



Select Committee on International Relations and Defence

Corrected oral evidence: The UK and Afghanistan

Tuesday 17 November 2020

10.20 am

Watch the meeting

Members present: Baroness Anelay of St Johns (The Chair); Lord Alton of Liverpool; Baroness Blackstone; Baroness Fall; Lord Grocott; Lord Hannay of Chiswick; Baroness Helic; Lord Mendelsohn; Lord Purvis of Tweed; Baroness Rawlings; Lord Reid of Cardowan; Baroness Smith of Newnham.

Evidence Session No. 14

Virtual Proceeding

Questions 115 - 135

Witnesses

I: Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, Minister for South Asia and the Commonwealth, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO); Baroness Goldie DL, Minister of State, Ministry of Defence; Gareth Bayley, Director, South Asia and Afghanistan, FCDO; Peter Vowles, Director, Asia Caribbean and Overseas Territories, FCDO.

USE OF THE TRANSCRIPT

1. This is a corrected transcript of evidence taken in public and webcast on www.parliamentlive.tv.

Examination of witnesses

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, Baroness Goldie, Gareth Bayley and Peter Vowles.

Q115 **The Chair:** Good morning. I welcome to this meeting of the International Relations and Defence Select Committee: Lord Ahmad, Minister of State at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, and the Prime Minister's Special Representative for the Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative; and Minister of State at the Ministry of Defence, Baroness Goldie. Welcome. I also welcome the officials Gareth Bayley, who is the FCDO director for South Asia and Afghanistan, and Peter Vowles, who is the FCDO Director for Asia, the Caribbean and the Overseas Territories.

Thank you for joining us today to give evidence to our inquiry on the UK and Afghanistan. This is our final evidence-taking session before we embark upon agreeing and then publishing our report. At this stage, I remind both Members and witnesses that this session is broadcast and transcribed, and therefore on the record. I also remind Members to declare any relevant interests they may have when asking their question.

As ever, I will begin by asking the general scene-setting question before I turn to my colleagues to ask more focused questions thereafter. We hope we will have time for each and every Member to ask a supplementary. I will skip that privilege on the basis that I have used my time for this introduction.

To the first question. Where does Afghanistan rank within the UK's foreign and security policy priorities, particularly in the light of the forthcoming publication of the Integrated Review? To what extent is protecting the UK's legacy since 2001 a factor in all that? Lord Ahmad, I turn to you first.

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: Good morning to everyone on the Committee. Thank you for inviting Baroness Goldie and me to this session. I am sure I reflect everyone's sentiments when I say that our commitment is underlined by the fact that, as we all remember, the UK has suffered 457 British military casualties in Afghanistan. Our prayers remain with the families of those personnel.

Afghanistan is a priority for the UK, and we play a central defence, diplomatic and development role in supporting it. We have done so over 19 years and are committed to supporting a more stable and prosperous Afghan state that is able to tackle terrorism and other threats to the UK. We have spent over £25.5 billion on military operations; up to 10,000 troops have contributed to the NATO mission—about 850 UK troops are currently deployed; and there has been over £3 billion in development assistance. The UK remains one of the top five donors in Afghanistan.

You mentioned the Integrated Review. As you and other colleagues will be aware, it will cover defence, diplomacy and development activity to build back better in Afghanistan. It crosses all aspects of that agenda.

I further assure you that we have worked very closely with our allies on the ground and NGOs ever since 2001 in the fulfilment of specific aims, including an issue that is very close to my heart, the rights and freedoms of the people of Afghanistan, with a particular focus on women and minorities. It is very important, as we see the Afghan talks taking place, that the gains that have been made continue and are stabilised and strengthened. That remains a priority for the UK.

Baroness Goldie: Thank you for the invitation to address the Committee. It is a great pleasure to seek to assist with your inquiry. From an MoD perspective, the Integrated Review is a comprehensive piece of work, certainly from the MoD end, with exhaustive analysis. Anticipated need has been identified and fed into the review, so it is an opportunity to extend and develop the already close co-ordination across HMG work in Afghanistan. From an MoD perspective, the review is really about us being able to pose the question, "What is the threat, and do we have the capability to respond to it?"

That brings me to Afghanistan. In 2001, the recognised threat was that the country was a terrorist base in which activity was growing, which could have a hostile and very adverse effect on the rest of the world. The whole point of subsequent NATO missions, whether the first mission until 2014 or the current Resolute Support mission, has been enabling NATO Allies, including the UK, to address that threat. It has enabled us to do a number of things very effectively. We have been engaging particularly in education and training with the Afghan national forces and the Afghan national academy. In fact, we have made a singularly important contribution.

The review will enhance the role that we have discharged. It will bring into sharp relief exactly what we, as a UK presence on the global stage, think we need to be doing. Afghanistan is at the heart of that and we shall approach that challenge, as we have done, in conjunction and in concert with our NATO allies.

The Chair: As we move forward to my colleagues asking questions, if our colleagues the Ministers wish to invite their officials to respond or add to any response, I will leave it to them to invite them to do so. Otherwise, I will simply call upon the Ministers on each occasion.

Q116 **Baroness Blackstone:** Following on from your answers to Baroness Anelay's question, what will the UK's strategy for Afghanistan be for the next three years? Could you say something about the scale of the UK's contribution, including on development aid, diplomacy and military support for this period, and why you have decided to operate on these scales?

The Chair: Lord Ahmad, I will go to you first this time, but I may try to mix things up a bit and invite Baroness Goldie to go first on other occasions, since no one is first or second class here.

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: I am always delighted to follow Baroness Goldie. On the specific question, I assure you that we are absolutely committed to supporting the people of Afghanistan. We are involved in helping Afghans to find a peaceful solution to the conflict. The only way to lasting stability in Afghanistan and indeed the wider region is through peaceful resolution. Peace is not only the possible outcome; we have to make sure that partners within and around Afghanistan, and their enablers, are committed to that principle. I am sure Baroness Goldie will cover military deployments, but we remain the third largest contributor to NATO's Resolute Support mission in Afghanistan.

I will cover a couple of points on development and support. In 2020, as in the last five years, we expect to spend £70 million to sustain Afghan defence and security forces. I recently signed off on another £70 million pledge for Afghan forces for 2021. Colleagues may know that there is a pledging conference next week on Afghanistan in Geneva, and in 2016 we pledged over £750 million over a four-year period¹.

Turning to diplomacy, we have one of the largest and most active diplomatic efforts on Afghanistan, which has supported many key initiatives, including on the priorities of women, peace and security, media freedom and other rights. Indeed, only yesterday, I attended a virtual event hosted by Canada, and it was good to see the Afghan Minister responsible for media freedom also joining that event. We have also increased our financial support for humanitarian assistance, including £57 million for 2020-21.

I hope that gives a summary showing that we are very much committed on the humanitarian side and the development side.

We are also building diplomacy. I am in regular touch with Foreign Minister Atmar in our discussions, and our special representative, Gareth Bayley, is in regular contact with senior officials in Afghanistan and other near neighbours on this important priority for Her Majesty's Government.

