

## [UK condemns plans for new housing units across the West Bank](#)

Commenting on Israel's announcement of plans for new housing units across the West Bank, Dr Andrew Murrison, Minister for the Middle East and North Africa, said:

The UK condemns the Israeli government's advancement of yet more plans for over 1,900 housing units across the West Bank.

It is the UK's longstanding position that settlements are illegal under international law and undermine the viability of the two-state solution.

We call on Israel to halt settlement expansion immediately.

### **Further information**

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## [Armed Forces Covenant Report shows support for military community](#)



The [report](#) outlines how the Government has been fulfilling its responsibility to ensure the military community are not disadvantaged as a result of their service.

Key accomplishments for 2018/19 include:

- The creation of the Office for Veterans' Affairs to co-ordinate and drive government activity to support veterans
- Introduction of flexible service allowing regular personnel to temporarily work part time

- The launch of the Future Accommodation Model pilot, looking at how the accommodation offer for service personnel can be improved
- Extension of the Forces Help to Buy scheme to December 2022, helping armed forces personnel to get on the property ladder
- 1,000 new signings of the Armed Forces Covenant in 2019, taking the total of signatories to over 4,000
- Approximately £5 million of funding for the Department of Work and Pensions to bolster the role of its Armed Forces Champions across the country

As set out in the Queen's Speech this week, the Armed Forces Covenant will be further incorporated into law over the course of this Parliament. The legislation will seek to strengthen current arrangements to remove disadvantage and improve the consistency of Covenant outcomes for the Armed Forces community.

Minister for Defence People and Veterans Johnny Mercer said:

Our armed forces make many sacrifices in defending our nation, so it's only right we do all we can to ensure personnel are not disadvantaged. This report clearly demonstrates we are taking this responsibility seriously, with schools better able to cater for service children, improved access for veterans to healthcare, and the Covenant reaching its 4000th signing.

Of course, there is still work to be done and I look forward to the role that the Office for Veterans' Affairs will play in providing our people with the support they deserve.

Further support delivered this year includes:

### **Service families**

- £23.1 million of Service Pupil Premium funding is being distributed to over 10,000 schools across England in 2019-20, benefiting over 77,000 current and former service children
- The Forces Families Jobs website has been launched, providing free access to employment and training opportunities to families in the armed forces
- £116 million has been invested in the improvement and modernisation of Service Family Accommodation in 2018/19

### **Health and wellbeing**

- The NHS launched the armed forces personnel in transition, Integrated Personal Commissioning for Veterans Framework offering personalised care for armed forces personnel who have complex and enduring medical conditions that are attributable to injury whilst in service
- The Veterans Trauma Network, providing specialist care to veterans with service-specific traumatic injuries, expanded into Wales in October 2019
- The Scottish Government in partnership with NHS Scotland and Combat

Stress will continue to provide funding of £1.4 million per year until 2021 for the Specialist Mental Health Services and Veterans First Point Network

- 285 additional GP practices in England were accredited as 'veteran friendly'

Published 20 December 2019

Last updated 7 January 2020 [+ show all updates](#)

1. 7 January 2020 Added a quote to the article from the Minister for Defence People and Veterans.
2. 20 December 2019 First published.

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## [Readout of PM call with President Erdogan: 7 January 2020](#)

A Downing Street spokesperson said:

"The Prime Minister spoke to President Erdogan of Turkey.

"The leaders discussed the situation in Iraq following the death of Qasem Soleimani. They agreed on the importance of reducing tensions and finding a diplomatic way through the current crisis, and of continuing to work together in the fight against terror.

"They agreed that Iran cannot be allowed to acquire a nuclear weapon and must comply with the terms of the nuclear deal.

"On Libya, the Prime Minister reiterated the UK's commitment to de-escalation and supporting the UN-led peace process. They agreed to keep in touch on this issue."

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## [Defence Secretary Oral Statement: Update on security situation in the Middle East](#)

With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the security situation in the Middle East.

Mr Speaker, I have deep regard for the nation of Iran and I chaired the All

Party Parliamentary Group group for Iran in this House for eight years and visited the country a number of times. Indeed the last time I visited, I visited with the leader of the opposition and we went together to visit the Iranian government and the people.

It is a wonderful place with a dynamic population. The world owes a great deal to its culture and its history.

But, in recent times, Iran has felt its intentions are best served through the nefarious use of proxies and the use of subversion as a foreign policy tool.

It has provided practical military support to the murderous Assad regime in Syria. Stoked conflict in Yemen. Armed militia groups in Iraq and has repeatedly harassed international shipping, including UK shipping, in the Strait of Hormuz.

It has also shown a total disregard for human rights. Holding dual nationals in prison and causing unimaginable suffering. Not just to those in jail, but to their families at home.

Such behaviour does nothing to enhance Iran's reputation with its neighbours and has had a seriously destabilising impact in the region.

Mr Speaker, one of the foremost architects of Iran's malign activity was the Quds force of Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps.

One of its commanders and leading enablers was General Qasem Soleimani who on 2 January was killed by a US drone strike.

Mr Speaker, General Soleimani was no friend of the UK or our allies in the region. He was not an advocate of a more peaceful and prosperous Middle East. His clandestine operations saw him supply weaponry to proxy forces in Iraq and Afghanistan. He encouraged proxies to develop weapons such as improvised explosive devices that killed and maimed UK soldiers and other western forces. And nor should we forget how he fomented instability in places like Basra where British Forces were stationed.

