HOUSE OF COMMONS

Foreign Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Follow-up on Afghanistan Inquiry, HC 1888

Tuesday 17 October 2023

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Alicia Kearns (Chair); Saqib Bhatti; Liam Byrne; Neil Coyle; Brendan O'Hara; Bob Seely; Henry Smith; Royston Smith; Graham Stringer.

Defence Committee Member present: Robert Courts.

Questions 1-46

Witnesses

I: Andrew Kidd, Former Head of UKAid Programme at British Embassy Kabul, Director at Kent Refuge Action Network, and Representative at UK-Afghanistan Diplomatic and Development Alliance; Nicola Kelly, Freelance journalist; and Fawzia Koofi, Former Deputy Speaker at Afghan Parliament.

II: The Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, Minister of State (Middle East, North Africa, South Asia and United Nations) at Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office; and Andrew McCoubrey, Director for Afghanistan and Pakistan at Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– Andrew Kidd

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Andrew Kidd, Nicola Kelly and Fawzia Koofi.

Q1 **Chair:** Welcome to this session of the Foreign Affairs Committee, where we will be looking at the current situation and humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan. I thank our three guests for joining us, and the Select Committee on Defence for having sent a representative. Could the witnesses please introduce themselves?

Andrew Kidd: I'm Andrew Kidd. I am a former civil servant. I was based in Kabul from 2008 to 2011. I took early retirement and stayed in touch with former colleagues. I came together with many of my former civil servant and diplomatic colleagues in August 2021 as the UK-Afghanistan Diplomatic and Development Alliance to try and support our former colleagues and advocate on their behalf.

Nicola Kelly: I'm Nicola Kelly. I am a freelance journalist. I tend to write for *The Guardian*, *The Observer*, *The Independent* and others.

Fawzia Koofi: Thank you for the opportunity. My name is Fawzia Koofi. I was a Member of Parliament in Afghanistan for 15 years, and was the Deputy Speaker of Parliament. I was also in the peace negotiation team representing the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in the negotiation with the Taliban. Since fleeing Afghanistan, I have continued my activism and advocacy for the people of Afghanistan. I am currently the president of Women for Afghanistan, a movement which tries to mobilise women in support of Afghanistan and the people of Afghanistan.

Q2 **Chair:** Thank you all for joining us. It would be difficult for us to start without recognising the appalling impact of the earthquakes that have taken place in Afghanistan over the very short recent period. It is horrifying to see a country face so many natural disasters in such quick succession. Fawzia, I hope that all of your loved ones have been able to remain safe and have not been affected.

I will start by asking the question that many do not wish to discuss: how do we engage the Taliban going forward? What should the be nature of the UK's relationship? How do we ensure that we are able to advocate in the best interest of people not only in Afghanistan, but within the wider geopolitical region? Fawzia, will you kick us off?

Fawzia Koofi: Once again, thank you for the opportunity. We appreciate your persistent position on very tricky issues of international and foreign policy.

Since the Taliban's return to power and the failure of the Doha agreement, which paved the way for their return, the world has been engaged with the Taliban, mainly on three issues. First, the human rights issue; secondly, the humanitarian issue; thirdly, the political dialogue and the peace process. On the human rights issue, as you know, the country is suffering

under severe human rights violations. The Taliban continue to arbitrarily detain people: women protesters, their political opponents, journalists, activists. For the past week, as the world's attention has been shifted to another conflict, they have continued to increase their arrests of education activists and my friends across the country. Human rights organisations, the UN and the special rapporteur produce reports on the severe human rights situation in Afghanistan. Their reports are accurate but not comprehensive, because they do not have the means to access across Afghanistan. Human rights organisations cannot operate in some places in Afghanistan. Media is obviously censored. The reports are important, but there has been no action on the outcome of the reports.

I suggest that the international community should strengthen the accountability mechanism. I suggest that the world must recognise the term "apartheid", because all the incidents indicate that there is gender apartheid happening in Afghanistan amounting to crimes against humanity. I negotiated with the Taliban, and I think they will respond to pressure. There should be principled engagement to clearly indicate what you will get. I have a few more points which I will raise when the time comes.

Andrew Kidd: It is a very difficult one. I am still in touch with former FCDO colleagues in Afghanistan who are still being hunted by the Taliban. To try and liaise with the Taliban in that context, recognising that they are still behaving in that way, is going to be extremely difficult for the Foreign Office.

The point about multilateralism is really important. Coming together as an international community and recognising the humanitarian situation is key. The UK could do more with regional neighbours and make diplomatic efforts, but whether the Taliban would be amenable to engagement with regional neighbours is, I would say, questionable.

Nicola Kelly: My focus is on resettlement—on UK immigration and asylum. I would say that the main focus is on speeding up processing; it has been far too slow. Only 66 individuals have been resettled through pathway 2 of the ACRS, and only 41 through pathway 3. It should also be on improving the quality of decision making so that decisions get made a lot faster and people can be brought to the UK.

Q3 **Graham Stringer:** Specifically on the humanitarian situation: when we have had witnesses here before they have told us that there has been food available, often at a price that people couldn't afford. What is the current situation of food availability and its price?

Fawzia Koofi: Under the Taliban, Afghanistan has become one of the most dire humanitarian crises in the world. Afghanistan is a rich country with poor people. My heart wrenched—as somebody who wanted to represent a different country, a country that has more economic prosperity—to hear, and get calls, from people on the ground. People, who only two years ago had a prestigious and dignified life, now struggle with an income of $20 or less per month.

The Taliban have a good division of labour. They want the international community to feed the people of Afghanistan as they continue to have agreements and contracts left and right with neighbouring countries in the region. That means that the people of Afghanistan are in a situation of dire humanitarian need. The World Bank reported that there is an increase in income per capita. Unfortunately, from my perspective that is not accurate, because the World Bank does not have access to ordinary people to collect the data.

On the humanitarian situation, we know that humanitarian aid organisations are not allowed to hire women. That leaves 17 million women in need of basic income. Madam, you mentioned the unfortunate earthquake that happened last week which cost almost 2,500 lives in Herat province—in Zinda Jan and some other districts. Women were the main victims because they were in their homes. They were not allowed to leave their homes when the earthquake happened, so they and the children lost their lives. Women who should be part of the humanitarian aid effort cannot access these families because they are not allowed to work. So, as it is very difficult, I cannot lobby for a reduction of humanitarian aid. Women-led organisations in Afghanistan that provide humanitarian aid are, at this stage, the only source of income for 17 million-plus women in Afghanistan.

Humanitarian aid definitely supports the Taliban; it empowered them. There are credible reports, based on my contacts from Afghanistan, that the Taliban have access to it, and they try to support their soldiers and people first, before giving aid to ordinary people in need. But I would still like to argue for a continuation of humanitarian aid, with a focus on two things. First, on establishing a strong monitoring mechanism to ensure that the aid actually reaches the people, because we do not have that. In the last two years, $2.8 billion dollars was spent on humanitarian aid in Afghanistan. But there is no monitoring mechanism; we do not know where the money has actually gone or how much of that benefited the Taliban.

Secondly, I recommend that the procedure should be made simpler for women-led organisations—those organisations that actually provide aid to the women involved in civic activism. We need to make the procedure easier for them so that they can access aid and access the money. The space is limited for them, but they can find a way to operate in different parts of Afghanistan. We need to make sure that international organisations such as the UN or any other group on the ground can make it simpler for these organisations to access aid, because they are the only source of jobs for women.

Q4 **Graham Stringer:** Andrew or Nicola, would you like to add anything to that?

Andrew Kidd: My former colleagues still in Afghanistan who worked for the FCDO, or those who work directly in association with the UK, are really struggling. You have got a broad-scale humanitarian issue here, as Fawzia has mentioned, but they are still being hunted. They are in hiding; they

are having to move from house to house; they are separating their families to manage the threat they face; they are unable to get jobs; they are having to sell all their assets to survive. The Foreign Office has abandoned its former employees and those who worked directly with the UK. That group is really suffering.

Q5 **Graham Stringer:** Is there food available?

Fawzia Koofi: But there is no money.

Graham Stringer: If people sell their assets, they can go and buy food.

Andrew Kidd: You can—at a price.

Q6 **Graham Stringer:** At a price, yes. I have one final question, because we are pressed for time. How stable is the regime in this situation?