Baroness Goldie: I would add that from a military perspective it may be helpful for the Committee to understand just what the shape of the Resolute Support mission is. Basically, we have a hub, which is in Kabul, and then four spokes reaching out to Mazar e-Sharif in the north, Herat in the west, Kandahar in the south and Laghman in the east. That is the framework within which the Resolute Support mission operates.

I certainly endorse what my noble friend Lord Ahmad was saying: we need to find a peaceful solution to the challenges and problems confronting Afghanistan. Without the Resolute Support mission, the conditions for peace negotiations would not have been met. Looking ahead, which is the thrust of Baroness Blackstone's question, we are regularly engaged in dialogue with our NATO Allies and partners about the next stages of the mission. We are very clear that any adjustments

¹ The FCDO clarified that the original pledge in 2016 was £750 million over a four-year period but had since delivered over that amount.

should be two things: conditions-based—that is, what is actually happening in the country—and made in consultation with our allies.

Our primary interest as the UK in Afghanistan is homeland security and counterterrorism. The one thing that we cannot allow to happen is Afghanistan once again becoming a safe haven for terrorists. We have to protect the UK against such threats. We will certainly continue our commitment to the sustainment of the Afghan national defence and security forces through to 2024. As my noble friend Lord Ahmad said, that includes the commitment of up to £70 million which he has just confirmed is now pledged for 2021.

Q117 Baroness Blackstone: You both mentioned contact—in the case of Baroness Goldie, with our Allies and partners, and in the case of Lord Ahmad, with Afghanistan’s neighbours. Could you put a bit more flesh on that? What form is this collaboration taking with the neighbours in particular? What contributions of theirs do you expect to get out of it?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: I joined the formal start of the peace negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban. It was heartening to see the number of countries across the region, as well as the globe, that participated, which gives a sense of the international commitment to a peaceful resolution.

Pakistan, of course, has an influence in Afghanistan. We continue to work very closely with Pakistan in that respect and we recognise its role in ensuring that the Taliban fully participated in the start of the Afghan peace negotiations. It remains an important partner.

Beyond that, more widely in the region, there are other interested countries, including the likes of Russia and China. We must ensure that we all work together on the key objective, which is peaceful progress on the current talks and an inclusive Afghanistan run in the interests of all its citizens.

Baroness Goldie: My noble friend has covered the position pretty comprehensively. It is more in the milieu of the Foreign Office than perhaps within the environment of the MoD. As I have already explained, we are very much focused on the Resolute Support mission, which is the nucleus of our MoD activity in relation to Afghanistan.

Q118 Baroness Fall: Afghanistan's part in the illicit drugs trade is well known and is identified in the FCDO’s written submission as being a national security threat. To what extent is our UK engagement addressing that issue at the moment?

Baroness Goldie: I thank my noble friend for a pertinent and important question. It is perfectly clear that narcotics, alongside counterterrorism, remain a key threat to our national security interests. We assess that something like 95% of the heroin on our streets originates in Afghanistan, so it is a very significant issue for the UK. The National Crime Agency works closely with the Afghan authorities to counter the flow of drugs to the UK and Europe from Afghanistan.

It is important to underline that the violence and instability caused by the ongoing insurgency exacerbate that drugs problem and hinder efforts by the Afghan government and internationally to eradicate and provide alternatives to poppy production. That is because organised crime groups in Afghanistan involved in drug trafficking use the profits from illegal drugs to fund other forms of criminal operations, including buying illegal firearms and financing terrorism. It is therefore imperative to engage meaningfully with the counter-narcotics efforts, which Baroness Fall is focused on. We have to continue to ensure that Afghanistan can become a stable state first, but I think Lord Ahmad will be able to expand more extensively on the wider diplomatic issues.

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: Insecurity and corruption in Afghanistan are the premise that enables this trade. The most effective way to combat it is to tackle the underlying security challenges and problems that we face. That is why, to go back to an earlier point, we continue funding to the ANDSF and support peace negotiations with the Taliban.

Baroness Goldie gave the specific example of the role of the NCA. That underlines that we take a whole-HMG approach to Afghanistan. It is not just about the FCDO and the MoD; we also work very closely with other colleagues, including the NCA. NCA activity in Kabul, for example, is focused on developing the intelligence and investigative capability of the Afghan authorities themselves. As well as benefiting Afghanistan, intelligence gathered also helps to disrupt the supply of drugs to the UK, which Baroness Goldie mentioned in her opening answer. That has led to a successful range of operations, including one operation in which over 800 arrests as well as seizures of money and drugs, including 1.3 tonnes of heroin in Felixstowe, were made, in September 2019².

I hope that gives a very specific example of how our investment in tackling this particular issue, which has a direct impact on UK streets, is also delivering results.

Q119 **Baroness Fall:** I want to push a little further. Over the summer, President Ghani made remarks, which were picked up in the press here, that he was concerned that Taliban fighters released from prison would create a worse situation, especially for drugs on our streets as well as for the US. Did he have a point? Should we be worrying about that at this critical moment in the talks and talking to the Americans about it?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: Of course, we are deeply concerned. I come back to the point that that is why we are investing specifically in training, investigative capacity and security stabilisation; it is not just about what we can do but about what Afghanistan itself can do.

As these talks have got under way—I fully accept that they have stalled at times—in our engagement with all parties in Afghanistan, the

² The FCDO has clarified that there were over 800 arrests and seizures linked to two operations, though that number is almost entirely comprised of seizures, including 1.3 tonnes seized at Felixstowe. The number of arrests was much smaller.

importance of tackling this issue at its core has been very much part of our discussions.

Talking to other Allies and colleagues, whether the Americans or others, is an important part of how we build this new future for Afghanistan as a key partner and friend to its people.

The Chair: Baroness Goldie, is there anything you would like to add?

Baroness Goldie: I do not think so.

The Chair: Thank you. Lord Grocott has the next question.

Q120 **Lord Grocott:** My question is about the Taliban. Do the Government consider the Taliban to be an organisation that we could work with if it were brought into the Afghan government as a result of these talks? Would the UK continue to provide financial and other support to Afghanistan?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: On the question of participation by Her Majesty's Government, we deal with a wide range of contacts in support of Afghan peace efforts. I might bring in Gareth Bayley at this point, because he has had various dealings in this respect, but that participation involves UK officials meeting Taliban representatives, for example in Doha—as others, such as NATO, as the the EU, as others do, that I would add. As I said earlier, I took part in the start of the inter-Afghan peace talks, and in that regard, again, the Taliban was present. We must recognise the reality on the ground: the Taliban holds both territory and influence, and that is a reality that we need to work with.

When we discuss peace negotiations, let me assure the noble Lord that we focus on the particular issues of human rights, women's rights and the need for a reduction in violence. The Taliban does not just need to make clear statements; its actions should reflect total dissociation from acts of violence and terror that have caused destruction in Afghanistan, and we continue to impress that upon all parties in pursuit of that objective. If I may, I will bring in Mr Bayley, if he wishes to add to those points.