The United States government has asserted that Soleimani organised the strike on 27 December by militia group Kata'ib Hizballah which targeted a US military base in Kirkuk, Iraq, and killed a US civilian contractor and the US is confident that General Soleimani came to Baghdad to co-ordinate imminent attacks on American diplomats and military personnel.

The UK will always defend the right of countries to defend themselves. The House will want to know that since October 2019 Coalition bases, which contain both United States and United Kingdom personnel and the Baghdad International Zone have been attacked 14 times. One attack on K-1 base involved 32 rockets. Our challenge now is, however, to deal with the situation we find ourselves in.

The US consistently showed restraint through all those previous attacks, even when their right to self-defence was well established.

Since the early hours of Friday morning the Government has responded to these events. Further conflict is in no one's interest. The only beneficiaries would be the terrorists and extremists – seeking to use the chaos as cover to advance their abhorrent objectives. So we are urging all people, all parties to de-escalate as soon as possible.

Meanwhile, the safety and security of British citizens and our interests in the region are of paramount concern. The FCO has strengthened its travel advice to both Iran and Iraq and will keep it under constant review. We urge British nationals in the region, or those intending to travel, to regularly check Gov.UK for further updates.

We have taken other urgent measures to protect British nationals and interests. The Department for Transport are reviewing the threat state and advice to Red Ensign shipping on a daily basis. Supported by the Ministry of Defence, we will issue guidance imminently. At the same time, Defence are changing the readiness of our forces in the region – including helicopters and ships on stand-by to assist if the need arises.

To ensure the safety and security of our personnel we have also re-located non-essential personnel from Baghdad to Taji. Coalition forces in Iraq, including British forces, have suspended all training activities. And, as part of prudent planning, a small team has been sent to the region to provide additional situational awareness, and contingency planning assistance.

Mr Speaker, on 5 January, Iraq's Council of Representatives voted to end permission for Coalition activities in Iraq. As the vote is only one part of the process, we are in discussions of what those implications mean with our Iraqi interlocutors.

Today I would simply remind this House that the Coalition is in Iraq, at the request of the Iraqi government, to help protect Iraqis and others against the very real threat from Daesh. Our commitment to Iraq's stability and sovereignty is unwavering and we urge the Iraqi Government to ensure the coalition is able to continue our vital work countering this shared threat.

Mr Speaker, the main focus of the UK Government is to de-escalate this issue. None of us wants conflict. None of us wants our citizens, our friends and our allies to be put at risk.

My Rt Hon Friend the Prime Minister, from the outset, has spoken to President Trump, President Macron, Chancellor Merkel and President Erdogan and will continue to engage with other world leaders.

The Foreign Secretary and I have been talking to our counterparts. Only this morning I met with His Royal Highness the Saudi vice minister for Defence and in tandem we are working with the E3 to reboot the JcPOA – the nuclear deal we believe it is a vital step to achieving a more stable Iran.

And in the coming days we will be doing all we can to encourage Iran to take a different path.

No-one should be under any illusion that, long before the death of General

Soleimani, Iran had stepped up its destabilising activities in the region. Whether it was targeting dissidents in Europe or hijacking civilian ships this aggressive behaviour was never going to go unchallenged. HMG urges Iran to return to the normal behaviour of the country it aspires to be and resist the urge to retaliate.

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## [Appointment of Permanent Secretary at the Northern Ireland Office](#)

The Cabinet Secretary Sir Mark Sedwill, with the agreement of the Prime Minister, has today announced the appointment of Madeleine Alessandri as the new Permanent Secretary at the Northern Ireland Office.

Madeleine is currently serving as the UK Deputy National Security Advisor and Prime Minister's Adviser on National Resilience and Security. The appointment follows the announcement in October 2019 that Sir Jonathan Stephens will be retiring from the Civil Service in early 2020.

**Welcoming Madeleine's appointment, the Cabinet Secretary, Sir Mark Sedwill, said:**

Madeleine is an exceptional public servant who embodies the very best that the Civil Service has to offer. With extensive experience in the diplomatic service and in the delivery of HMG priorities, she will be an excellent addition to the Northern Ireland Office at an important time. I'm very pleased to announce her appointment as Permanent Secretary.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank Sir Jonathan, on behalf of the whole Civil Service, for his outstanding commitment and contribution to public service for over three decades, and particularly for his leadership of NIO over the last six years. I wish him all the best for the future.

**The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Julian Smith said:**

I am delighted that Madeleine will be joining the Northern Ireland Office as Permanent Secretary. She will provide experienced leadership to the Department at a critical time and I look forward to working with her for the people of Northern Ireland. I would like to thank Sir Jonathan Stephens for his sage advice and expertise, and for his commitment to the Civil Service over three decades. I wish him the best of luck in his retirement.

**Madeleine Alessandri said:**

This is a critical time to be joining the Northern Ireland Office as the hard work continues to restore devolved government at Stormont. I am very much looking forward to joining the Secretary of State and the great team at the NIO, and working with a restored Executive to create a stable, prosperous and safe Northern Ireland that works for everyone.

**Notes to editors**

1. This appointment was overseen by the First Civil Service Commissioner.
2. Madeleine joined government service in 1988 and has held a wide variety of positions in the Diplomatic Service and in National Security both in the UK and overseas.
3. Madeleine's appointment follows the announcement in October 2019 that Sir Jonathan Stephens will be retiring from the Civil Service in early 2020.
4. There will be a handover period to ensure a smooth transition of leadership. Efforts will continue to be focused on working with the parties to get Stormont back up and running.