Andrew Kidd: I think that from the outside the regime looks stable enough to still want to hunt—it has a long memory—those who worked as what they would call foreign agents. It is sufficiently stable to still want to hunt those individuals.

Fawzia Koofi: If I may, there is further division among the Taliban that could be used as a lever. I believe, as a political theory, that there is no government that could last very long on the basis of exclusion. The Taliban exclude from participating in the Government not only those in their own community, such as women, but everybody. Basically, it is a Government of the Taliban, for the Taliban, by the Taliban. No Government will run on the basis of exclusion.

The Taliban claim that they have brought security to Afghanistan, but we all know that security is not just the absence of war; security is when people feel safe in their homes, which they do not. They have been convenient with their military strategy in their fight against military extremists such as Daesh or ISIS or others. They are hunting their political opposition and former security forces under the name of Daesh, and they sell it to the world as, "We are the only group that will counter other military extremist groups." From my experience, having lived in Afghanistan all my life, no military extremist group will actually be able to counter another one. In fact, the Taliban have inspired many military extremist groups in the region. Now there are 25 military extremist groups between Afghanistan and Central Asia and South Asia, including Daesh and al-Qaeda, which could endanger global security in the long term if we do not look beyond humanitarian aid and human rights, and take a political view.

Q7 **Bob Seely:** A parliamentarian called Tobias Ellwood, who was Chair of the Defence Committee, went to Afghanistan earlier this year and said that it was a country transformed, certainly when it came to production of poppies and basic security. I respect his right to have an opinion, and I am not saying he was right or wrong, but I just want to ask you if you felt that he was right in his comments, or if those comments were wrong, was it a country not transformed, or a country transformed but not in a

positive way? Can I just have a quick answer from all three of you? Fawzia, what do you think?

Fawzia Koofi: Sir, how can a country be transformed when the 17 million of the population that is female is deprived of participating in any kind of social, political or economic sphere? The country has a $3 billion deficit because women have not participated in the job market. How can it be prosperous and transformed when the prisons are full of women protesters and men who speak against the Taliban? As I say, it is a Government of the Taliban, by the Taliban, for the Taliban. When foreign diplomats go to Afghanistan, the Taliban welcome it. They try to provide them with security, take them where they want—like an escorted mission—and try to superficially make it look nice for the international community.

When they say, "We counter corruption", there is no money. With the food and the humanitarian aid, there is a lot of corruption—the Taliban do that. If there is more money, there is more corruption. So, when the Taliban claim that they are fighting corruption and that the economy has transformed, it is a false claim. In fact, when I say principled engagement, these are the basic things we want the foreign diplomats to look at when they go to Afghanistan, including MPs from the UK Government. Have they really committed anything that they promised in the negotiations in Doha in terms of human rights? In fact, it has gotten worse: Afghanistan is the worst country for women and its citizens—you know that. Women are not only banned from education and work, but from breathing. My sisters in Afghanistan tell me that maybe if there were a lack of oxygen, the Taliban would tell us to stop breathing. I am telling you that there should be certain principles. We do not campaign for disengagement. We are asking for a set of principles that you could monitor, and those principles do not exist. That is why everybody presents their own views.

Nicola Kelly: The people I speak to who are in Afghanistan are in hiding. As Andrew says, they are like fugitives—they are moving from house to house, trying to get internet access. If we are talking about resettlement schemes, they try to get the forms, and the websites crash. Data gets leaked. Forms get lost. Meanwhile, while they are waiting for a response from the British Government to their applications, they are being kidnapped, tortured and killed. For some of my reporting, I spoke to a man called Batoor who worked for the British Council for many years. His two-year-old daughter, Najwa, was taken sick. He had death threats against him and was unable to leave his house. When the situation deteriorated and her health got a lot worse, they then had to move to the hospital. By the time they arrived at the hospital, she had died of liver failure and cardiac arrest. If she had arrived at the hospital sooner, she might have lived. Probably even more likely, if she had been resettled in the UK, then they would all be alive.

Andrew Kidd: For those who worked with the UK, it has been transformed into a hellhole. As we said, they are moving house to house worried about their own lives.

Q8 **Bob Seely:** This is not just about the UK, because I know we are going to

come to that again. Looking at society overall, you don't think it's a society transformed in a good way?

Andrew Kidd: Well, people feel at risk and vulnerable. There are many different types of groups who feel at risk and vulnerable. I am particularly concerned for those I used to work with and were employed by HMG.

Q9 **Brendan O'Hara:** Following on from what Bob said, my question is about the situation of women and girls in Afghanistan. Have you seen the report from the International Bar Association's Human Rights Institute that talked about the normalisation of oppression and the erosion of women's human rights? Given that and what you said earlier, what can the UK do to help? What should it be doing that it is not doing to better support women and girls in Afghanistan.

Fawzia Koofi: Thank you, sir. There are a few recommendations and suggestions I would like to bring before the Committee. First, as I said, the international community must continue to support women-led and womanhood operations still operating in Afghanistan in urban and rural areas—this is the first thing. Secondly, yes, what is happening in Afghanistan is by no means normal. Unfortunately, I have seen that there were some talks from a lot of international commentators—and even in a meeting held in September at the FCDO—about sending girls to madrassah, and how you could recognise madrassah as an alternative to an official school system. We know that, first of all, madrassah only accept girls until age 13. Secondly, their curricula are radicalised curricula. Thirdly, it is not inclusive to religious minorities. Fourthly, it actually embraces military acts, including suicide bombing. Why do we think that, in the 21st century, it is okay and normal for a woman to not go to a formal education system? The Taliban know that an educated mother will never allow her son to pick up a gun and pursue his political career through violence. That is why. They want to have a generation of Taliban in the future and they have actually chosen their war against women very carefully. So, I think what you could do is not accept the exceptionally imposed restriction of the Taliban. A political process is the response.

Without changing the political ecosystem, trying to see how we can find our way within the current status quo is not going to be helpful. Pursuing a political path is something that the Taliban promised in the Doha negotiations. It is one of the four elements of the Doha agreement: American troop withdrawal was the first, and a political process was the second and main element. If that is a legally valid document, the signatories must hold the Taliban accountable for a political process to result in inclusive Government. We women in exile and in Afghanistan have now initiated a women-centric civic and peace process, and we hope for your support and your Government's support for creating an alternative space to the current crisis in Afghanistan.

Q10 **Brendan O'Hara:** Widening that out to other members of the panel, do the UK Government have leverage that they can exercise to achieve that?

Andrew Kidd: If they have leverage, I do not think they are using it effectively. Are they using their diplomatic network in the region

effectively? I talk to my former colleagues in the FCDO and it feels as if that kind of network of ambassadors being aligned to get behind a policy agenda to make change—change will come from not only individual engagement but a regional, multilateral approach—has been eroded as a skillset.

Q11 **Brendan O'Hara:** I have a final question about the needs of women in Afghanistan and the gender apartheid that you talked about. Do those differ from the needs of women in the diaspora? Have the Afghan women who are no longer in Afghanistan been talked about enough? Have their needs been recognised, and what are those needs?

Fawzia Koofi: Thank you, sir, for that important question. We call ourselves women in exile because all our struggles are to go back to our country in the near future—we hope—and to make our country look like Great Britain. On needs, the women in Afghanistan face the catastrophe and suffer the most. In my daily contacts, almost 80% of my time is still spent with women in Afghanistan, inside the country. I try to support them in whatever way I can.

As I said before, we start our day looking at the walls of our home and we end it that way. Only those women who are there will understand what that means. I invite you to put your feet in the shoes of those people. If the UK were to suppress the men in this country and not let them go to work or education, how would that feel? If the women of Afghanistan were not women, but belonged to a religious group, how would the world react? We should not think that the women of Afghanistan deserve that.

The women who are in exile continue to amplify the voices of women in Afghanistan. I think the UK Government must adopt a provision to support them, because they are the talent and brains of Afghanistan—not just the women, but the men who are in your country. They were part of the progress of their country until only two years ago. They were part of the change in their country. You have invested your blood and treasure to empower them. British troops lost their lives in Afghanistan to empower this generation of empowered Afghans. You need to support them here and to adopt certain provisions as the United States adopted.

We are not here just as refugees in search of a better life: we were forced to flee our country. The United States adopted certain procedures to give these women and men the platform to be part of society in this capacity, but also to continue to work for what is best for their original country. Those kinds of policies should be adopted for the women in the UK, for instance, as well as the men.