Gareth Bayley: I have very little to add, only that we have yet to discern in face-to-face contact with the Taliban its views on an end state in Afghanistan. When we have contact, we emphasise very strongly—*[Connection lost.]*

The Chair: In that case, I turn to Baroness Goldie to contribute here, if she would like to. I am sorry for messing you around, but IT is defeating a little of the process.

Baroness Goldie: Your respite is brief, because I do not think there is anything that I can usefully add to what has already been said. If Gareth Bayley has been able to find some medium that he can access, he may be able to expand a little on what Lord Ahmad said.

The Chair: Back to Gareth, who will be on and loud now, we hope.

Gareth Bayley: I made contact with the Taliban representatives through Doha—[*Inaudible.*] The conversations are always—[*Inaudible.*] The main message to get across is that Taliban views on an end state in Afghanistan are yet to be made entirely clear. While we have this interrogative discussion with Taliban representatives, we place great emphasis on what we want to see in a future Afghanistan, including the protection of rights and minority rights especially.

Q121 **Lord Grocott:** A lot of the evidence that we have had has been quite graphic about the extent to which the Taliban, in the areas where it dominates, has been providing many of the functions of government, working with NGOs and other organisations that help with the basic provision of services in those areas. It is very difficult to imagine a post-talks situation in which it stops doing that, if you see what I mean.

We also don't know—this is the second part of my first question—whether Britain would continue to provide financial support to a post-talks Afghanistan if the Taliban were heavily involved in the government of the country. That is a pretty crucial question, because well above three-quarters—I forget the exact figure—of the Afghan government's budget comes from abroad, a good deal of it of course via aid from this country. So perhaps you can address those two questions.

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: I agree with you. As I said, with the Taliban, there is a reality on the ground that needs to be recognised: its control, and the governance of various parts of Afghanistan that are in the hands of Taliban forces—[*Inaudible.*]

The Chair: We have lost you. You have frozen and gone silent, which we never want to do to you, I have to say. Baroness Goldie, I am not sure it is really fair to ask you this question, but there we are. I will go ahead anyway.

Baroness Goldie: I would just reiterate the strands of what I think Lord Ahmad was saying. We have to deal with the reality on the ground, which is that the Taliban's importance to the current talks is significant. Looking ahead, that was the thrust of Lord Grocott's question about what the future looks like. In all honesty, none of us is quite sure about the answer to that question. However, we are clear, certainly from the UK's perspective, that however we achieve it we want peace and stability to become the hallmarks of Afghanistan. That requires us to work at all levels. It requires us to work at diplomatic levels and within our defence responsibilities through the Resolute Support mission, and, as I said earlier, the critical criteria for us at the MoD are that we look at conditions on the ground and consult with our allies. That will inform how we proceed.

The Chair: I can see that Lord Ahmad is trying resolutely to sort out his IT. At this stage, I go back to Baroness Helic, because these questions are symbiotic with hers, in a sense.

Q122 **Baroness Helic:** I want to ask about the role that the UK has been playing in support of the talks in Doha between the Taliban and the

Afghan government.

The Chair: I now go to you, Lord Ahmad, to see whether we can get a clear voice from you. I know you have a very clear voice on every other occasion. This may well be a continuation of the words that we heard from Gareth Bayley.

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: First, I hope you can hear me clearly. Sorry, I am now getting an echo at my end. I will soldier on in the hope that everyone can hear me loud and clear. To complete what I was saying in answer to Lord Grocott's question, this is something that I have spoken to the Afghan Foreign Minister about and in other engagement with partners, and I cannot reiterate it enough: the issues that we have prioritised, including the rule of law, the protection of the rights of women and minorities' rights, and democratic governance, are priorities for me and for Her Majesty's Government, and, to come back to Lord Grocott's point, it is important that the Taliban subscribes to them. There are conditions that need to be met to secure future funding, which is important. I look forward to the pledging conference next week to determine exactly how we can move forward with key partners.

Baroness Helic asked about the peace talks. We welcome the start of the talks, as I have said. I represented the Government at the start of them and subsequently in various discussions that I have had, including with the Foreign Minister of Afghanistan and the Afghan ambassador to the UK. Since then I have emphasised the importance, which I have just reiterated again, of ensuring that the gains of the last 19 to 20 years are sustained. I know, as does Baroness Helic, the importance of protecting women and girls. The UK has a very proud record in the support that we have extended in that area, and it is important that we continue to do so.

The UK is also providing capacity-building technical advice and training to the Afghan Ministry for Peace and is supporting the Afghan negotiation team directly in the negotiations. We are working, through the inclusivity of the Afghan peace negotiations, to build support to the negotiating teams through women's networks and civil society representation to help build women's direct participation and representation.

This point straddles questions from both Lord Grocott and Baroness Helic: we continue to make clear to all sides that any Afghan-led political settlement should protect the progress that has been made in the country, including on the protection of women and minorities. The current constitution of Afghanistan ensures equal rights for all citizens. That is an important priority for Her Majesty's Government and it will continue to be so, as we will stress to all parties involved in the peace talks.

The Chair: Baroness Goldie, is there anything that you would like to add to that?

Baroness Goldie: There is not. I think that subject has been fully covered.

Q123 **Baroness Helic:** If I understood correctly, we heard what support has

been given to the Afghan government, but has any support been given to the Taliban negotiating team? I think Gareth said that he had had communication with the Taliban. Has the desire and the fully justified ambition to support women's participation been impressed upon the Taliban negotiating team? I would be interested to know what kind of reactions you received.

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: The inclusivity of women's rights and the need for women to be involved in the peace negotiations is key. We have seen four women being directly involved in the peace talks from the government of Afghanistan's side. I assure you that we continue to stress in all our conversations with the Taliban the importance of inclusivity, stressing the points of all parties, all communities and, of course, women.

On whether we give specific support to the Taliban, or indeed to any of its programmes, the short answer is no. We have invested very heavily in ensuring that the training done in support of the peace negotiations goes to the Afghanistan government in support of what they are seeking to achieve.

We recognise—again, I am sure that everyone shares this sentiment with me—that the philosophy of the Taliban, and I am being very open and candid with you here, has to be addressed. If it is to be a partner for peace, its ideological philosophy has to be addressed. In our discussions, we have to be candid and direct that any support by the UK Government and our key allies is dependent on the Taliban's commitment. This is not being imposed from the outside in; the constitution of Afghanistan guarantees that it upholds the principles of the constitution to ensure an inclusive Afghanistan.

The Chair: Would Baroness Goldie like to add to that?

Baroness Goldie: Thank you. I have nothing further to add.

Q124 **Lord Reid of Cardowan:** I thank both Ministers, and in doing so I declare an interest as a former Defence Secretary. Many other witnesses, and not a few commentators, have described the timescale for the planned US withdrawal from Afghanistan as precipitate. That was when the plan was for the US forces to withdraw next May, and there was very little hope of the talks being finished by that time.

Since then we have read reports that President Trump, presumably for domestic consumption in order to pre-empt President-elect Biden, is thinking of withdrawing them by Christmas, before the inauguration. Whether or not that is true, even with the next-May timescale, what is the Government's view about that being too precipitate? What discussions have you had, or plan to have, with your US counterparts about the possibility of a delay in withdrawal or additional conditions to be met by the Taliban before the withdrawal?

