG was doing a decent job of dealing with the crisis, and was responsive to their advice. However they and KRG ministers themselves told us that (as of late October, at the onset of winter) the KRG was operating at the very limits of its capacity and was running out of the outside support it needed to provide basic adequate services.¹⁷⁷ There was also real pessimism as to whether refugees or IDPs would be able to return home soon; and we note US and UK policymakers' estimates that it may years rather than months to successfully prosecute a war against ISIL.¹⁷⁸ The influx of so many refugees and IDPs has put massive pressure on

175 See also Ranj Alaaldin ([KUR 18](#)), page 2

176 According to the UN High Commission for Refugees, as of December 2014, there were 234,000 *registered* Syrian refugees in Iraq, the vast majority of these in the Kurdistan Region. (On our visit to Iraq, we were told that most Syrian refugees in the country are ethnic Kurds). The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre estimated that, as of November 2014, there were just under 1.9 million IDPs in Iraq; 47% of these in the Kurdistan Region. As the Kurdistan Region itself has not suffered mass population displacement during the recent crisis, almost all of this percentage will be individuals displaced from elsewhere in Iraq.

177 The issue was also raised with us in the June by the then KRG High Representative (Q75-77)

178 Q157 and Q221 [Tobias Ellwood MP]; HC Debs, 26 September 2014, [col 1257](#) [Commons Chamber]

public services: we were informed, for instance, that nearly half of the Region's schools had not yet opened for the summer term because they were being used as emergency accommodation. The view of one well-placed agency was that one more significant surge of displaced people could "break" the Region's economy.

112. The UK has responded to the humanitarian crisis in the Kurdistan Region and the rest of Iraq by contributing £39.5 million in emergency aid thus far; more than any other EU member, except Germany.¹⁷⁹

113. The Kurdistan Regional Government and the people of the Region have responded with generosity and sacrifice to the influx of hundreds of thousands of displaced people from Syria and Iraq. Their continuing presence threatens to overwhelm the Region's economy and public service particularly if, as appears likely, conflict in Syria and Iraq continues for the foreseeable future. It would be disastrous if this ongoing crisis were to seriously destabilise the Region's economy or political system, and accordingly is in the foreign policy interests of the UK to work with allies in the UN, EU, NATO and other international organisations to ensure that the KRG is well-supported to deal with this crisis. Whilst we agree that patience is likely to be crucial in order to defeat ISIL, the UK Government should note that a "long war" carries its own risks, amongst these a prolonged and economically debilitating humanitarian crisis, with hundreds of thousands of people unable to return to their homes, and the possibility of increased tensions between displaced people and the host community.

The disputed territories

114. Practically overnight following ISIL's capture of Mosul on 10 June, territories south of the Green Line that the KRG has coveted since the start of Iraq's democratic era were captured by the Peshmerga as the Iraqi army retreated. For the KRG, these districts are an integral part of Iraqi Kurdistan but because they did not form part of the safe haven vacated by Saddam's troops in 1991, they do not form part of the Kurdistan Region.¹⁸⁰

115. Article 140 of Iraq's constitution, agreed in 2005, provided that the status of disputed territories should have been resolved by November 2007, through local plebiscites, but by the time we commenced the inquiry, the votes, already deferred several times, had been postponed indefinitely.¹⁸¹ The status of the disputed territories arouses strong emotions on both sides.¹⁸² For most Kurds, they are historically Kurdish territories that Saddam sought to steal from the Kurds, and the failure to implement Article 140 is another example of bad faith from the federal government.¹⁸³ The Peshmerga's capture of the disputed territories in

179 Department for International Development, ["Providing humanitarian assistance to people affected by conflict in northern Iraq"](#) [accessed January 2015]; UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Iraq 2014 [Financial tracking service](#) [accessed January 2015]

180 KRG High Representative to the UK (KUR 15), paragraph 15; Q69 [KRG High Representative to the UK]

181 Q26 [Professor Charles Tripp and Professor Gareth Stansfield]

182 Q130 [Dr Ali Allawi and Peter Galbraith]

183 Q69 [KRG High Representative to the UK]

June led to what turned out to be a terminal breakdown of relations between the federal government and the KRG, with Mr Maliki alleging that the KRG and ISIL were working together to divide up northern Iraq.¹⁸⁴

116. In late June, the then KRG High Representative to the UK told us that the KRG planned to implement article 140 as soon as possible, in order to resolve the territories' status once and for all. She told us that the KRG would ensure that elections took place in accordance with international standards and that foreign observers would be invited, although she expressed doubt about asking the UN to have a role, on the ground that the UN was sometimes a "corrupt" organisation and still had questions to answer over their handling of the Saddam-era oil-for-food programme. The High Representative told us that the KRG would respect the results.¹⁸⁵ Former Ambassador Peter Galbraith told us in June that he had received assurances from Kurdish leaders he had met recently in Kirkuk that if any district did not vote to join the Region it would not have to, a message reiterated on our visit to the Region in October. This is reassuring, although we are not certain what this would lead to in practice if plebiscites produced a ragged pattern of Yes and No votes in neighbouring districts. Mr Galbraith said that he would favour the UN being involved in running the vote as it would give the process greater credibility, including with Iraqi Arabs.¹⁸⁶

117. By the time we visited the Kurdistan region in October, it was apparent that the timetable for holding local plebiscites had been pushed back several months, following the worsening of the crisis in August. This may be no bad thing if it provides a breathing space for careful consideration of next steps.