Q12 **Neil Coyle:** Thank you, Fawzia, for your continued advocacy for Afghan women and girls, which is hugely important. I saw the work you do both for those still in Afghanistan and for those Afghans here in London at the Nowruz festival in Southwark last year.

On your point about Doha and the role of the Taliban, the Qataris wanted to play the role of broker and believed that they could influence what the Taliban would do. They said they would bring together international

Muslim clerics and academics to try to exert some influence on what the Taliban would do in Government. Is there any evidence at all—I fear not—that the Qataris have had any positive influence on what the Taliban has done? Does any other external actor have a stronger role that it could play to influence the Taliban?

Fawzia Koofi: Muslim majority countries have a role. In the first place, what the Taliban do is to misrepresent our religion, and in the name of religion they try to do things that contradict religion. For example, the first verse in our religion is about reading—"iqra" means to read—but the Taliban stopped 50% of the population from reading in the name of the same religion. That is why the member states of the OIC and neighbouring countries in the region have a much bigger role to play before the Taliban creates further Islamophobia. That is why I think that Qatar has tried to play the role of a catalyst. Its role, like that of many other Muslim countries, is very important in countering the Taliban's narrative of Islam.

On the impact, however, we know that nothing has changed. In fact, things have got worse on the ground. The Taliban only allow women to go to school up to grade 6, but many people, when they see it is only to grade 6 and do not see any future, stop their girls continuing their education to grade 6, because there will be no work or anything else. That has increased child marriages, forced marriages and mental health issues. There is not only one element: there is a vicious circle of what the Taliban is doing to women and their lives. The OIC member states must be more vocal. Recently, they sent a delegation of Muslim scholars to Afghanistan, but there has been no outcome as to what they negotiated with the Taliban.

Q13 **Liam Byrne:** Andrew, will you describe the cross-Government co-ordination on settlement schemes and the broader response? When we were pulling this session together, the Foreign Office said that the Home Office needed to be alongside; the Home Office was approached, but it said that the topics fell beneath the Foreign Office, the MoD and the Department for Levelling Up, co-ordinated by the Cabinet Office; the Levelling Up Department was approached but said that it was the Home Office's job; and the Home Office said that the topics were not Home Office responsibility. It sounds like an episode of "Yes, Minister", but it is not funny. How would you describe it?

Andrew Kidd: You have summed up the complexity of co-ordination. There are ongoing failures in co-ordination between Departments. I will give you one example, which touches my heart closely. Former Foreign Office employees should fit with ARAP category 2. That policy is under and operationalised by the MoD. In July 2021, a former colleague was rejected because he was not employed directly by HMG, but he was. He was a Foreign Office employee. Did the MoD check with the Foreign Office? I don't know. He went to appeal in August 2021 and has still yet to hear anything from ARAP.

Another case that has just been rejected is that of a former DFID employee, a programme officer—a publicly exposed role, meaningful and

significant to the UK mission—whose application was rejected in August 2023. He fits perfectly with our category 2. Did the MoD speak to the Foreign Office about that case? In another case, someone who applied in January 2022 still has not heard anything. Those are three cases.

In August last year, our group had a consultation with the Foreign Office about the future of the ACRS pathway 3. What is to come? They wanted to consult and to listen. I took that opportunity to share with them those cases and sent them a grid of 10 former HMG employees who are still yet to get a response from ARAP. They said, "We'll get back to you"—nothing.

Liam Byrne: It sounds shambolic. Is that too strong?

Andrew Kidd: In fact, I thought, "Well, to be fair, maybe they do not want to engage with third parties," so I actually copied in those Afghans to their former employee, the FCDO, but they got back nothing. That co-ordination between the MoD and the Foreign Office in respect of those the Foreign Office should be most concerned about—its former employees—has failed woefully.

Nicola Kelly: The Committee said that the mismanagement was completely inexcusable. When I was reporting on this, I found that there were only eight staff within the FCDO working on the ACRS—eight—in comparison with 540 from across Whitehall working on the Ukrainian schemes.

Q14 **Liam Byrne:** Nicola, you have said that the resettlement schemes are too narrow, they are lacking in transparency and they are inconsistently applied. I think we have well under 10,000 who have come in on one of the three pathways. The commitment was obviously 20,000, but we have 30,216 people who are still awaiting a decision. Can you say why you came to that judgment about the structure of the schemes being too narrow?

Nicola Kelly: I think there is a number of different factors. The under-resourcing is one, the way in which it has been administered is another, and the lines of communication are another. The co-ordination has been particularly poor. People came to me, a journalist, rather than going to any other source of information, because they were completely unclear as to which pathway they should apply for. Some people applied for both because they had applied for ARAP and then said, "I think I should probably apply for ACRS as well." They did not know which pathway they fell into as well.

The figures are always slightly fudged when I talk to the Home Office, and you have alluded to the ways in which this has ping-ponged around different Departments. The Home Office consistently say, "We have brought 21,000 people over." That figure, when interrogated, could be that a number of those people came over under ARAP before, during and shortly after Operation Pitting, and then a number of people were brought over under pathway 1 of the ACRS. But the numbers for pathways 2 and 3 are negligible: 66 individuals under pathway 2 and 41 under pathway 3. It

has completely stalled, and people are dying, as I say. They are being forced to take small boats, because the safe routes have now completely closed. People who are ACRS and ARAP eligible are now getting into small boats, and I have spoken to a number of them. There are a wide number of reports of those who are ACRS and ARAP eligible getting into small boats to cross the channel.

Q15 **Liam Byrne:** So you're saying that because of the inadequacies of the scheme, we now have people who potentially served with the UK Government in Afghanistan being forced to get on small boats.

Nicola Kelly: Exactly right, yes. There is an example of a pilot who was involved in 30 combat missions alongside coalition forces in Afghanistan and who was forced, having waited over a year, to travel along that well-trodden, perilous migration route and then take a small boat across the channel. The number of Afghans now outnumbers any other nationality of those crossing by small boats. That, in turn, is leading to the number of deaths in the channel also being predominantly Afghans. So yes, there are a number of people who are ARAP and ACRS eligible who are crossing in small boats.

Q16 **Neil Coyle:** I have constituents say that their family will enter the UK by boat because they cannot use the scheme that should be open to them and for which they qualify. Your fear is that there will be deaths in the English channel among those who worked for the UK Government or were trained by the UK Government, as a result of the failure to fix the problems that this Committee identified last year.

Nicola Kelly: Yes, and there will have been already.

Q17 **Neil Coyle:** Is there any evidence that the suggestion that people will be sent to Rwanda is in any way a deterrent to someone getting on a boat in these circumstances?

Nicola Kelly: Absolutely not. Every time I travel to northern France, go across the country speaking to people in asylum hotels and elsewhere. In fact, the morning after the Rwanda deal was announced, I was on the Kent coast and went down to speak to people who had just arrived in small boats and said, "Have you heard of the Rwanda deal?" They all said yes, they had all heard of it, they all follow the news reporting, and they crossed anyway, so it is not a deterrent.

Q18 **Neil Coyle:** Can I ask one further quick question, Chair? I will try to be the devil's advocate. The Government deserve credit for the Ukraine scheme and for the Hong Kong British national overseas scheme. What do Afghans and others describe as the difference between those successful schemes and the complete failure with the Afghan scheme? What is seen to be the reason behind that by those affected—your former colleagues, friends, neighbours?

Andrew Kidd: They just shake their heads and say, "What's wrong with us Afghans? We were loyal to the UK. We worked for the UK. We will potentially now be put in harm's way because of our association with the UK."

Fawzia Koofi: It is not very easy to get a passport in Afghanistan. The Taliban only sell passports for $2,500, if you want to get it faster. This is their fight against corruption. Two weeks ago, the passport office opened in Herat province, the same province affected by the earthquake a week ago, and thousands of people, men and women—you have probably seen the photos, Nicola and Andrew—queued to get passports. Six million Afghans have left Afghanistan since the Taliban takeover. They have taken enormously dangerous routes and are waiting in Pakistan and Iran. We know that the Pakistani and Iranian Governments have announced that they will expel Afghans. Even if they have legal documents, they will send them back and deport them to Afghanistan. These are Afghans who are really at immediate risk. Some of the women who are in Pakistan, for instance, were the heads of departments of gender, judges, prosecutors or female police officers. They are at risk of being deported to Afghanistan.