Baroness Goldie: I thank Lord Reid for a salient and penetrating question. By way of preface to my answer, I would say that in relation to

matters within the US we are inevitably dealing to some extent with speculation and ambivalence, which is never a very robust construct.

I therefore want to talk about what I know, which is the facts as we understand them. The facts are important but pretty simple: the US has been a leading force in creating the conditions for an Afghan peace process to start, and we welcome the US-Taliban deal as a historic milestone towards ending the conflict. The US shares NATO Allies' objectives of ensuring the sustainability of Afghan institutions, as well as making sure—I made this point earlier, but I think it bears repetition—that Afghanistan does not become a safe haven for terrorists once again. We all need to remember the genesis of NATO involvement in Afghanistan, the horrific events of 9/11, which America and indeed the rest of us remain very mindful of.

I reassure Lord Reid that we will continue to work closely with the US to ensure that our mutual national security objectives are met in the long term, and to protect the momentous—I do not think that is too exaggerated a word to use—gains that we have made over the last 19 years. RSM support has been crucial in developing the Afghan national defence and security forces to the point at which they are now increasingly capable and self-sufficient. By way of illustration, their numbers now stand at approximately 280,000 and they are fully responsible for the security of Afghanistan. They have shown frankly remarkable resilience and courage in meeting the challenges that they face.

It is also important to observe in relation to the US that nothing in the recent news reports has suggested a termination of mission. What those reports have suggested is a reduction in personnel within Afghanistan. The understanding of all NATO Allies is clear: we have signed up to the Resolute Support mission for a reason and a purpose, and we have been successful in discharging a great deal of that purpose. I think the Allies are united in their view, but if we are to continue to protect that important legacy, we must be very mindful of ensuring that we have due regard to conditions on the ground, and that whatever decisions are made about how the Resolute Support mission develops and proceeds will be made collectively by the Allies.

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: To build on that answer, while obviously I concur with what Baroness Goldie has mentioned, I think our presence on the ground is very clear. We will continue to work in partnership with our Allies, particularly NATO. As of 16 November, as I said in my opening remarks, we remain in Afghanistan in terms of troop deployment. We have 850 troops in Afghanistan.

I have mentioned the Taliban, but I emphasise that point again in relation to future progress. It is about ensuring stability and security for all the country's population. Our primary focus is therefore obviously the political process, but the presence of our troops and those of our NATO Allies ensures that the elements of security that are so essential for that political process are also sustained.

With the new Administration taking the reins in the US, we look forward to co-operating with it. The Prime Minister has already had a very productive call with President-elect Biden, and we will continue to work very closely with the US on security in Afghanistan, the decrease in the numbers of troops in Afghanistan already announced by the US, and, importantly, support for the talks and the political settlement.

Q125 Lord Reid of Cardowan: I entirely agree with Baroness Goldie about the primary reason for going in and with her statement, which I think has been repeated four times now, that the future should be conditions-based. When she said that, I think she was referring to the future UK strategy. However, it has to be conditions-based for the Taliban as well. The point that many of the witnesses are making is that if we precipitately withdraw from Afghanistan before the peace talks have got under way, we will lose all leverage on an incremental conditions-based peace process.

It is probably a bit unfair to press this with Baroness Goldie, who I know would probably agree, because we all know that this is almost entirely dependent upon the US. The point that I am making is that we have to recognise that if it continues with its current withdrawal timetable, it is probable that the old phrase that has been repeated by the Taliban, that we may have the technology and the watches but it has the time, will play entirely into its hands. As much as I would like to believe that our negotiators are extremely persuasive and rational, relying on that alone will probably not persuade the Taliban to change fundamentally.

The Chair: As they say in the Chamber, John, I do not actually hear a question in there.

Lord Reid of Cardowan: I was going to add, "Would you agree?"

Baroness Goldie: When it comes to Lord Reid, for whom I have the highest respect and the greatest affection, uttering the words "I agree" to him would be tantamount to wanting to check my fingers afterwards. He makes a very useful analysis of the situation and the potential challenges. I reassure him that all the NATO Allies are seized of the difficulties that he has identified and which he anticipates.

That is why, at the risk of being tedious, I go back to my fundamental premise, which is that the NATO Allies are very clear about the responsible and onerous nature of their mission and their undertaking. Many people have sacrificed their lives in pursuit of that undertaking to make Afghanistan a more stable and safer country. We just have to continue to work as Allies within the mission. We have to continue to assess what is happening on the ground.

I cannot pre-empt or anticipate what decisions will then be made. The only reassurance I can give is that all the Allies are seized of the situations and circumstances to which Lord Reid has referred. That is why our future action as a mission cannot be detached from conditions on the ground, and it will have to be done by speaking to one another and

agreeing in concert, as NATO allies, what we do.

The Chair: In the interests of time, we move on to the next question.

Q126 **Lord Hannay of Chiswick:** I would like to ask you questions about counter-terrorism. First, what is the Government's assessment of the robustness of the provisions on counterterrorism in the 29 February US-Taliban agreement? Secondly, what is their assessment of the possible impact on security and counterterrorism of a US withdrawal before a peace deal is reached, or even perhaps before Christmas? What is the risk, therefore, of Afghanistan, as I think both Ministers set out very clearly in their opening remarks, again becoming a haven or a base for international terrorist outrages?

Baroness Goldie: We welcome the US agreement with the Taliban as well as the joint declaration between the US and the Afghan government. We think these agreements are significant and a necessary step that paves the way to a lasting peace in Afghanistan. There is acceptance that there is no military solution to the conflict in Afghanistan for any party; the agreement demonstrates that even the Taliban now understands that.

In the North Atlantic Council statement of 29 February this year, NATO also welcomed the announcement of the US-Taliban agreement and saw it as a significant first step towards peace. The Alliance and our partners subsequently agreed to implement a conditions-based drawdown in line with the US-Taliban deal, but I make it clear that that is not a unilateral commitment. All decisions, collective adjustments and future planning continue to be made in consultation with Allies and partners. We remain committed to the principle—I suppose it is almost a mantra—of “In together, adjust together, out together”, which describes the cohesive and collective nature of the commitment. That is why any decision on NATO's role in Afghanistan, including any potential withdrawal or reduction of forces, will be taken by NATO Allies and partners—again, with consideration being given to conditions in the country and progress towards a political settlement.

Lord Reid speculates on what happens if the peace talks fail. I do not want to speculate on such a situation. We understand that progress may stall on occasion, but we are hopeful that a peaceful solution can be reached. As Lord Ahmad will make clear, we are encouraging both sides to engage meaningfully with peace negotiations in order to end the conflict.

The Chair: Thank you. Perhaps, Lord Ahmad, you might wish to comment on ISKP.

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: I totally accept the premise. The basis of the talks when they began was an agreement by all sides that the premise of any future negotiation must be decreasing any acts of terror and any acts that divide the country. I will be very up front with you, Baroness Anelay. You rightly mentioned a particular group operating in

Afghanistan. Sadly and tragically, on the last two occasions when I have had to pick up the phone to talk to the Afghan Foreign Minister I have started by extending our condolences on behalf of our Government and our people because of a terror attack that has taken place. That shows the vulnerabilities of the current process and, indeed, the country itself. That is why, right from the outset, the basis of the agreement stipulated the importance of a peaceful settlement. That was the only outcome that would guarantee a stable future for Afghanistan.