Kirkuk and "Arabisation"

118. The disputed territories include towns and districts that are, or were, amongst the most diverse in Iraq, with Kurds living alongside Arabs, Assyrians and Turcomans, as well as distinctive Kurdish minorities such as the Yezidis and Shabaks. A number of districts considered important for strategic or economic reasons by the regime in Baghdad were, from the 1960s onwards, intermittently subjected to its "Arabisation" policy, with Arabs from the south moved in, and local people (Kurds, and in some cases, Assyrians or Turcomans) forced out. This happened particularly in Kirkuk; the largest city in the area, sitting astride the largest crude oil field in northern Iraq. Thousands of Kurds were forced to leave. Many Kurds moved back after 2003, and today Kurdish parties run the local council.¹⁸⁷ For many Kurds, Kirkuk is the future capital of an independent South Kurdistan, but for local Arabs, Turcomans and Assyrians it is their city too.¹⁸⁸ A similar story is repeated in smaller communities across the disputed territories.

184 ["Iraq crisis: Accusations fly between Kurdish leaders and Baghdad hampering co-ordinated action against militants"](#), *The Independent*, 10 July 2014. See also Peter Galbraith ([KUR 17](#)), paragraph 3

185 Q69-72

186 Q130

187 Q68 [KRG High Representative to the UK]

188 APPG Kurdistan Region of Iraq ([KUR 16](#)), paragraphs 26-27

119. Kurdish leaders negotiating Iraq's constitution secured a provision to enable victims of Arabisation policies in northern Iraq to have a vote in any referendums under Article 140, and for families who had been moved in to be given financial encouragement to move back to their original area. The very existence of such a provision does raise questions as to how the right to vote in any local referendum would be determined. We understand that there has been a partial "unwinding" of Arabisation over recent years, with some Kurds, as in Kirkuk, returning to their homes, but that very few Arab "settler" families have taken up the option of being rehoused elsewhere, because the federal government never properly funded the resettlement scheme.¹⁸⁹

Communal relations and protection of vulnerable communities

120. The conflict which has ravaged the area in the last year has led to further mass displacement of populations, including the uprooting of entire communities, all of which impacts on the future of the disputed territories, including any future vote on their status. We are far from certain, following our visit to the Kurdistan Region that many of these people will be returning to their homes soon, or indeed whether they will still have homes to go to. We understand that many Christian and Yezidi families in particular have lost almost everything to ISIL.

121. The conflict has raised ethnic tensions in mixed areas in northern Iraq.¹⁹⁰ Sunni Arab frustration and disillusionment with the Maliki government, discussed elsewhere, is understandable, but it was disturbing to hear, as we did during the visit, of collaboration between ISIL and local Arabs when the former moved into areas over the summer, with some of the latter betraying their non-Sunni neighbours and appropriating their property.¹⁹¹ Given the outrage in the Region at the acts of ISIL and their supporters, there may be a risk of reprisals, if and when ISIL are finally forced out of ethnically mixed areas. If emotions are left unchecked, there is a risk of the innocent being punished alongside the guilty, and of the cycle of reprisals continuing. The prospect of referendums taking place in such an atmosphere is not an attractive one.

122. In Erbil, we met representatives of minority communities who told us that ordinary people were frightened of going back to their homes, even if and when ISIL were removed. They told us that they had felt let down by the Peshmerga, alleging that they had not defended them as stoutly they would have fellow Kurdish Muslims. They asked us to support the stationing of international peace-keeping forces in parts of northern Iraq in order to ensure that minority communities felt protected and able to go on living there. When we put this plea to the Minister, Mr Ellwood, he said that there were no UK Government plans to support international peacekeepers in northern Iraq, saying that he

189 ["Iraq's Article 140: Underfunded, Unfair and Not Working, Critics Say", Rudaw, 23 May 2013.](#) ["Kirkuk ethnic tensions scupper Iraq census", BBC News Online, 6 December 2010](#)

190 Tweet by Kurdistan Region Deputy Prime Minister Talabani, 22 August 2014: ["The way Iraqi Arab tribes have assisted #ISIS in attacks against Yezidis, Christians & Shiites makes reconciliation very hard 2 foresee"](#)

191 See also Q157 [Tobias Ellwood MP] and ["Peshmerga forces heave Isis away from Mount Sinjar", The Guardian, 21 December 2014](#)

saw as the way forward Iraqi Government plans to develop a national guard composed of local militias, each reflecting the composition of the area they are charged to defend.¹⁹²

123. The allegation that the Peshmerga abandoned the minority communities they were supposed to be protecting in August has been made elsewhere, and we know that it troubles both the KRG and the Peshmerga.¹⁹³ The KRG and Peshmerga representatives we have met during the inquiry have been very clear that they see it as their duty to defend from attack by ISIL everyone under their protection, of all religions and ethnicities, and want to help displaced communities of Christians and Yezidis get back in their homes as soon as possible.¹⁹⁴ We do not doubt this, although something clearly went wrong in the summer, when Yezidi, Christian and Shia Turcoman towns fell to ISIL. Peshmerga commanders told us that the main problem was simply of local fighters running out of ammunition after being outgunned by ISIL. It is perhaps worth adding that most of the districts overrun in August were outside the formal boundaries of the Kurdistan Region, closest to ISIL's Mosul stronghold, and at the furthest edge of Peshmerga control. We are pleased to note that the Peshmerga appear to be gradually gaining the upper hand in much of this area.