Andrew Kidd: Forgive me, Fawzia, but that also includes those who are under the care of the British high commission in Islamabad and whose visas have expired. It touches the UK directly as well.

Fawzia Koofi: Exactly. As you said, their Pakistani or Iranian visa is expired. They keep asking me this question and I do not really know how to help them. This is part of the guilt I suffer from, because I left Afghanistan. I wish I did not leave Afghanistan. Now, these people who have walked with you on very bumpy roads over the last 20 years—they are left there. That is the trauma that we are suffering every day.

Chair: I thank you all ever so much for giving evidence today. A year on from our report, there are serious concerns that our ability to have what some call a strategic commitment to our partners around the world continues to be undermined. I question how that affects our ability to partner around the world and to support the buy-in and support of local communities when we go into countries, and also the impact of that on the safety of the brave men and women in our armed forces who go out there to work, as well as our Foreign Office staff. I thank you all for your continued advocacy for all those Afghans who worked with the UK and beyond. In particular, Fawzia, I thank you for raising the femicide that is taking place in Afghanistan. Thank you all ever so much.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Lord Ahmad and Andrew McCoubrey.

Q19 **Chair:** Minister, thank you ever so much for joining us today. I recognise that it has been a particularly difficult 10 days for you and am grateful for the fact that whereas other Ministers might have sought to shirk their responsibility to this Committee, you have upheld your commitment. I am very grateful to you.

As you know, we are talking today about where we are with Afghanistan, a year on from the Committee's report that found there to have been

serious failings in the way in which the UK conducted the evacuation and the way in which we have upheld what should have been a commitment to those who stood by us and helped us as we sought to secure better stability and security for all in Afghanistan. What do you see as the road map for the UK's future relationship with Afghanistan and, specifically, with the Taliban? What are our objectives in Afghanistan now?

Lord Ahmad: First, thank you; I am glad that the Committee has called this session. I know that previous evidence has been given, and I think it is extremely important. I have been at the Foreign Office for a while now, and it is important that we keep certain key issues on the front burner. Tragically, there will always be a conflict or crisis somewhere. I welcome the opportunity to review where we have got to.

On the specifics of your question, since the Taliban takeover in August 2021 there have been several areas of our activity. To summarise them very quickly, the key objective and priority was on the humanitarian front. I am proud to say this about the first 18 months after the Taliban takeover. You have talked about staying with our responsibilities; irrespective of where you were on NATO's decision to withdraw, the important thing was to provide the maximum support we could extend to the Afghan people who, through no fault of their own, have suddenly had to endure the governance of the Taliban.

On the record—I have said it before to this Committee and to others—I want to make it absolutely clear from the outset that the Taliban's philosophy is nothing to do with Islam. It is a draconian, subversive philosophy that is against different people, different communities and, as we know, women and girls in terms of their empowerment. This is totally against Islam. It is a faith I follow and I have grown up with. I have seen, in my own experience, what it is has done as a force for good—and that applies to all faiths and beliefs. I say that right at the outset, because it is important to contextualise what the Taliban's perverse ideology is. What we have seen since then is a quite draconian application of that philosophy, especially in the context of women and girls, which I am sure I will come to in subsequent questions.

We have really stepped up our humanitarian effort—we were over half a billion pounds in that first 18 months. The question was about how to ensure that support got through, as we have targeted at least 50% to girls and women, which is a key objective—and rightly so—that we set at the FCDO. That was done through working directly with a whole raft of NGOs on the ground and some international NGOs, as well as through the UN framework. Was it easy? Not at all. I have refrained, and I will refrain again, from naming specific organisations, which is more to protect them and at their request. But we have been working closely with a number of agencies on that point to ensure that we can deliver basic food aid. At that time, immediately in the aftermath, we worked directly with the World Food Programme and its then head, David Beasley—as well as other UN agencies, including UNICEF—to ensure that the requirements were met. That is the first element.

The second element was about diplomacy and diplomatic engagement. As you know, we do not have a mission on the ground. Nevertheless, we set up a mission in Doha, which has been important. Do we have a relationship with the Taliban? We do at official levels. We have engaged at the seniormost diplomatic level—Andy is here with me and will speak to that. Through our heads of mission, that has been an important link, both in assessing the situation on the ground and when it comes to more sensitive situations. There was a very delicate and long negotiation on certain detainees in Afghanistan, which I am sure some of you have followed. I myself was involved with that, and I pay tribute to our amazing teams, both here in London and particularly in Doha—the diplomats who were engaging, quite directly, with the Taliban on this negotiation. That could not have been achieved, had that channel not been open.

The third element I would also like to just talk about is of course eligible Afghans who are seeking to leave Afghanistan. I pay tribute again to some of the neighbouring countries, particularly Pakistan, which through real challenge domestically—

Chair: We will come back to Pakistan.

Lord Ahmad: I am sure we will, but we should not forget what they have done in the last 18 months—we would not have achieved a certain buffer if that had not happened. We are continuing to engage, despite the changes in Pakistan, and also with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. You'll remember, Chair, that I went to the region several times. That direct diplomacy allowed us to share information that allowed for the access of individuals. That said, the situation is ever evolving, and that diplomacy is still important when it comes to the rights of individuals within Afghanistan, particularly women and girls. In that respect, extensive work has been done with Afghanistan's near neighbours, but also with the wider Islamic world. As you will be aware, I have also worked with the United Nations directly, namely with Sima Bahous, the head of UN Women, and with Amina Mohammed, Deputy Secretary-General and head of development, who has led on this. At my behest and advocacy, they also visited Afghanistan, and I hope there will be an opportunity to discuss those points as well. I hope that gives you a flavour of the different elements that we have been engaged with.

Q20 **Chair:** It does indeed. Before I turn to Henry, I have a quick question. You mentioned Qatar, but can I just ask what are our strategic objectives when it comes to Qatar, because it has been home to both Hamas and the Taliban? How many more enemies does Qatar need to shore up before we start questioning what our strategic implications are and what our priorities are with them?

Lord Ahmad: I think with, as many countries around the world, there will be certain countries that have direct diplomatic engagements with both Administrations that we do not share the same beliefs with. I mean, let's not also forget—

Chair: Terrorist organisations, not Administrations.

Lord Ahmad: I will come on to that, but in this particular case, the role of Qatar has been important both in the current crisis, which I know you have requested a private briefing on, and in some of the key areas of our priorities. Particularly when we were seeking to get eligible Afghans out of Afghanistan, Qatar played a very important role, as did the UAE. In terms of our objectives, Qatar, of course, is a partner. There are many things that we disagree on when it comes to these particular issues. However, it plays an important diplomatic role when it comes to engaging with organisations with which we might not have direct links, including the two that you mentioned.

Chair: I am sure we will come back to that. Henry, please.

Q21 **Henry Smith:** Minister, thank you for appearing before the Foreign Affairs Committee. I appreciate that it was essentially a US policy-led decision, but what impact do you think the nature of the withdrawal in August 2021 has had on British influence in the region?

Lord Ahmad: I think there are two elements to that. The first is the role of NATO itself. There were objectives that we went in on. We all remember those dreadful events that led to the intervention, and indeed NATO's intervention, in Afghanistan. If I were to be quite straightforward, there is that feeling of, "We went a complete circle." Were there objectives achieved? Of course, during the 20 years of our engagement there were positive moves forward in terms of the empowerment and education of girls, and the empowerment of women. We saw society changing in a positive way, although not across the board.

I am not going to play back other sessions we have had with the Committee, but once those strategic decisions were taken, at the speed at which they were taken, and once the then President departed on that fateful day of 15 August 2021, as one particular Minister within the then Afghan Administration—whom I won't name here—said to me, the whole sense of leadership was lost because there was no one there. The whole sense of purpose was lost with the Taliban moving into Kabul. With many of the gains that we were able to achieve, particularly on the rights of minorities and of women and girls, and the progress we saw on education, there was a real setback.

That has been reflected and evidenced by what we have seen in the two-and-a-bit years since then. It is a sense of, I think, deep reflection and regret for many who operated as part of that NATO team. I understand that operations come to an end, but I think the nature of a disengagement and the issue of instability within the region—you used that important word, "influence"—remains something that we need to work on. Our equities on the humanitarian side and our continued engagement through some of our diplomatic levers have been important in reasserting the fact that, while NATO has departed, the United Kingdom still regards Afghanistan as an important priority.