Picking up on the issues of security and counter-terrorism specific to Lord Hannay's question, I have already mentioned our support for the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces. I think that underlines our commitment that it is not just about our forces on the ground but about how we build up the capacity of Afghanistan itself to deal with its security challenges. We remain very committed, as are they, to protecting the people of Afghanistan while also, importantly, tackling the threat from other actors who continue to operate in Afghanistan. That includes the likes of Daesh in Khorasan Province and ensuring that Afghanistan does not once again become a safe haven for terrorists.

We support the Afghan National Police, supported by the Ministry of the Interior, which plays an integral role in enabling the ANDSF to maintain security and the rule of law. These are important investments that we are making to ensure medium and long-term stability in Afghanistan. However, the challenge is real, and we recognise that. Different non-state actors continue to look to destabilise not just the peace talks but the country. That remains a reality, which is why it is important that we continue to invest in the security apparatus and the elements, particularly the ANDSF, to ensure that the framework of the peace negotiations can continue in a secure environment.

However, to be very candid with you again, the challenge is real, and we have continued, sadly and tragically, to see attacks in Afghanistan by some of these organisations.

Q127 Lord Hannay of Chiswick: I have to say that I did not ask Baroness Goldie a question related to the failure of the talks in Doha. I asked a question related to the US withdrawing its troops from Afghanistan before there was an agreement in Doha. I would quite like to have an answer to that question, as well as to the one about the robustness of the actual provisions in the 29 February agreement on terrorism, which are much weaker, I am sure you would agree, than the ones about US troop withdrawal.

My additional question is the one the Chair mentioned, about ISKP. Could you tell us why ISKP is not considered by the Home Office to be a terrorist organisation, even though it is so considered by Canada and the United States? You yourself mentioned that that organisation is responsible for most of the outrages going on at the moment. Could you give us your assessment of the comments of the UN's Adviser on counterterrorism, who told us that al-Qaeda remained deeply embedded in the Taliban?

Baroness Goldie: I apologise if I misinterpreted the noble Lord's question. I do not wish to disappoint him or seek to be evasive, but I really do not think there is anything I can add to what I have said, which is that our role in Afghanistan is that of partnership with NATO and NATO Allies. We are very clear about the consultative and conjoined nature of that relationship. We continue to review what is happening. We continue to make an assessment of circumstances in the country and conditions on the ground. That is what will inform how we respond to any changing situation.

If Lord Hannay is speculating, for example, on what the UK and other NATO Allies would do if the US decided to depart in total, as I indicated earlier I do not think there is any suggestion that the United States is proposing at the moment to do that, although it may be proposing a reduction in troop numbers. Again, I cannot be drawn into speculating on what response future events might require from NATO Allies. I can only confirm that we regularly review circumstances as extensively and as comprehensively as we can, and, in concert as a collective grouping, determine how we should react to that.

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: On the issue of ISKP, I agree with Lord Hannay about the terror attacks that we have seen across the country, and of course we condemn them wholesale.

On the issue of proscriptions of organisations, we do not mention them until they have happened, so it would be wrong for me to give a specific answer on ISKP. Rest assured that we monitor these terror groups. The point the noble Lord makes about its continued acts of terror across the country is very valid.

On the important issue of the Taliban itself and the agreement that was signed right at the start, which Lord Hannay referred to, the agreements between the US government, the Taliban, and indeed the Afghan government are clear that the commitments made by the parties are all interrelated, and if one party does not deliver on its side of the engagement, that calls into question whether others will need to do so as well.

The Taliban itself has committed to preventing terrorist groups using Afghanistan as a terror base but, as I said already in a previous answer, it is all very well stating these things; we also want to seek clarity in terms of actions. Terrorism will not get international partners somehow to accept the Taliban as a legitimate part of any future Administration. It has made commitments to ensure that terrorism is eradicated, and we will certainly seek to hold it to that. The proscription of any other group, as I have already said, is a matter for the Home Office, but I assure the noble Lord that it is kept under very close watch.

The Chair: We now move on to the next question, which is from Baroness Smith. I think Baroness Smith will have the opportunity to explore Lord Hannay's supplementary question a little more.

Q128 Baroness Smith of Newnham: First, I have to declare a formal interest as the Liberal Democrat defence spokesperson in the House of Lords. That is not a personal interest, but it is what the Code of Conduct now requires me to do.

I want to explore a little more how far the UK might explore ways of staying in Afghanistan if the United States withdraws. Obviously, we are in a peculiar situation at the moment where there should be a transition towards the new presidency on 20 January, yet the incumbent President is not formally allowing that transition to happen. Have the Government thought about the possibility of working with other non-US NATO Allies to continue the Resolute Support Mission should the US withdraw? What discussions are the Government having, either through the MoD or through the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office?

The Chair: Baroness Goldie, over to you.

Baroness Goldie: I will try to flesh out a little of what I was saying to Lord Hannay. It is important to make clear again that we are firmly committed to our collective NATO mission. I stated earlier on the fundamental principles of “In together, adjust together and out together”. That means that any decision on NATO’s role in Afghanistan, including any potential withdrawal or reduction of forces, will be taken collectively by NATO Allies.

As I have said, that will be taken having regard for considerations of conditions within the country and progress towards a political settlement. Of course, the UK will also continue to consult with Allies and partners on ensuring that our collective national security interests are met and that Afghanistan does not once again become a safe haven for terrorists. That prospect is what, to be honest, focuses everyone’s attention. That is really all that I am able to say at the moment.

The noble Baroness is correct about the degree of ambivalence surrounding the US at the moment because of the particular constitutional position that the country finds itself in. Earlier I described that as a combination of ambivalence and speculation, which is difficult. I know it is tempting for inquirers and commentators to ferret in among that and tease things out of it, but I personally will not be drawn on it because I am confining myself to making remarks on situations and circumstances as they currently are.

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: I totally agree with Baroness Goldie. I would just add that the circumstances as they currently are, are why we continue to make the investments, particularly in the agreement that we recently signed off on continuing support for the security agencies of the government of Afghanistan, and why we continue to support efforts on the ground. The other wider issues about NATO and its future plans have been covered by Baroness Goldie already.

Baroness Smith of Newnham: I suppose my real question is that while I understand Baroness Goldie’s view that the position of NATO should be “In together, adjust together, out together”, if one party in NATO—

namely, the largest party, the US—is talking about withdrawal, and we as the UK feel that the capacity building that Lord Ahmad has talked about will not be met if we end the Resolute Support Mission, might there not be scope for us to talk to other NATO Allies, particularly in the short term? If there is a precipitate decision by President Trump, Afghanistan could be left in exactly the sort of position that Baroness Goldie has been saying we do not want to see.