124. **The Kurdistan Regional Government deserves credit for swiftly directing the Peshmerga to occupy Kirkuk and other disputed areas of northern Iraq at a moment of crisis in June 2014. The question now is what happens next. The KRG is right to insist on adherence to the Iraqi constitution, and to votes on the status of the disputed territories finally going ahead. However, there is much that could go wrong if the voting process is seen as unfair or lacking in transparency. The UK Government should use its influence to ensure that the voting process is transparent, addresses the various practical problems that the issue engages, is respectful of the rights of minorities as equal citizens of Iraq, and overall inspires the confidence of those taking part in it. Ideally the process would also proceed with the acceptance, or even involvement, of the federal government, and again we would encourage the UK Government to use what influence it has to this end.**

125. **For the time being, much of the disputed territories are effectively a war zone, with entire communities still displaced from their homes. The KRG has rightly put back plans for local plebiscites for the time being, and we would encourage the UK Government to use its influence to try to prevent a peremptory vote.**

192 Q163

193 ["Qaraqosh Christians tell of IS terror in Iraq"](#) *Middle East Eye*, 8 August 2014. ["Iraq crisis: Barack Obama sends in bombers to tackle Isis' 'potential genocide'"](#), *The Independent*, 8 August 2014

194 Q75 [KRG High Representative to the UK]

7 The Kurdistan Region's constitutional future: UK policy

126. Kurds enthusiastically backed Iraq's new constitution in the 2005 referendum. Since then, the public rhetoric of the KRG has been to the effect that the democratic, plural and federal Iraq envisaged by the constitution is an experiment which Kurds are committed to help make work;¹⁹⁵ but that if the experiment turns out to be a failure, Kurds will consider other options. By 2014, that point had been reached.¹⁹⁶ At informal meetings near the start of the inquiry, KRG representatives told us that Iraq's federal model had failed, and that the only remaining solution, short of full independence for the Kurdistan Region was the "confederation" of Iraq into Arab and Kurdish parts. On 1 July, following the fall of Mosul, President Barzani told the BBC that it was time to push for Kurdish independence on the ground that "Iraq is effectively partitioned" and that it was time for Kurds to escape the country's "tragic situation".¹⁹⁷

127. The intensification of the security crisis in August has brought a pause: President Barzani's proposals for a referendum are still before the Kurdistan National Assembly, but the timetable has been suspended, and it would appear that there will be no further movement in the foreseeable future. In other respects, the constitutional crisis appears slightly less acute: Prime Minister Maliki has gone, replaced by a man who has said he wants to mend fences with the Kurds, and a 12-month deal has been reached on oil and the restoration of national budget payments to the KRG, just within the three-month deadline that the KRG had set for the new Prime Minister to make demonstrable progress on constitutional disputes.

The Kurdistan Region's long game

128. We took back from our visit to Erbil in October an impression of a Kurdish political establishment, of all parties, that is committed to the ultimate goal of full independence but recognises that a series of obstacles lies in its way and is proceeding cannily.¹⁹⁸ Good relations with neighbours is one of these, especially those with Kurdish minorities; thus the cultivation of friendly bilateral relations with Turkey and Iran.¹⁹⁹ Another challenge is in the words of one of our witnesses, for the Region to "find its southern boundary" by resolving the status of the disputed territories.²⁰⁰ This process may also help the Kurdistan Region achieve its penultimate goal of economic self-sufficiency, if most or all of the

195 KRG High Representative to the UK ([KUR 15](#)), paragraphs 11 and 12

196 Q92-96 and Q124 [KRG High Representative to the UK]

197 "[Iraq Kurdistan independence referendum planned](#)", *BBC News Online*, 1 July 2014

198 See also Peter Galbraith ([KUR 17](#)), paragraph 2; London Kurdish Institute ([KUR 7](#)), paragraph 6; Ranj Alaaldin ([KUR 18](#)), page 3

199 Q122 [Peter Galbraith]; APPG Kurdistan Region of Iraq ([KUR 16](#)), paragraph 18; Professor Gareth Stansfield ([KUR 14](#)), paragraph 10

200 Q26 [Professor Gareth Stansfield]

Kirkuk oilfield were to be incorporated into the Kurdistan Region. The final challenge would be to secure international recognition as a sovereign state. We were struck by comments of a very senior figure in the government in Erbil that the KRG had no desire to achieve independence if the price of it was for the Kurdistan Region to become “another Northern Cyprus”.

129. We should add that we do not see the outcome of any future referendum as one of these significant obstacles: it was made clear to us during the inquiry that voters in the Kurdistan Region are very likely to vote for independence, if this option is presented to them in a referendum.²⁰¹ However, we are far less clear what practical outcome such a vote would have, given that the rest of Iraq is likely to portray it as unofficial, or unconstitutional, and non-binding.

Overview of UK policy

130. The UK Government’s policy has generally been to avoid being drawn into detailed public comment on the merits of each dispute but to encourage dialogue and reconciliation. The UK Government says that it supports a strong and unified Iraq. It does not favour independence for the Kurdistan Region but says that questions over Iraq’s constitutional future are ultimately for the Iraqi people to decide.²⁰² We are not aware of UK Ministers elaborating on the thinking behind its policy, but it may be presumed to be representative of a general foreign policy bias in favour of the status quo²⁰³ and against perceived interference in the affairs of a sovereign state, and a fear of the consequences of an unravelling Iraq on the wider Middle East, particularly in the current climate, with ISIL openly propagandising for a rebirth of a Sunni caliphate.²⁰⁴

131. We invited the Minister to comment on what criteria the FCO would use to determine whether to recognise the independence of the Kurdistan Region, but he declined on the grounds that this was speculative.²⁰⁵