Q22 **Henry Smith:** If I may ask a brief supplementary on that point about the United Kingdom remaining engaged, what damage do you think the

nature of the withdrawal just over two years ago has done to the UK's future programmes, engaging not just in Afghanistan but in other parts of the region and the world?

Lord Ahmad: I wouldn't use the word "damage". I think that we have had to reassess prioritisation. One thing I would say in a very general sense—I don't mean this because I am a Minister at the Foreign Office, but I see it myself when I travel to various parts of the world in multilateral fora—is that, notwithstanding many of the challenges and conflicts that currently exist around the world, the United Kingdom is still regarded as an important partner. It is regarded very highly in terms of diplomacy and engagement, and our ability to convene. Those are important assets that we should not just sustain but strengthen.

Of course, the kind of crisis that we have seen unfurling in Afghanistan presents an immense challenge, not just to us but to a number of our NATO partners. It is equally important that we have shown, notwithstanding the strategic decision, that we remain engaged. I do not believe—I mean this on principle and through my own experience—that we have seen the influence of British diplomacy declining. If anything, on many of the conflicts and challenges we face, there is a real call for increased British engagement.

Q23 **Robert Courts:** Lord Ahmad, thank you very much for appearing before us. I am guesting, as it were, on behalf of the Defence Committee, so I would like to ask you some questions from a slightly different perspective. You mentioned the nature of the disengagement, which, however one looks at it, I think we have to accept constitutes a major failure of intelligence and medium-term planning. A worse disaster was only avoided because of the extraordinary performance of, in particular, the Royal Air Force and the Parachute Regiment in pulling the iron from the fire in Operation Pitting.

Given that that is the case, and given that you have had chance to reflect upon this, and given that that extraordinary performance came at an enormous cost to people and platforms, could I ask you what lessons you have learned from the intelligence failures and the planning failures between MoD and FCDO? Above all, can you comment on the logistics and airlift capability that the UK would need in such a scenario?

Lord Ahmad: First of all, thanks, Robert. On the issue of plans that were in place and disengagement, if we go back to those particular events—albeit briefly—there were changing timelines. There were contingency plans in place, and the co-ordination was in place. You referred to the issue of intelligence; even the Afghan Administration, or parts of it, were surprised at the speed of the Taliban takeover. This was, as you rightly say, an opportunity to really reassess—as we are doing currently—how the different scenarios in any crisis, be it in the middle east or Russia-Ukraine, will play out. There has been real learning on that, in terms of better co-ordination and recognition.

Q24 **Robert Courts:** May I press you on that? Forgive me, but without wishing to revisit it, although I appreciate that the speed took people by surprise,

that is what planning is for.

Lord Ahmad: Of course it is. But first of all, were there plans in place? There were plans in place, because the ability to stand up certain elements of that logistical exercise would not have happened otherwise. The United Kingdom assisted 36 countries in exiting their nationals and individuals from that country. That would not have happened if plans were not in place. I am not saying they were the best plans or that we have not learned from them.

Q25 **Robert Courts:** I'm not wishing to be unfair; I am seeking to ask what lessons have been learned.

Lord Ahmad: Which I will come to. We then move forward to what has happened subsequently. I think some of the lessons that we have learned relate to our own internal processes at the FCDO and the engagement across Government. I know: I worked that crisis—I pay tribute to the then Home Secretary and to my good friend and colleague the Minister of Armed Forces—and individual relationships and the working of phones mattered.

This was not, with the best planning, something that could take weeks or days. When the Taliban had taken over Kabul, this was a minute-by-minute crisis. Decisions needed to be made quickly. I think we have seen those lessons—about the urgency and the need for cross-Government working to have the dynamism to respond to crisis—reflected in how we have dealt with subsequent issues, on both an intelligence and a logistical front, such as the Russian illegal war on Ukraine, which is reflective of that. We are embedded, through cohesive and strategic structures, in terms of how Government Departments work together, and also through working together on first responders, what the requirements are and briefing to parliamentarians and colleagues—earlier today I was with the Foreign Secretary, briefing parliamentarians on the middle east.

So in short: yes, there have been lessons learned, both internally, in processes and structures, and how we seek to mitigate better, and in intelligence, which you mentioned specifically, but also in strategic working with other key partners to ensure that there is a diplomatic track and a humanitarian track. Let's take the example of Russia-Ukraine. On the atrocities that we have seen committed over many years, I also lead on the issue of preventing sexual violence in conflict, which is really close to my heart and has been for many years. Our response to Ukraine has been really based on the experiences of conflicts past. We are working now with the likes of the International Criminal Court, for example, on ensuring that structures, processes and procedures are set up, and that training is provided now, through internal mechanisms, to Ukraine, to ensure that when this war ends, we hope at the earliest opportunity, the structures and the accountability mechanisms are also set up. There is a great deal of learning that we have been able to apply to Ukraine and also in the crisis in Sudan—understanding who has the best equities on the ground in a time of crisis, who has which best resources on the ground, and ensuring that the Government-to-Government working with different partners is

also in place and that there are open channels of communication. We were able to achieve that in terms of logistics. You, like myself, have been an aviation Minister previously and it is not easy to go out and say, "We need a charter flight tomorrow." It does not work like that. You need to plan ahead. We learn from each crisis—when we were doing the covid response, for example—and how we then subsequently deal with it.

Q26 **Robert Courts:** What specifically did you learn from civ air and grey tail arising out of Pitting that was then applied in Sudan and other crises?

Lord Ahmad: The issue of co-ordination with partners is key in terms of the liaison that we have—who has what equity in place and exactly where, in terms of logistics. There have to be contingencies to the contingencies, if I can put it that way. The mechanics of Government need to be dynamic given the response times, which can change quite quickly.

There was an operation prior to Pitting. Plans were in place. Pitting happened and the numbers of people we got out was not by accident, but there were lots of logistics issues on the ground there that we were dealing with—the closure of gates particularly, and then the intelligence that was coming through on different issues, including the attacks around the hotels at that time. All those add into the sharing of information. Sometimes it has to be done more discreetly. Sometimes it has to be done at a very high level. We have enhanced forms of communication.

One thing that I think we need to do, going back to that time—this is my personal view—is to ensure that all strategic options are exhausted even before the key strategic decision is made. Although I might have been a particular voice in the Government—at times not a prevailing voice—it is important that we give due consideration to all the contingencies that we are planning for and then effectively resourcing them appropriately as well.

Q27 **Robert Courts:** Do you have a view on that effective resource? Do we have the capacity now that we had then? Was it adequate? Is it adequate?

Lord Ahmad: I think every crisis brings a different challenge. You will have the ability to have a greater number of specialists, for example, on issues of atrocity prevention. How can you have better and more able co-ordinated action when it comes to humanitarian support? Every crisis can be different, but when it comes to war and conflict, of course, there are some immediate actions. I believe the resourcing is more effective. I believe that, notwithstanding some of the challenges that remain with the merger of any organisation, having your development and diplomacy arms working very closely together is important, as is an enhanced level of co-ordination with our colleagues across the road at the Ministry of Defence.

Chair: Graham, I believe you want to go more into the consular.

Q28 **Graham Stringer:** I want to ask two quick questions; you have already answered some of my questions. Following Robert's questions very specifically about Sudan, it appears that lessons were not learnt in Sudan

and that other countries' embassies took action beforehand. They seemed to have knowledge that the two warlords in Sudan were going to set about each other, whereas we did nothing or little, and the plans to get people out of the country were poor. Would you accept that the lessons were not learnt in Sudan?

Lord Ahmad: No, I would not, and I will tell you why. Of course, there will always be things you can do better. We played a very active role. I talked earlier of countries that have equities on the ground. I know from my own experience. I worked very closely with the Saudis in terms of ensuring our access. The contingency planning enabled the establishment very quickly of not only our crisis centre; we were able to respond with a much larger pool of crisis-trained staff. There were new policies and programmes that we were able to put in place. On the comparison with other countries, we had a larger number of British nationals who were spread across the country rather than in a single space, whereas our European partners had fewer people in a more concentrated zone. Those elements provided an added challenge.