Baroness Goldie: Baroness Smith, in framing her question, concedes that it is speculative, which is what makes it exceedingly difficult to respond to. I could engage in hypothesis, speculation and surmise, but I do not think that would be helpful to anyone. I can simply respond by repeating what I have already said: there is constant consultation among Allies, and I would go so far as to say that there is universal recognition of the hazards, challenges and potential difficulties—Lord Reid interestingly defined many of these. All I can say to Baroness Smith is that all the allies are vigilant about and conscious of these, and they inform our continuing collective discussions.

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: The question is focused on defence or at least military capabilities on the ground, but we have a very strong diplomatic presence in Afghanistan covering many different areas, including our funding support for state institutions. The eventual goal must be, whether through the deployment or our support for other projects, that Afghanistan is able to move forward and stand on its own feet. That is why it is important to continue with investment in the security institutions. Then, as we all hope and desire, as agreements are reached during the peace negotiations we can look to invest further in other important projects.

Q129 **Lord Purvis of Tweed:** Moving on to development assistance, Lord Ahmad said that in the previous funding round the UK had committed £750 million. Have we met that? If so, could you explain the profile of the expenditure over the last two or three years? The FCDO DevTracker now suggests that there has been a fall in the last year of £267 million compared to previous years.

Secondly, you mentioned elements of the support that the UK is providing for this coming year. Has that been ring-fenced from the overall cuts to development assistance that the Foreign Secretary announced in July, or will there be in effect a pro rata reduction in support for Afghanistan compared to other projects, mindful that it is our fourth biggest level of contributions anywhere in the world?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: The answer to the noble Lord's last question is no; we have made the commitment of £70 million. As I have stated on a number of occasions already, it is important that we invest in the continued stability and security of Afghanistan.

Turning to your other questions, I assure you that the UK remains very committed to supporting Afghanistan's development. In 2016, we pledged the £750 million for the period 2017-20 to be spent on projects.

To give you a flavour of some of our development spending, I mentioned investing particularly in girls and women—there may be a further question on this. That has risen from £13 million in 2016 to programmes now in 2019 of £22 million³. Humanitarian support has also risen from £41 million in 2016 to £67 million⁴. Of course, circumstances on the ground dictate the ability to deliver support and development, and the security situation is kept under very close monitor. In doing so, we have shown that we remain very committed.

The noble Lord talked about future pledges. I am certainly not going to pre-empt any announcements that I will make at the pledging conference next week in Geneva, but I go back to the point about conditionality, which Lord Grocott and others talked about: as the peace talks continue, we must have support for the idea that in the future Afghanistan must not only reflect the gains that have been made and the principles of its constitution but be inclusive when it comes to development, and it must deliver upon our objective of an inclusive Afghanistan for all communities irrespective of which community, faith or gender they may be. I think that is the right approach. There will be a donor review of pledges and progress in line with those objectives in 2021.

On other specifics, in 2019 we allocated another £40 million on the humanitarian side. The issues of both humanitarian support and development support are significant. I am proud of what we have achieved in enabling the people of Afghanistan to progress, and we will continue to remain committed to that, but there has to be a recognition of the prevailing situation. Baroness Goldie talked about our forces on the ground, but equally it is right and appropriate, to my mind, to recognise the conditions that will prevail that will determine our future support and the decisions that we make. However, we remain committed to Afghanistan, and that is why we announced the 12-month funding that we did, which also reflects the current spending round.

The Chair: Baroness Goldie, is there anything you would like to add?

Baroness Goldie: Thank you, Chair, there is not.

Lord Purvis of Tweed: I do not think you quite explained why there had been a reduction from that year. If you have any comments on that, that would be helpful.

I was interested that you referred back to Lord Grocott, because that is what I want to ask my supplementary question about: what is conditionality? Will conditionality be over the totality of development assistance from the UK? As your own briefing indicated, over 50% of the UK development budget for Afghanistan goes to the Afghan

³ The FCDO clarified that this relates specifically to Girls' Education Challenge funding.

⁴ The FCDO notified the Committee that the Minister had accidentally misspoken and used an incorrect figure; the correct figure, as the Minister stated in his response to Baroness Blackstone's follow up to question 109 earlier in this session, should be £57 million.

Reconstruction Trust Fund, administered by the World Bank, a multilateral fund, and in fact we are the second biggest donors to it after Germany.

If there is Taliban in the government as a result of the peace talks, will the totality of British assistance be conditioned on the criteria that you indicated? At the moment, over half of all UK development assistance is going through Afghan ministries, so we could be in a situation where there are Taliban Ministers who have links with existing and ongoing terrorist groups, as Lord Hannay indicated, and who will be administering British funds. Clearly that cannot be the objective, so what is the totality of conditionality?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: I think I have already alluded to that, in the sense that the priorities that I have set out are the actual filter that will be applied to future support to Afghanistan. An inclusive Afghanistan means that, as the current peace negotiations recognise, the Taliban have control of territory. Equally, I can give you a practical example of instances of Taliban interference in aid delivery, for example. We take this issue very seriously and are very clear that there is zero tolerance of any diversion or interference.

As to the premise of future spending and future support, the conditionality is very clear that the Taliban needs to be inclusive. It needs to ensure that women's rights and the rights of minorities are protected, and the basis on which we provide support through the current institutions of the Afghan government will continue to ensure that they, too, recognise and prioritise the areas that we have highlighted as conditions to the support that we provide.

I share Lord Purvis's view that it is very difficult at this time to see what entity this new Administration may take, the influences they may have and the priorities they will set, but the starting premise must be what was agreed at the start of the talks, which was agreement to peace and security but also agreement to uphold the principles of inclusivity. That is why we will continue to press that through the peace process.

As I have already stated a number of times, future funding will reflect what we are seeking to achieve through our development programmes—not just in Afghanistan, I would add, but elsewhere. I am very clear as the Minister responsible, tallying up my role as Minister for South Asia and Minister for Human Rights, that the essential feature of what we have gained and established in education for young girls in Afghanistan is not lost.

That is why I come back to an earlier point: that, for me, one of the priorities is tackling the ideology of the organisation that is the Taliban to ensure not only that we influence it but that any future Administration reflects the priorities, and not just as we see them. The lens must be very clear: if the Taliban can claim to follow a particular philosophy of a religion, let us use that lens of religion. It is not just us articulating it but

our other partners working within that to ensure that it stands up the principles and agreements it has signed up to, and we will hold it to that.

The Chair: Thank you. We now move to Lord Alton's question. I appreciate that the run of questions at the moment is aimed at the FCDO, but I always invite Baroness Goldie, when the question is first asked, whether she has anything to add. I am not ignoring her, of course.

Q130 **Lord Alton of Liverpool:** I am sure that none of us would ever ignore Baroness Goldie or indeed Lord Ahmad.

I would like to dig deeper, if I may, into the levels of funding we have been giving in specific areas. During our select committee hearings, witnesses have told us that in recent times there has been a decrease in UK and international funding for human rights programmes and women's rights programmes in Afghanistan. These, of course, are programmes that have challenged Taliban support for issues such as child marriage and the denial of women's education. Has there been a decrease in support, and, if so, why is that?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: Let me assure Lord Alton that the UK remains absolutely committed to supporting projects on human rights, and particularly women's rights, in 2020. For example, we approved \$8 million of support dedicated to women's projects under the ARTF. There are different funding streams, and a lot of the projects and support for women are contained in them.