132. The UK’s policy of favouring the unity of Iraq puts it at odds with what is now the official policy of the KRG, but nothing in our evidence-gathering indicated that this policy currently poses an obstacle to good relations with the KRG (although, as we noted earlier, there was some evidence to suggest that it may have inhibited the development of a deeper trading relationship).²⁰⁶ This may be because the KRG recognises that there would be little currently to be gained from insisting that the UK take a different side on the constitutional question: should the KRG ever seek a new constitutional dispensation, it

201 Peter Galbraith ([KUR 17](#)), paragraph 4; Q115 [Peter Galbraith]

202 Q208-212 [Tobias Ellwood MP]

203 Q55 [KRG High Representative to the UK] Q124 [Dr Ali Allawi]. Former Ambassador Peter Galbraith referred to the US Government’s commitment to “the integrity of every country that exists on the globe” as “a kind of inertia” and a cause of frequent foreign policy mistakes, legitimising the use of violence to hold some countries (such as Iraq) together, when a better policy would be to pursue the outcome of peaceful separation (Q118-120) See also London Kurdish Institute ([KUR 7](#)), paragraph 5

204 See also Q119 [Peter Galbraith]

205 Q213-214

206 Q10 [Gareth Stansfield]

would be in need of friends in the international community. We appreciate that if UK diplomacy in Iraq is to be effective it must to some degree be a balancing act between Baghdad and Erbil, and one of our witnesses told us that one of the better aspects of the FCO's performance was that it had managed to remain on cordial terms with both sides, despite their ever worsening relations.²⁰⁷ The UK Government may begin to face more difficult diplomatic choices if and when Kurdish independence becomes more than a theoretical possibility.²⁰⁸

The road map to economic independence: oil and gas

133. The single biggest dispute of the last few years has been over what the KRG says is its right to sell oil and gas. Baghdad says this is disallowed by the constitution, which declares oil and gas the property of the people of Iraq.²⁰⁹ The KRG says that the federal government is wrong, pointing out that the constitution gives the federal government a right of joint management only over "present fields", which the KRG argues means fields being exploited at the time of the constitution being agreed.²¹⁰ All the fields being exploited in the Kurdistan Region are new.²¹¹ Both sides in fact agree that, under the constitution, oil and gas are a common resource of the Iraqi people, and that any receipts from their sale should be distributed proportionately. The dispute may therefore appear technical, even artificial. In fact, it cuts to the heart of the acrimony between Erbil and Baghdad. It is clear that the dispute touches on at least three sensitive issues: competence (it appears that the KRG does not trust the federal government to manage the industry as efficiently or profitably as it does); trust (it appears that neither side trusts the other to apportion receipts fairly); and above all power.²¹² For the Maliki government, unilateral management of oil and gas fields by the KRG was an unconscionable breach of Iraqi sovereignty. For Kurdish politicians, it means the prospect of an end to any remaining financial dependency on the federal government. Kurdish politicians of all stripes have been open with us during the inquiry that they see oil and gas as a route to economic and, potentially, political self-determination.²¹³ We sense that, for the politicians and perhaps also the people of the Kurdistan Region, management of the oil and gas fields also fulfils an important psychological and symbolic need: to demonstrate, after decades, if not centuries, of political marginalisation and neglect, that Kurds in Iraq can finally be masters of their own destiny.

207 Q11 [Professor Charles Tripp]

208 Q8-9 [Professor Gareth Stansfield]; Professor Gareth Stansfield ([KUR 14](#)), paragraph 9. See also Ranj Alaaldin ([KUR 18](#)), pages 1-2

209 Article 111

210 Q100 [KRG High Representative to the UK]; Q130 [Peter Galbraith]

211 Article 112. The further link in the chain of the KRG's argument is article 115, which provides that any powers *not* stipulated under the constitution as being within the federal government's competence are within the competence of the Kurdistan Region.

212 Q20-22 [Professor Gareth Stansfield and Professor Charles Tripp]; Q 40 [John Roberts]; John Roberts ([KUR 19](#)), page 5

213 KRG High Representative to the UK ([KUR 15](#)), paragraph 22

The Kurdistan Region's oil and gas potential

134. We were cautioned during the inquiry to take any estimate of the Kurdistan Region's oil and gas reserves with a pinch of salt,²¹⁴ but by any reckoning they are extensive and potentially transformative. A commonly cited estimate is of around 45 billion barrels of oil, putting the Kurdistan region in roughly the same league as Libya and Nigeria, and 110 trillion cubic feet of gas, which would place the Region around tenth or twelfth in the world for reserves, were it a state.²¹⁵ Over the past decade, the KRG has invested considerable effort in building the industry by attracting foreign investors, selling the region on the basis of its relatively safe and politically stable environment, comprehensive regulatory framework, and business-friendly policies.²¹⁶ A number of big names have started drilling and investing in infrastructure, including Exxon, Chevron, Repsol, Total, the local giant KAR, and the British-Turkish company, Genel Energy.