In terms of the sourcing, I talked earlier of the ability to get people out from Port Sudan. Were there flights and contingencies arranged, for example, in Cyprus? We had that set up to arrange for evacuees who were coming through. In standing up a real-life scale evacuation, I think we did learn the lessons of what happened in Afghanistan and applied them in Sudan. I am not saying that it was a perfect response, and there are always lessons to be learned from that, but certainly they were specific and alive to that, particularly on the diplomacy side that we were able to engage more effectively and directly on. Andrew, you may want to add to that.

Andrew McCoubrey: Perhaps just a little. Another example, perhaps, would be Ukraine, where lessons have been learned; contingency capability planning enabled the development of key plans ahead of the invasion and the rapid deployment of nearly 1,000 core staff. Contingency planning also enabled the establishment of a British embassy in Lviv and the secure evacuation of our embassy in Kyiv, as well as a network of reception centres in third countries and faster and more targeted use of our rapid deployment teams. I would emphasise what the Minister said: each crisis is different, and we continue to learn from our experience in Afghanistan.

Q29 **Graham Stringer:** Thank you. I will ask some specific questions. Can you confirm that every embassy in conflict posts has up-to-date crisis management and evacuation plans? To save time, I will follow that up. Following the FCDO's review of consular policies, what is the Government's policy on eligibility for evacuation assistance? Does that policy vary by country? Does evacuation assistance extend to those working on UK development projects?

Andrew McCoubrey: Each embassy or high commission should have a crisis management plan, and it is the—

Q30 **Graham Stringer:** Do they, though? The question was: do they all have them?

Andrew McCoubrey: Yes, they all do. Those are regularly reviewed, and it is the responsibility of each regional director to ensure that those plans are in place. Of course, those are on paper and need to be looked at. I can give you an example: in one of the high commissions that I manage, we are now looking at the crisis management plan. We are ensuring that it is implementable, working with colleagues in the Ministry of Defence to ensure what our evacuation plans would look like under different scenarios and doing an exercise to ensure that it would be effective at the time of a crisis or a major crisis.

In other words, it is not just that there are plans; where we feel that there are risks, we are also looking ahead to see what that would actually mean in practice and if the people on the ground and our colleagues in the military are working with us to look at the various scenarios and our ability to respond. That is not to say that it is all perfect. As the Minister said, each crisis is different. There are plans, but they are not just on paper; we try to work through them to ensure that they will actually work in practice as and when a crisis arises.

Q31 **Graham Stringer:** Do you have anything to add to that, Lord Ahmad?

Lord Ahmad: Programmes and policies need constant refresh and review. There needs to be a greater emphasis on training as well. We are certainly, through our diplomatic efforts and our broad range of policy and process issues, seeking to see how we can enhance that capacity and capability as well.

In terms of specifics, we have looked at our internal process. I know the Chair has been very keen on what the core offer is when it comes to mediation and conflict prevention. We have resourced that better and developed and strengthened our expertise in responses as well. When Robert asked that question about airlines, for example, and charters and so on, you have to think well ahead and know what the component parts are. Yes, we have improved that, and I think that there are some real lessons learned that have then been applied to a crisis.

I would add that if it is a humanitarian crisis, there will be a different response, and we need the different specialists. We are also seeking to develop specialisms within posts as well, particularly, as you alluded to, in those that are more high risk or prone or with near neighbours in conflict to ensure that we are equipped as near as possible to a particular situation with local expertise as well.

Q32 **Brendan O'Hara:** I have a number of questions on humanitarian aid, the position of women and girls and atrocity prevention. Lord Ahmad, in February you said that the UK's first priority should always be humanitarian. However, the Government then cut contributions to the World Food Programme by 75%. Why did the Government do that? What, if any, impact assessment has been done on the impact that that has had on the people of Afghanistan?

Lord Ahmad: First, on the issue of where I stand and what I said, I stand by that. It has to be that when a crisis occurs, whether it was Afghanistan, Sudan or Ukraine, issues of humanitarian assistance are very much part and parcel of our strategic planning, thinking and support. We have done that most recently when, as the Minister for the Middle East and North Africa, I was dealing with two simultaneous crises: the tragic earthquake that hit Morocco, together with the situation that arose in Libya. We have contingency within our budgets and programming to allow us to stand up funding and support for humanitarian assistance, which we were able to do.

Of course, when it comes to the World Food Programme and other priorities, you know the challenges we have faced in terms of budgeting. At the same time, the multilateral and bilateral support we provide is still among some of the largest contributions we make. For example, we prioritise immediate humanitarian relief, food crisis, sanitation, and medicine supplies. We work with key partners in that respect as well, including key UN agencies, to ensure that the response accords to the demand.

One added element is that we reach out directly about lessons learned. My own experience lends itself to that—you should reach out if it is a Government that you have strong relations with. In the case of Morocco, those personal relationships matter in identifying exactly what is needed at what time, in what quantity, and to what extent. That support can then be channelled directly, and whatever we are doing domestically in assisting that country through the incredible support that we often get, and rightly so, from the British people can be tailored in a way that has the best outcome. I accept the principle that you have raised, Brendan, that we have had to reduce funding and support to certain organisations. At the same time, we stand quite dynamic in our response when we need to step up funding, as we have done recently in several crises.

Q33 **Brendan O'Hara:** Not to open a can of worms, but the budget that was cut was a budget that was set by the Government. You are working within a budget that you set yourself. We heard from the first panel that there is a food crisis in Afghanistan at the moment; has any assessment been done on the impact of that cut?

Andrew McCoubrey: The World Food Programme is under severe financing pressure. We are still a major donor to the World Food Programme, both this year and in previous years. In terms of the additional things we have done, we have been working very closely particularly with the Asian Development Bank, but also the World Bank, over the last two years to try to release further funds from those institutions. Most recently, the ADB has just made available $400 million, a good proportion of which will be made available to the World Food Programme. It is not enough, but it is an initiative with which we have tried to ameliorate the funding situation, which is across the whole donor community, not just the UK.

It is a little too early to say what the impact will be this winter. There is an assessment being done by the United Nations by the end of November, which will give us a better indication of what the winter will look like. It will be a very difficult winter, but once we have got that assessment, we will be able to see exactly what impact it will have. I have asked for a report when that UN report—the IPC assessment—comes out to ensure that we have the right data to make assessments of what funding decisions to make through the winter.

Lord Ahmad: If I may, Chair, on Afghanistan specifically, I talked earlier about the funding. One thing that I am sure you will also accept has been a challenge is that at the start of the year we saw a real assessment by not just ourselves but international agencies—the UN and various international NGOs—about the ability to provide support and assistance, including food and health assistance, to the most vulnerable in Afghanistan. That was a real challenge that was imposed by the Taliban authorities, for example, in the supply chains, where you cannot utilise any women. You could not utilise women within the distribution of aid. There was a pause, which was an international decision, to reflect on how you can most effectively deliver the funding and support needed.

As I have said, I have accepted the principle of reduced funding and that does mean that you have to be much more focused on how you can release, as Andy has alluded to, other forms of funding. But we also have to be real to the end-effect of that funding. We still have, for example, £100 million for this year and £150 million for next year for Afghanistan set up. We identify key delivery partners. However, in Afghanistan specifically, and I am sure you have heard evidence to that effect, the ability to deliver through a supply chain in certain areas—I am not saying it's across the board—has been really hindered by the imposition of quite draconian restrictions by the Taliban.

That said, I won't name the agency now but there is one particular agency that is working in eight or nine regions of Afghanistan that actually reported in the last meeting I had with them an improvement in their ability, because the local governance arrangements of the Taliban in those areas have been more conducive to allowing women to work in the supply chain. And when it comes to some issues, particularly of health outcomes, the cultural sensitivities that also exist in Afghanistan are something that you cannot ignore. So, we need women to be part and parcel of that delivery chain when it comes to assistance of helping humanity in Afghanistan. There are a lot of complexities, both by country and by region in Afghanistan.

Q34 **Brendan O'Hara:** Moving on to the situation of women and girls in Afghanistan, Fawzia Koofi talked just a few minutes ago about gender apartheid and the rapidly deteriorating situation for women and girls. The Government rightly have made women's rights and girls' rights a precondition for diplomatic engagement, and earlier you spoke of your deep regret of the way that things have turned out. What are you doing now and what are you planning to do differently in engaging with

women's groups inside Afghanistan?

Lord Ahmad: First and foremost, I want to express deep regret. I think it's abhorrent what the Taliban are doing and I don't hold back on that. I was very clear on where I am.