Afghanistan remains an FCDO human rights priority country—it appears in our annual human rights report—and we continue to support initiatives with the communities, particularly those focused on girls' education. I have already given figures for the increment in support that we have seen specifically for girls' education in Afghanistan. As you will very much recognise, it is also a personal priority for our Prime Minister. The issue of 12 years of quality education is very much part and parcel of our thinking when it comes to support programmes, not just today but going forward, and the issue of inclusivity of women and girls is very much part of that.

Multilaterally, our mission at the UN co-chairs with the Afghan permanent representative, Afghanistan has a very dynamic woman ambassador, and the Group of Friends of Women in Afghanistan advocates for a larger role for women, including in the peace process. We have been a key driver of that.

The UK has also, in partnership with Germany, Indonesia and Afghanistan, used its seat at the UN Security Council to promote a greater role for women in the peace process, which is fundamental to the success of the peace process. As Minister for the UN, I avail myself of every opportunity to stress that point, and I pay particular tribute to the Chair of the Committee for her efforts in that regard. I assure her and Lord Alton that we aim not just to sustain this but to strengthen it.

In 2019, we also provided support in the area of media freedom that focused specifically on female journalists. We will continue to take these

different initiatives. There is specific funding for projects that are focused specifically on women, but some of our larger pots of money are also focused on delivering our key priorities, particularly for girls and women in Afghanistan.

The Chair: As promised, I turn to Baroness Goldie. Is there anything you wish to add?

Baroness Goldie: Silence is something I always revel in, particularly when faced with such a fearsome set of interrogators as your Committee.

There is a little information that I might be able to give the Committee from an MoD perspective that might be helpful with regard to the way we try to promote and assist the role of women in Afghanistan. I would like to make a brief contribution about the Afghan National Army Officer Academy, which we will call ANAOA. The UK helped to found that in 2013, and I have to say that it has been hugely successful in facilitating female inclusion. It has now reached planned full operating capability. It has the capacity to train up to 1,050 male students and around 100 female students every year.

On 9 September, the academy celebrated the graduation of its five thousandth cadet, 316 graduates being women. It is with great pleasure that I tell the Committee that these female graduates are now operating in intelligence, logistics, human resources, and combat support. The retention rates for officers are high. In addition, the UK offers professional military educational opportunities to Afghan students, and we are very glad to have welcomed a number of female students to the UK in recent years.

I thought it might be helpful for the Committee to understand the UK's perhaps not widely known but, to me, extremely important contribution to supporting the role of women in Afghanistan.

Q131 **Lord Alton of Liverpool:** I thank both Ministers for their replies. Lord Ahmad said earlier that we have to address the philosophy of the Taliban. The Taliban is implacably opposed to women's education, perhaps best demonstrated by the attempt to murder Malala Yousafzai in Pakistan. It also believes it to be a capital offence to change your religion. We have seen the persecution of minorities, such as Hazaras, Sikhs and Hindus, and of course the persecution of people with same-sex attractions, all of which contributes to the exodus of refugees.

How are we engaging with religious leaders and scholars to challenge an ideology that would turn the clock back to the eighth century, and, without such a change, how will a new emirate co-exist with pluralism, democracy and human rights?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: In answering the noble Lord, I am pre-empting an announcement that I make will be making later today on the declaration of humanity, which has been very much led by exactly the points that the noble Lord has set out, at a side event at the Freedom of Religion or Belief Ministerial.

I draw a comparison with Iraq, and I am sure Baroness Anelay will recognise this. When I went to Mosul, I saw there the philosophy of the organisation that is Daesh, which has been mentioned on occasion during this conversation. It totally dehumanised a whole population, particularly women and girls, to the extent that it then sanctioned offences to be committed against those people, including rape and torture. Tackling that is not just about governance or about others making statements; it is important that we address the fundamental philosophy of any religion, including the religion of Islam, which the Taliban claims to follow. If you look at the history of Islam, you see that it actually gave rights to women on inheritance and what they should seek to achieve. When declarations have been made on education, they have not been gender-specific in the religious scriptures but are about ensuring that there is inclusivity.

That comes back to a point that I made earlier: we must address some of these philosophical challenges by, as you rightly say, engaging faith leaders directly. This faith leaders' declaration on humanity addresses specific points when it comes to the rights of women, particularly those who have been raped, and of children born of such crimes, to ensure that the initial stigma is directly addressed and that the communities show compassion, not rejection. This has been led by the faith leaders themselves and includes Christian, Yazidi and Muslim leaders.

The whole intention is that this will evolve. There is a strong narrative attacking the very ideological base that allows groups to discriminate, persecute and legitimise criminalised activities against women and girls. I assure you that it remains a personal priority for me to address that ideological base. In the exchanges we will have with the government of Afghanistan, and the engagement we will have with whichever Administration emerges from these peace talks, we will stress the issue of women's rights, girls' rights and investing in education.

We have seen some really positive achievements in Afghanistan since our investment, and I will reiterate some of the figures. The rights of women to education and to work are now enshrined in the 2004 constitution. Some 28% of parliamentary seats are held by women. Girls who did not attend school previously now make up 39% of the children enrolled. These are real achievements, but to sustain them we must challenge the ideological base that claims—wrongfully, I would argue—that any religion sanctions discrimination, persecution or the targeting of women and girls. They do not, and we will make that clear in our discussions.

The Chair: I look forward to attending the event that you have referred to, which I think is at 1 pm today, and to hearing the declaration.

Q132 **Baroness Rawlings:** One of our witnesses said that the UK should focus ODA funding on girls' education and on the provision of community midwives in Taliban-controlled areas. I wondered what the Government's view was on that.

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: I assure Baroness Rawlings that we will focus on girls' education. To give some facts, our Girls' Education

Challenge fund, the monetary value of which I have alluded to, has helped over 300,000 girls to attend primary school since 2013, and in 2019 we supported over 70,000 marginalised girls in accessing primary and secondary education, skills and training. In this regard, we will also be publishing a girls' education plan, expanding our activity in this area and focusing specifically on the 12 years of quality education.

Reflecting on Afghanistan specifically, on the issue covering some of the health aspects, including community midwives, which Baroness Rawlings raised, over the last five years we have seen a shift in Taliban support for education and health support and provisions for citizens in Taliban-controlled areas. We will seek to continue to ensure that those are strengthened.

We have to face the reality that COVID has also been a challenge. I have three children myself, and educating them from home has been challenge enough before you even consider the challenges of COVID in a country such as Afghanistan. There have been issues that have impacted children's learning, such as the school closures during March and September. There was a choice to be made—whether we continued to support or not—but our girls' education projects shifted their support to help remote learning through remote-learning packages with a particular focus on the rights, freedoms and continued education of girls. That was an innovative way of demonstrating how we would deliver support in the current COVID-19 pandemic. However, if you look at the lie of land in Afghanistan you will see that there are many remote areas of Afghanistan. We need to embrace technology to ensure that we can deliver education that is inclusive.