135. The key practical problem for the industry in the Kurdistan Region, namely that oil and gas reserves are a largely stranded asset, now looks on the point of being comprehensively addressed, thanks to Erbil's 2013 oil and gas agreement with Ankara, and the completion in 2014 of a spur to connect Kurdish fields with the main pipeline running through eastern Turkey. Kurdish crude can now to be loaded onto tankers at the port of Ceyhan on Turkey's southern coast, and we understand that a number of sales were made over 2014.²¹⁷ Kurdistan has also agreed to supply Turkey with liquefied natural gas by 2017²¹⁸ although work on the necessary infrastructure appears to have barely begun.²¹⁹

136. According to the KRG itself, as of November 2014, exports to Ceyhan were at around 300,000 barrels per day (BPD)²²⁰ and continuing to increase, with production as of December standing at 400,000 BPD.²²¹ In July, Dr Hawrami, the KRG's Natural Resources Minister, told us at an informal meeting that the plan was to be exporting 1 million BPD by the end of 2015, and 2 million by 2020.²²² Recent media reports indicate that Dr Hawrami considers the KRG still to be on target, although we note evidence that the KRG's current midstream capacity is limited.²²³ On our visit to Iraq, 500 BPD was mentioned as the "magic number" at which the Kurdistan Region would wean itself off reliance on the Iraqi

214 Q41-42 [John Roberts]

215 Q41-42 [John Roberts]; KRG High Representative to the UK ([KUR 15](#)), paragraph 17; Genel Energy ([KUR 2](#)), paragraph 1

216 Amongst the latter are that contracts are awarded on a production-sharing rather than (as in the rest of Iraq) a service basis, offering potentially far greater rewards to those who take the calculated risk of investing in the Region. (Q43 [John Roberts])

217 Q84-87 [KRG High Representative to the UK]

218 Genel Energy ([KUR 2](#)), paragraph 8

219 John Roberts ([KUR 19](#)), pages 7-8 and 8-10 (Evidence provided May 2014); "[Genel to Produce Kurds' Gas as Turkey Said to Ready Pipeline](#)", *Bloomberg*, 13 November 2014

220 "[Kurdistan oil sales reach almost \\$3 billion this year](#)", *Rudaw*, 7 November 2014. In May, John Roberts informed us that the KRG would need to significantly increase its pipeline infrastructure if it was to meet its future export targets (Q35)

221 "[Kurdish exports to rise despite falling oil prices](#)", *Rudaw*, 18 December 2014

222 See also John Roberts ([KUR 19](#)), pages 5 and 6

223 John Roberts ([KUR 19](#)), pages 8-9 (Evidence provided May 2014)

national budget. A long-term continuation of the current slump in oil prices could clearly have the effect of postponing the Kurdistan Region's economic independence, at least until it becomes a significant exporter of liquefied natural gas.

137. We sought information during the inquiry as to how robust the deal between the KRG and Turkey would turn out to be, given possible domestic barriers to deepening relations on both sides and the hostility of Baghdad. The overwhelming balance of evidence was that the deal was too much of a “win-win” for both sides for either to be deterred by any foreseeable political obstacles, and as we noted earlier, that was very strongly the message from the KRG itself.²²⁴

Iraq's federal moment?

138. The then KRG High Representative to the UK told us that the only deal not on the table for the future of Iraq is the continuation of the status quo. She said that Iraq had to escape the “strongman” model of centralised governance which had been a “catastrophe” for the country.²²⁵ (Other witnesses expressed similar sentiments.)²²⁶ She told us that President Barzani's referendum proposal did not mean that the Kurdistan Region had rejected the possibility of a confederal model of future governance. It is not clear exactly what the “confederal model” would entail, but presumably it would mean a loose and decentralised form of governance, in which Baghdad would retain only residual or joint control of a handful of matters affecting the Kurdistan Region, such as foreign relations or defence.²²⁷

139. A renewed discussion over the constitutional future of the Kurdistan Region may provide an opportunity for a wider debate over the constitutional future of Iraq as a whole, including the possibility of addressing what might be considered the anomaly of Iraq's “asymmetrical” federalism, with Kurdistan as its only region. We noted earlier the relative disunity of the Sunni Arab political establishment as a partial cause of the Sunni community's increased alienation from the political process. One aspect of that disunity has been a failure to come to a collective view on whether to pursue the goal of federalism for the Sunni-majority districts of Iraq.²²⁸ On our visit to Iraq, we sensed a mood from discussions with senior federal politicians that a truly federal Iraqi model might at last be seriously up for discussion.²²⁹ This was a model proposed by one of our witnesses, Dr Ali Allawi, who said that relatively loose federalism could be seen both as Iraq's last chance to

224 Q24 [Gareth Stansfield]; Q45 [John Roberts]; Q133 [Peter Galbraith]

225 Q52-55

226 Q3 and Q20 [Professor Charles Tripp]

227 The KRG High Representative told us that the confederal model envisaged by the KRG would be a form of “devolution, with almost total authority and definitely economic independence” (Q55)

228 The Iraqi constitution describes Iraq as a federal state, though there is in fact only one federal region; the Kurdistan Region. The constitution, however allows groups of governorates, to petition to become a region. There were some abortive moves by Sunni politicians to press for federalisation of Sunni-majority districts, blocked by the Maliki government on the ground that Iraq was not yet ready for full federalisation.

229 See also Q16 [Professor Stansfield] and Q21 [Professor Tripp]; Professor Gareth Stansfield ([KUR 14](#)), paragraph 12; APPG Kurdistan Region of Iraq ([KUR 12](#)), paragraphs 44 and 45; Ranj Alaaldin ([KUR 18](#)), page 2

remain a united and sovereign state, and also as Iraq's great opportunity to be an exemplar of diversity and decentralisation in the Middle East.²³⁰ We recognise that such a model brings challenges as well as opportunities; it may arguably entrench sectarian differences rather than overcoming them. There is also the challenge of enabling decentralisation of power whilst maintaining an equitable allocation of resources, so as not to leave one region relatively impoverished. (An Iraqi "Sunnistan" would be both landlocked and oil-poor relative to the rest of Iraq.²³¹)

140. We were interested to note public comments of the Foreign Secretary on his visit to Iraq just before our own that a form of "devo max" could provide the best model of future democratic governance in Iraq.²³²