Since the fall of the then Government, the pull-out from NATO and the takeover by the Taliban, I have had circa 84 or 85 engagements specifically and bilaterally on Afghanistan, and many of them have been focused on people and organisations, but most importantly on people like Fawzia Koofi, who I know is behind me. I mean, she and I are bound by her exit from Afghanistan. I know how I worked with her, and I know her bravery and courage, which I put on the record, to ensure that because of who she was, she was able to facilitate the exit of several more people, because she knew that her being and continuing to be in Kabul was a really, really challenging situation for her, as well.

I remember that call that I made when there was a small window of opportunity to get Fawzia out. The phone rang, it rang and it rang, and I put the phone down. I don't shy away from it. That was one of those moments where, in terms of reflection, you are willing someone on. You have got everything in place. Then we worked some other channels and I know that we got Fawzia out on the last flight. We talked about Qatar earlier and there were some points made, but it was support from Qatar that allowed us to get that particular exit programme from there.

Specifically on women and girls, I have been engaging, and I hope that Fawzia and others— I know Zehra is in the room as well. She has led various women's groups and I have engaged quite directly as the Minister responsible, because we need to learn. I was saying in response to earlier questions about what the lessons learned are that we must learn from the people who were there on the frontline. We must learn and have their input in the policies and programming that we put in place, and that is exactly what we are doing.

I alluded earlier to the issue of women and girls. Amina Mohammed is the Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations. She is the second most senior person in the multilateral world and she hadn't gone to Afghanistan. I said to her—she is a hijab-wearing, articulate, Muslim woman—that her being in Afghanistan was not just symbolic. It was a right sort of rebuke of the Taliban in their draconian philosophy on women that you had someone who was fully empowered and actually was the second most important person in the multilateral system.

As I said, it was our advocacy with the UN that led to that visit. We are working again with the likes of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the OIC on ensuring that there is a conference arranged in Saudi, which is coming up very shortly, on this very issue of women's rights.

I know that there are programmes and plans. We met recently with the all-party parliamentary group on Afghanistan and Afghanistan women. I have been fully inclusive in getting their views, as we talk and engage with

different women leaders—not just those who are here in the UK and the US, but also in Afghanistan, quite directly. It is now that we need their insights and expertise to inform the decisions that we are making under quite difficult circumstances. The best resource we have is the very people who led the effort in those slightly brighter days before the Taliban took over.

Q35 **Brendan O'Hara:** Finally, on atrocity prevention, we all know that sexual violence in conflict is one of the most abhorrent, wicked crimes, and we know its long-term impact. What are the UK Government doing to ensure that the commitments that they made to survivors of sexual violence in conflict are being extended not just to people in the diaspora but, as much as we possibly can, to people living in and around Afghanistan?

Lord Ahmad: Absolutely. In that regard, I have two very incredible people—senior advisers who work with me directly on the strategy. We have a three-year strategy that was informed by survivors. Both of them are part and parcel of our working in terms of strategy and policy. There is no point talking to survivors once a strategy is in place or a policy has been established, so they inform what we do directly.

In the UN Security Council, for example, we have worked with the likes of Nadia Murad—herself an incredible survivor of sexual violence from the atrocities that Daesh committed. We produced the Murad code, which has now been translated and is being applied, including in Ukraine. We have worked with the incredible Nobel laureate Denis Mukwege, whose work in the DRC for victims of the conflict you should see, if you haven't been. When I was there with Her Royal Highness the Duchess of Edinburgh, there was a four-year-old girl—a four-year-old girl—who had been raped countless times. For her, a man equated to violence. That scream lives with me. In those experiences of survivors, not just those who are able to articulate, you see the tragedy that unfolds. All credit to William Hague, who set this initiative up at the time.

I have been proud of the fact—and certainly on a personal level I have had the great honour to lead on this for the last six-odd years as the Prime Minister's special representative—that the UK has a convening power. In November, I launched a new international alliance, which is very broad; it is not just our usual partners, such as the United States and European partners, but the likes of the UAE and Jordan. We are ensuring that when it comes to the abhorrence of this crime, particularly against women and girls and the most vulnerable, we are a broad alliance acting together and adopting the Murad code, which is a code of conduct for survivors.

Why were we inspired with the Murad code? What does it do? When I visited some of the Rohingya camps in Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh, a woman I met there had given her testimony 27 times and then was told that, because her testimony varied from time to time, it would not allow for a successful prosecution. The Murad code ensures that the people taking, protecting and applying the testimony do so in a professional way, as long as it takes for us to be able to stand up and support the successful prosecution.

There are two other elements on this. We are working very closely with the ICC on the protection of witnesses when they give their testimonies, and we are using AI in this respect; I hope to update the Committee and colleagues on that in due course. We are also working on local justice and court systems and enhancing support for judges. I talked of lessons learned earlier and of what we are doing in Ukraine to train the prosecutors and judges now to allow for effective prosecutions, when they can take place, against those people—those criminals and inhumane minds who commit these atrocities against, particularly, women and girls.

Chair: I am going to bring in Royston. Minister, we are starting to run out of time, so I ask for succinct answers going forward.

Q36 **Royston Smith:** Thank you, Lord Ahmad, for coming to us. There is something quite refreshing about a Minister who has been in post for a while and knows his brief. That is very helpful to us. We talked earlier about people coming out of Afghanistan and then perhaps the failure still to bring them out. Some of them have got themselves to Iran and Pakistan, and we have heard that they may well be deported from Pakistan back to Afghanistan as their visas start to expire. What are we doing to try to prevent that from happening? In addition, we are not doing enough to get out some of these people who were employed by the Home Office, directly or otherwise, and they are finding their own ways across on small boats. That is something of a stain on the procedure and on this country. What are we doing to step up or stand up ARAP to be more successful than it has been up to now?

Lord Ahmad: Thank you, Royston. First of all, on the issue of the Pakistani Government—I know Alicia alluded to this—there have been different Governments that we have dealt with in recent years. But with the current caretaker Government, Prime Minister Kakar was here a few weeks ago. James Cleverly, the Foreign Secretary, met him directly for an hour, and this was one of the mainstays of our ask of them.

We have heard the announcement and followed closely what their plans are, and they are twofold. One is that they accept the principle that those who already have qualified passage to the UK and are awaiting their departure from Pakistan, be they on the ARAP scheme or the ACRS, will be protected. What they need from us is an assurance on facilitation.

I know there were a few raised eyebrows when I complimented the Pakistani Administration, but one thing has to be made clear: since the time of the Taliban takeover until now, the cost of the Taliban being in power, and the impact on Pakistani society, is immense. The Pakistani Tehrik-i-Taliban are another vile terrorist organisation that targets Pakistanis quite specifically but has an ideological base with the Taliban in Afghanistan.

That said, the Pakistanis have given us assurances in this particular area. I met Foreign Minister Jilani at length during his recent visit to London. We have those assurances in place, and Andrew will talk to this. He was in

Pakistan and met all the special representatives on Afghanistan from Pakistan.

Schemes have been set up. I can talk about the specific element of the ACRS for which the FCDO are the referring partner. You will recall that there were three cohorts in that: Chevening scholars, the British Council and GardaWorld. We have made some really good progress. There was a 1,500 cap on that scheme. Colleagues talked about cross-Government working; I know my colleagues in the Home Office and the Immigration Minister will be responding to a debate shortly in Westminster Hall, where, without stealing his thunder altogether, there will be some good news on the issue of the cap, which will also allow us now to facilitate a greater number of people who are eligible to come to the United Kingdom.

There is one other issue before I hand over to Andrew: those who are undocumented. The Pakistanis are working up a scheme for people who have some form of letter that demonstrably shows their association with the United Kingdom through the Government or a role they fulfilled. The detail of that is still being worked up so that they can be protected and normalised in terms of their status, and we hope that they would then have a safe passage to the UK.

Andrew McCoubrey: Very briefly, we have been meeting, as the Minister says, both on the military side and on the diplomatic side with senior members of the Pakistani Government to try to understand how they are going to executive this plan between now and the end of December. Obviously, we will ask them to ensure that it is done in as humanitarian a way as possible.

On the specific question that you asked about those who are eligible but waiting—in Pakistan, for example—we have been given private assurances that eligible persons will not be returned to Afghanistan. Obviously, we are following up very closely to make sure that those private assurances are followed through.