On the question of community midwives in Taliban-controlled areas, there is a need for greater health provision and for greater understanding and education about it, and we will continue to press for that during our discussions with various institutions and government parties.

Baroness Goldie: This is an interesting question. Perhaps I can give a bit of context in relation to the challenges of providing services in these areas. There are security challenges in providing such support in Taliban-controlled areas, given concerns about violence levels. Interestingly, in Taliban-dominated areas the threat is slightly reduced because of the Taliban's desire to prove that it is a just and effective government in waiting.

However, areas are still vulnerable to Taliban violence and pressure. In areas contested by the Afghan government and the Taliban, violence levels are particularly high, so I would observe that to allow for work, girls' education and community midwives in these areas, a permissible security environment must be ensured. Ensuring that the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces remain resilient and sustained is, frankly, key to achieving that safer environment for the commendable work that the question references.

Baroness Rawlings: Those were very comprehensive answers. My

supplementaries can wait for another time.

Q133 Lord Mendelsohn: At the time of the last international pledging conference, the donor community fused financial assistance to government reforms in the midst of an ongoing war with the Taliban. As we look at the Geneva summit next week, there is a different context: peace talks, a new political settlement to resolve the crisis of the 2019 presidential election, COVID-19 and the like. Could you give us some sense of the UK objectives for the summit, the main challenges to a successful outcome and preparations that you have made with other countries and other partners in order to achieve that?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: Thank you, Chair and Lord Mendelsohn. First, you are quite correct. I have already alluded to the fact that we have the Afghanistan pledging conference next week in Geneva on 23 and 24 November. I was hoping to attend in person. However, the current challenges mean that I am not. On a lighter note, I have found this year particularly strange as a Foreign Minister who has not gone foreign in his travel since February. However, the virtual world we live in allows me to participate. We are working very closely in the lead-up to it with the Government of Finland and with the UN, and I have had various meetings in that respect.

The specific aims of the conference are: first, to renew international and Afghan commitments to the development and stability of Afghanistan; secondly, to agree to joint development goals for 2021-24; and, importantly, to co-ordinate development co-operation regarding financial support to Afghanistan. These are important objectives, but clear and strong political commitment will be crucial to improving Afghan confidence and investment in its country's future. So we will be participating in that donor conference. I hope to have direct bilateral engagements during it with the Foreign Minister, Dr Abdullah Abdullah, among others, and senior FCDO officials will also meet various counterparts during those two days.

The COVID crisis is another important focus of the current negotiations. I have already alluded to girls' education. Afghanistan remains heavily aid-dependent, and the COVID pandemic has exacerbated the challenges that we currently face.

I hope that outlines the key goals of the conference, but I come back to the central point: that whatever emerges in a future Afghanistan, security and stability will be crucial determinants of our medium and long-term support to ensure the inclusivity for all communities within Afghanistan.

Baroness Goldie: I underline Lord Ahmad's final point that the sustainment of Afghan security institutions is critical to the future direction of travel.

Q134 Lord Mendelsohn: I would like to probe a little further, although I appreciate that this is very difficult territory.

As we look at the upcoming summit, it is not straightforward, because in

many ways we are looking at threading the needle. There is a delicate balance to be struck, so that the summit can focus on helping to support Afghanistan while not taking sides on the presidential question, or not influencing the peace process one way or the other, but providing Afghanistan with a long-term capacity-building programme.

Those sorts of complexities perhaps lend themselves to a slightly different approach to Afghanistan from the traditional government approach of slightly overpromising on what it can do in the face of tremendous challenges. Is there some understanding that Afghanistan faces a particularly complex series of issues and that there may be a slightly different, more creative approach from the donor community?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: I agree with you. The complexity of Afghanistan has been very real to successive Governments of the United Kingdom, but over the years we have shown the important role of support and development as well as humanitarian aid and development support.

You rightly raise the point about being innovative in what can realistically be delivered. I will give a practical example. In 2019, the UK put the majority of its aid and support through the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund. What does that do? It ensures structure for donors themselves so that the support is well co-ordinated and aligned with the Afghan government's priorities, and it has delivered specific outcomes. For example, through this trust fund the UK contributed to 6.2 million people gaining access to electricity in Afghanistan. That has been verified by the World Bank.

I agree that it is important to be innovative in the support that we give, and structured in the governance of that support, but equally it is important to ensure that the structures allow us to assess the effectiveness of what has been delivered, either through our own means or by working with international agencies and partners such as the World Bank. I hope that gives you a practical example of what can be done with that kind of approach.

Of course, if something has been working well, you continue to sustain it, but that does not mean that you cannot improve it further. We have talked through Her Majesty's Government's various priorities. For me, as the Minister responsible for our relationship with Afghanistan, we have to bring hope to the citizens of Afghanistan. When we are demonstrably showing that we are helping with the education of a population, the infrastructure and electricity provision, we are also influencing the population.

Whatever new election may take place in Afghanistan and whatever future framework a new Afghanistan takes, we hope it is recognised that there have been gains in what has been a difficult terrain, but the challenges remain very clear and we continue to work with our partners, international agencies and donors on the ground to ensure that we deliver on our commitments as well.

The Chair: Baroness Goldie, would you like to add to that?

Baroness Goldie: I have nothing further to say, only to thank you, Chair, and your Committee members, for the opportunity to participate in the proceedings.

Q135 **The Chair:** Thank you. In the remaining couple of minutes, there is one question that I would like to put. The Government talk a lot about protecting our legacy in Afghanistan. If you were approached by a member of the public and asked, "Okay, how do you define that legacy?", what would you say?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: My first focus would be very personal. I have children. I have a daughter. If we have made an important contribution through the support we had given, as I have indicated, to enable girls to realise their full potential through education, that will be a significant part of the legacy. However, a legacy is achievable or sustainable only as long as you continue to protect it, and that is where the difficulty or the challenge lies.

I assure you that from Her Majesty's Government's perspective, the continued investment in ensuring equality, justice and inclusivity in a progressive, inclusive Afghanistan will remain a key priority. The legacy is one of delivering on the infrastructure thus far, particularly in the gains we have made in aiding and supporting girls to realise their full potential, but there is a lot of work still to be done.

Baroness Goldie: With the collective good will that comes with the professionalism and skill of Allies and partners, we have been able to give Afghanistan some spine and muscle in helping it to start determining its own affairs in terms of democracy, elections and government.

In relation to the latter point raised by Lord Ahmad, I am very encouraged by the evidence that we can point to now that girls are being given the opportunity not only to have an education but to come forward and contribute to the fabric of their country, and, hopefully, be part of planning the future of their country. I always think, Chair, that women have such an important role to play, and I know that I need not try to persuade you of that. You are one of the most tireless advocates of the importance of women being involved in administration and government, and I would like to think that that good example could manifest itself positively in Afghanistan.

The Chair: I thank all our witnesses today for helping us to conclude our evidence taking. As always, we look not to the past but to the future, and you have helped us to plot our path in planning how to address the challenges that we will face in drafting and agreeing the report on the UK and Afghanistan.