141. **We agree with the UK Government that for the time being it is far better that Iraq seeks to recover its unity and strength in order to defeat the common enemy of ISIL. It is also rational to be concerned about the possible consequences of Iraq's break-up. But the Kurdistan Region's desire for increased self-governance, or even independence, is itself rational, given its economic potential and demonstrable capacity for effective self-governance, and also understandable, given its recent history. We do not judge that independence is imminent, but it is a medium-term possibility, depending in large part on the Kurdistan Region's energy export strategy, for which the UK Government should be prepared.**

142. **It is for the Iraqi people to decide their future, but it appears to us that a looser federal model, permitting greater self-governance by its diverse mosaic of communities, offers best hope for Iraq remaining united and sovereign. Highly centralised rule under a "strongman" in Baghdad will never work.**

143. **If the Kurdistan Region is to become independent, it should be with the consent of the rest of Iraq. But the UK and its international partners should stand ready to help ensure that any clear expression of will in favour of independence, and on reasonable terms, is accepted and respected.**

230 Q116; Q124; Q134; Q138

231 This would be especially the case if the Kurdistan Region were to retain Kirkuk, and its oilfield, currently held by the Peshmerga

232 "[Iraq is in last-chance saloon as a single state, says Philip Hammond](#)". *The Telegraph*, 14 October 2014.

Annex A: Informal meetings in the UK relevant to this inquiry

1 April 2014: Meeting with Ms Bayan Sami Abdul Rahman, High Representative to the UK of the Kurdistan Regional Government

7 April 2014: Meeting with Minister Falah Mustafa Bakir, Head of Department of Foreign Relations, Kurdistan Regional Government

20 May 2014: Meeting with Dr Ashti Hawrami, Minister of Natural Resources, Kurdistan Regional Government

10 June 2014: Meeting with Baroness Nicholson, UK Trade Envoy to Iraq and Executive Chair of the Iraq British Business Council

11 June 2014: Meeting with Mr Faik Nerweyi, Ambassador of Iraq

17 June 2014: Briefing by FCO officials on ISIL and situation in Iraq

3 July 2014: Meeting with delegation from Jazira and Qamishli cantons, Syria, led by Mr Salih Muslim Muhammad, Chairman, Democratic Union Party (PYD)

3 September 2014: Meeting with King Abdullah II Ibn al-Hussein of Jordan

10 September 2014: Meeting with Mr Salih Muslim Muhammad, Chairman, Democratic Union Party (PYD)

10 November 2014: Meeting with delegation from the Syrian National Coalition (SNC), led by Mr Hadi al-Bahra, President, SNC

11 November 2014: Briefing by FCO officials on Syria

Annex B: Committee meetings on visit to Iraq, 19–22 October 2014

Briefing by HMA Iraq Frank Baker and officials

Meeting with President Fuad Masum of Iraq

Meeting with Dr Salim al-Jabouri, Speaker, and Sheikh Humam Hamoudi, Deputy Speaker, Iraq Council of Representatives

Meeting with MP from Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq

Meeting with Vice President Dr Ayad Allawi of Iraq and Mr Qassim al-Fahadawi, Minister of Electricity, Government of Iraq

Briefing by UK Government officials and security adviser at UK Consulate General Erbil

Lunch with Mr Sokol Kondi and Ms Helen Hughes, UN Assistance Mission for Iraq, and Mr Andrew Pendleton, UN Office (Erbil) for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

Meeting with Mr Yousif Sadik, Speaker, Mr Izzat Sabir, Chair, Finance Committee, and Mr Soran Omar, Chair, Human Rights Committee, Kurdistan National Assembly

Meeting with Ms Pakhshan Zangana and Ms Floran Gorgis Seudin, Kurdistan Regional Government High Council for Women's Affairs

Meeting with Mr Mustafa Qadir, Minister for Peshmerga Affairs, Kurdistan Regional Government

Meeting with representatives of minority groups (residents of Anbar governorate internally displaced in the Kurdistan Region, Turcomans, Yezidis)

Dinner with Mr Nawzad Hadi, Governor of Erbil, and Dr Ali Sindi, Minister of Planning, Kurdistan Regional Government

Meeting with Mr Hakim Qadir, Mr Omar Fattah and other members of the politburo of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan

Meeting with Mr Nawsherwan Mustafa, Leader of Goran Party

Lunch with Vice President Kosrat Rasul of the Kurdistan Region

Briefing from supervisors of Arbat camp for internally displaced people in Iraq and discussion with camp residents

Meeting with representatives of UK business community in Erbil and representatives of KAR and Genel Energy

Meeting with Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani, Mr Karim Sinjari, Minister of Interior, and Mr Sefin Dizayi, Chief Spokesman, Kurdistan Regional Government

Briefing from Peshmerga commanders and discussion with Peshmerga soldiers and UK trainers (the Yorkshire Regiment) at Bnaslawa military training area

Lunch with representatives in Erbil of the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, Save the Children, Kurdistan Human Rights Watch, and International Commission on Missing Persons

Formal Minutes

Tuesday 13 January 2015

Members present:

Sir Richard Ottaway, in the Chair

Mr John Baron
Ann Clwyd
Andrew Rosindell

Mr Frank Roy
Sir John Stanley
Nadhim Zahawi

Draft Report (*UK Government policy on the Kurdistan Region of Iraq*), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraph 1 read and agreed to.

Paragraph 2 read, amended and agreed to.

Paragraphs 3 to 20 read and agreed to.

Paragraph 21 read, amended and agreed to.

Paragraphs 22 to 25 read and agreed to.

Paragraph 26 read, amended and agreed to.

Paragraphs 27 to 31 read and agreed to.

Paragraph 32 read, amended and agreed to.

Paragraphs 33 to 39 read and agreed to.

Paragraph 40 read, amended and agreed to.

Paragraphs 41 and 42 read and agreed to.

Paragraph 43 read, amended and agreed to.

Paragraphs 44 to 47 read and agreed to.

Paragraph 48 read, amended and agreed to.

Paragraphs 49 to 51 read and agreed to.

Paragraph 52 read, amended and agreed to.

Paragraph 53 read, amended and agreed to.

Paragraphs 54 and 55 read and agreed to.

Paragraph 56 read, amended and agreed to.

Paragraph 57 read, amended and agreed to.

Paragraphs 58 to 65 read and agreed to.

Paragraph 66 read, amended and agreed to.

Paragraphs 67 to 72 read and agreed to.

Paragraph 73 read, amended and agreed to.

Paragraphs 74 and 75 read and agreed to.

Paragraph 76 read, amended and agreed to.

Paragraph 77 read, amended and agreed to.

Paragraphs 78 to 80 read and agreed to.

Paragraph 81 read, amended and agreed to.

Paragraph 82 read and agreed to.

Paragraph 83 read, amended and agreed to.

Paragraphs 84 and 85 read and agreed to.

Paragraph 86 read.

Amendment proposed, in line 6, to leave out “and to join in air strikes”.—(*Mr John Baron.*)

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Paragraph agreed to.

Paragraphs 87 and 88 read and agreed to.

Paragraph 89 read, amended and agreed to.

Paragraph 90 read.

Amendment proposed, in line 2, to leave out from “ISIL” to “freely” in line 4 and to insert “is prevented from moving”.—(*Mr John Baron.*)

Question put, That the Amendment be made.

The Committee divided.

Ayes, 1
Mr John Baron

Noes, 5
Ann Clwyd
Andrew Rosindell
Mr Frank Roy
Sir John Stanley
Nadhim Zahawi

Question accordingly negatived.

Paragraph agreed to.

Paragraphs 91 to 93 read and agreed to.

Paragraph 94 read, amended and agreed to.

Paragraphs 95 to 106 read and agreed to.

Paragraph 107 read, amended and agreed to.

Paragraphs 108 and 109 read and agreed to.

Paragraph 110 read, amended and agreed to.

Paragraphs 111 to 113 read and agreed to.

Paragraph 114 read, amended and agreed to.

Paragraphs 115 and 116 read and agreed to.

Paragraph 117 read, amended and agreed to.

Paragraphs 118 to 126 read and agreed to.

Paragraph 127 read, amended and agreed to.

Paragraphs 128 to 132 read and agreed to.

Paragraph 133 read, amended and agreed to.

Paragraph 134 read and agreed to.

Paragraph 135 read, amended and agreed to.

Paragraph 136 read, amended and agreed to.

Paragraphs 137 to 143 read and agreed to.

Summary read.

Amendment proposed, in second page of summary, line 16, to leave out “strongly support” and insert “understand”.—(*Mr John Baron.*)

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Another Amendment made.

Amendment proposed, in second page of summary, line 48, to leave out “Nevertheless, in the long term, the Region’s prospects look bright” and to insert “The region faces challenging times. Prospects will be improved”.—(*Mr John Baron.*)

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Another Amendment made.

Amendment proposed, in third page of summary, line 6, to leave out, after the word “along”, the words “this path; and with the support and mentoring of the UK and other Western partners, there is every prospect that in the years to come the Region will stand out as a beacon of” and to insert “its path towards”.—(*Mr John Baron.*)

Question put, That the Amendment be made.

The Committee divided.

Ayes, 3
Mr John Baron
Mr Frank Roy
Sir John Stanley

Noes, 2
Ann Clwyd
Nadhim Zahawi

Question accordingly agreed to.

Another Amendment made.

Summary, as amended, agreed to.

Annexes agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report, as amended, be the Eighth Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chair make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That written evidence be reported to the House for publication on the internet:

KUR 18 Ranj Alaaldin

KUR 19 John Roberts

Ordered, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available, in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order No. 134.

[Adjourned till Tuesday 20 January at 1.45 pm]

Witnesses

The following witnesses gave evidence. Transcripts can be viewed on the Committee's inquiry page at www.parliament.uk/facom.

Tuesday 6 May 2014

Question number

Professor Charles Tripp, Professor of Politics, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, **Professor Gareth Stansfield**, Al Qasimi Professor of Gulf Studies, Director of the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies, University of Exeter, and **John Roberts**, Energy Security Specialist and Senior Partner, Methinks Ltd

[Q1-51](#)

Tuesday 15 July 2014

Bayan Sami Abdul Rahman, Kurdistan Regional Government High Representative to the UK, **Peter Galbraith**, and **Dr Ali Allawi**, former Minister of Trade, Defence and Finance, Government of Iraq

[Q52-138](#)

Tuesday 18 November 2014

Tobias Ellwood MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State and **Edward Oakden**, Director, Middle East and North Africa, Foreign and Commonwealth Office

[Q139-224](#)

Published written evidence

The following written evidence was received and can be viewed on the Committee's inquiry web page at www.parliament.uk/facom. KUR numbers are generated by the evidence processing system and so may not be complete.

- 1 APPG Kurdistan Region In Iraq ([KUR0012](#))
- 2 APPG Kurdistan Region In Iraq ([KUR0016](#))
- 3 British Council ([KUR0004](#))
- 4 British Expertise ([KUR0003](#))
- 5 Dlawer Ala-Aldeen ([KUR0001](#))
- 6 Foreign & Commonwealth Office ([KUR0006](#))
- 7 Gareth Stansfield ([KUR0014](#))
- 8 Genel Energy Plc ([KUR0002](#))
- 9 John Roberts ([KUR0019](#))
- 10 King Edward VI School ([KUR0009](#))
- 11 KRG UK High Representation ([KUR0015](#))
- 12 London Kurdish Institute ([KUR0007](#))
- 13 Newcastle Gateshead Medical Volunteers ([KUR0010](#))
- 14 Peter Galbraith ([KUR0017](#))
- 15 Professor Michael Bohlander ([KUR0005](#))
- 16 Quintin Oliver ([KUR0013](#))
- 17 Ranj Alaaldin ([KUR0018](#))

List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

All publications from the Committee are available on the Committee's website at www.parliament.uk/facom.

The reference number of the Government's response to each Report is printed in brackets after the HC printing number.

Session 2010–2012

First Special Report	Turks and Caicos Islands: Government Response to the Committee's Seventh Report of Session 2009-10	HC 623
Second Special Report	The Implications of Cuts to the BBC World Service@ Responses from the Government and the BBC to the Committee's Sixth Report of Session 2010-12	HC 1058
First Report	Future inter-parliamentary scrutiny of EU foreign, defence and security policy	HC 697
Second Report	FCO Public Diplomacy: The Olympic and Paralympic Games 2012	HC 581 (Cm 8059)
Third Report	FCO Performance and Finances	HC 572 (Cm 8060)
Fourth Report	The UK's foreign policy approach to Afghanistan and Pakistan	HC 514 (Cm 8064)
Fifth Report	Scrutiny of Arms Export Controls (2011): UK Strategic Export Controls Annual Report 2009, Quarterly Reports for 2010, licensing policy and review of export control legislation	HC 686 (Cm 8079)
Sixth Report	The Implications of the Cuts to the BBC World Service	HC 849 (HC 1058)
Seventh Report	The Role of the FCO in UK Government	HC 665 (Cm 8125)
Eighth Report	The FCO's Human Rights Work 2010-11	HC 964 (Cm 8169)
Ninth Report	UK-Brazil Relations	HC 949 (Cm 8237)
Tenth Report	Piracy off the coast of Somalia	HC 1318 (Cm 8324)
Eleventh Report	Departmental Annual Report 2010-11	HC 1618 (Cm 8360)
Twelfth Report	UK-Turkey relations and Turkey's regional role	HC 1567 (Cm8370)

Session 2012–13

First Special Report	The FCO's Departmental Annual Report 2010-11: Responses from the BBC Trust and the British Council to the Committee's Eleventh Report of Session 2010-12	HC 530
First Report	Scrutiny of Arms Exports (2012): UK Strategic Export Controls Annual Report 2010, Quarterly Reports for July to December 2010 and January to September 2011, the Government's Review of arms exports to the Middle East and North Africa, and wider arms control issues	HC 419 (Cm 8441)
Second Report	British foreign policy and the 'Arab Spring'	HC 80 (Cm 8436)
Third Report	The FCO's human rights work in 2012-13	HC 116 (Cm 8506)

Fourth Report	The role and future of the Commonwealth	HC 114 (Cm 8521)
Fifth Report	FCO performance and finances	HC 690 (Cm 8636)
Sixth Report	Foreign policy considerations for the UK and Scotland in the event of Scotland becoming an independent country	HC 643 (Cm 8644)

Session 2013–14

First Special Report	FCO performance and finances 2011-12: Responses from the British Council and the BBC to the Committee's Fifth Report of Session 2012-13	
First Report	The future of the European Union: UK Government policy	HC 87 (Cm 8693)
Second Report	The UK staff presence in the EU institutions	HC 219 (Cm 8698)
Third Report	First Joint Report of the Business, Innovation and Skills, Defence, Foreign Affairs and International Development Committees of Session 2013-14 - Scrutiny of Arms Exports and Arms Control (2013)	HC 205 (Cm 8707)
Fourth Report	The FCO's human rights work in 2012	HC 267 (Cm 1762)
Fifth Report	The UK's relations with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain	HC 88 (Cm 8780)
Sixth Report	FCO performance and finances 2012–13	HC 696 (HC 1196)
Seventh Report	The UK's response to extremism and instability in North and West Africa	HC 86 (Cm 8861)
Eighth Report	Government foreign policy towards the United States	HC 695 (Cm 8876, Session 2014–15)
Ninth Report	The future of the BBC World Service	HC 1045

Session 2014–15

First Special Report	The future of the BBC World Service: Responses from the Government and the BBC to the Committee's Ninth Report of Session 2013–14	HC 218
First Report	The use of Diego Garcia by the United States	HC 377 (HC 646)
Second Report	Gibraltar: Time to get off the fence	HC 461 (Cm 8917)
Third Report	UK policy towards Iran	HC 547 (Cm 8920)
Fourth Report	First Joint Report of the Business, Innovation and Skills, Defence, Foreign Affairs and International Development Committees of Session 2014–15 - Scrutiny of Arms Exports and Arms Controls (2014): Scrutiny of the Government's UK Strategic Export Controls Annual Report 2012, the Government's Quarterly Reports from October 2012 to September 2013, and the Government's policies on arms exports and international arms control issues	HC 186 (Cm 8935)
Fifth Report	Support for British nationals abroad: The Consular Service	HC 516
Sixth Report	The FCO's human rights work in 2013	HC 551
Seventh Report	Hong Kong: China's ban on the Committee's visit	HC 842 (HC 937)