Royston Smith: If I may push the boats thing a bit, because it came up and I had not really thought about it: some of the people escaping Afghanistan who would otherwise have qualified—what happens to them when they land in Dover or whatever off a boat? Are they treated differently from other refugees who come across? I know it is not a Foreign Office thing per se.

Chair: We asked for a Home Office representative and were told that the Foreign Office can handle all questions. I will ask you to pick that up with your Home Office colleagues if that is not the case.

Andrew McCoubrey: Perhaps it would be better if the Home Office—

Q37 **Chair:** I am afraid we are not going to allow that to be the case. I think they were given six weeks' notice when they were asked. They told us it was DLUHC's job. DLUHC told us it was the Home Office's job, and the Home Office told us it was the Foreign Office's job.

Lord Ahmad: First of all, we all know it isn't technically, and I will defend the Foreign Office here. It is not the Foreign Office that makes decisions, ultimately, on immigration. Our job has been to provide a safe exodus. I will come on to the question, though, because—

Q38 **Royston Smith:** I was not suggesting that you did. I was suggesting that you might know what happens to those people.

Lord Ahmad: I think it is a very valid question, when we have a policy specifically on immigration, about the issue of those who would come here and seek asylum. We will ask our Home Office colleagues specifically about the answer.

However, one thing I am very clear on, Royston, is that if someone is seeking protection when it comes to them being from a draconian regime or escaping from abhorrent practices, Britain has always been a place that they can come to and we provide them support. While there are also, as we all know, various elements to the current Government policy looking at legal issues, and we await the outcome of that, it is right for the Home Office—I am not saying I am sidestepping it because it is a policy and programme issue, but it is for them to answer for that. You raise a practical question and let me come back to you on that specifically.

On the general point you make about whether someone qualifies, there have been examples. I am not going to speak to the particular case or the MPs, but there is a live case that I dealt with only yesterday where someone had left Afghanistan and given the application of the criteria for those in Afghanistan, they then had to come back because they had gone to a third country. Had they not gone to the third country, they would qualify.

So there are ways of working round. I have pressed on that and I can share with you a successful outcome on that particular issue. However, it needs persistence and the application of the policies in a way that reflects the circumstances of the individual in terms of their qualification.

My personal view is that we need to look at that quite carefully in terms of the application, particularly for those who are in third countries. Otherwise, the only scenario then left is to go back to Afghanistan and be reassessed according to that eligibility criteria, and that obviously cannot be entertained. That is why, coming back to the first part of your question, we have been pressing the Pakistani Administration to ensure they do not send people back and particularly those who we are currently processing.

Q39 **Chair:** Minister, we are going to try and get to my question quickly because it is not complex, and then we will come to Saqib.

You have said that the ACRS cap is going to be discussed by a Home Office Minister in the next few minutes. We hope to see good news on that because the reality is that our cap is substantially lower than our NATO allies'. That is fundamentally unacceptable and I hope the view of the Committee will be taken away. There continues to be case after case where people meet the eligibility criteria and yet they are not being

brought to the UK. I am going to bring up the one I know to be the best example of where there has been a UK failure.

Lord Sedwill, the former Cabinet Secretary, has written repeatedly to the Home Secretary about the Afghan special forces unit called CF333. It was set up and run by the UK to tackle drug trafficking, organised crime and terrorism. According to Mark Sedwill, they were the most effective, loyal and resilient unit of all the Afghan forces and yet they have been told that they are ineligible for ARAP and not a single one has been brought to the UK. How can cases with eligibility that obvious and that blatant, being raised by a former Cabinet Secretary, still have not been resolved? What hope does that give to people who do not have people such as Mark Sedwill fighting their corner? That seems to me to be one of the most heinous failures of this entire process.

Lord Ahmad: First, I would ask specifically again, if I may, to follow up on that particular issue. On the issue of ARAP and, like yourself, I had also requested this: it is appropriate that Home Office and MoD colleagues also respond to schemes that they oversee and are responsible for. That said, I know the ARAP scheme remains open.

There is a particular eligibility criterion that is not based on profession. It is a criterion about whether someone fulfils a mandate from the particular example you have given. What I can say is that we will look specifically into that. I will write to you, if I may. Andy, do you have anything to add to that? I will come back on that.

Andrew McCoubrey: Just to say, yes, we can. The commando force 333 was one of the triple commando forces that the UK supported. There is, as I understand it, Chair, eligibility for some members of that commando force under ARAP, but not everybody. Having said that, as the Minister said, we will come back to you.

Q40 **Chair:** I am glad to hear that you have confirmed today that some of them do have eligibility—I question why not all—given that none has been given it. That would suggest that within the next few weeks, the Home Office will give positive results to these individuals who have been waiting for well over a year to come to safety. I hope that that is what we see come from the Home Office.

Lord Ahmad: The only thing: ARAP is the MoD scheme, though.

Q41 **Chair:** Yes, but we all know that the Home Office is hanging or carrying—I cannot think of a good way of describing it—but we all know exactly who the responsibility sits with. You say very clearly there that that specific commando unit has some eligibility.

Andrew McCoubrey: Each application is made on its own merit, and they are eligible to apply.

Chair: If anyone wants to suggest that CF333 are not eligible or do not have the credibility to be so, I will be very happy to do an urgent question to the Home Secretary specifically on just that unit.

Q42 **Saqib Bhatti:** Minister, you spoke about the cap, and obviously I look forward to that announcement. Do you plan on increasing capacity for processing ACRS referrals? My understanding is we had eight FCDO staff on Afghan resettlement schemes versus 540 on Ukrainian schemes. How can that difference be justified?

Lord Ahmad: For each scheme we look at the numbers and the targets that have been set. Some schemes were more open-ended. The ACRS—obviously, the pathway we were the referral partner to—did have a cap set of 1,500 for the three cohorts I have alluded to. On those three cohorts—just to give you a sense, Saqib—when we opened up the expressions of interest, there were 11,452 applications of interest. These are from the individuals. If you look at those, not everyone will qualify. Those have been processed and, in terms of that initial 1,500, that came through the FCDO as a referral.

Again, so we do not lose sight of it, I have made sure that I have had ministerial oversight on that. I have a weekly document—internal, I would add—sent to me to ensure that I know where everyone, in terms of that cohort that we oversee as the FCDO, is in the pipeline. Are they in Pakistan? Which third country? Where are they? That has improved now. It was right that we dealt with some of the upstream issues, including, as you well know, the issues of accommodation.

I pay tribute to the Veterans Minister, who has done a lot of good work in that space as well to allow for both those qualifying under our ARAP or ACRS to come to the UK. In terms of resourcing, it would be set in accordance with the scheme. Where we need to then adapt or adjust particular resourcing, we would do so for whichever scheme is being operated.

As I said, in terms of the referral structures, we have been working very much at speed, but there have been challenges, as you know, in terms of upstream and accommodation. But we are in a better place right now, and we are getting a steady stream of people under ACRS—the pathway that we are the referral partner—who are coming to the UK.

Q43 **Saqib Bhatti:** Just so I am clear on that, in terms of FCDO staff on Afghan resettlement schemes, how many staff are working on those at the moment?

Andrew McCoubrey: For ACRS it is 17, and just over 30 altogether. That number will fluctuate depending on the level of the project cycle that we are in, but it is 17 on ACRS at the moment.

Q44 **Saqib Bhatti:** Do you anticipate increasing that?

Andrew McCoubrey: Not at the moment.

Q45 **Saqib Bhatti:** Would you say the Ukrainian and the Hong Kong schemes have had an impact on ACRS capacity?

Lord Ahmad: The Hong Kong scheme, when it came to BNOs, was different for the obvious status of those who were BNOs, and I think that scheme operated there.

On Ukraine, we are all fully aware of the strong support we have given at all levels as well, but I think we have seen under the caps that were originally applied to work as flexibly as we can. I think the resourcing has not been the issue; the issue has been the ability to facilitate and then ensure that they can travel to the United Kingdom and have accommodation available to them.

As I said, I think we are in a better place today. I think the Home Office has probably put something out on its website as well, which means that the 1,500 cap that we were looking at is something that—I would say also the strong advocacy from the Foreign Office—is being looked at, and I am glad that is being reviewed.

Andrew McCoubrey: Just to add, 99% of the applications that we received under ACRS have now been processed.

Q46 **Saqib Bhatti:** I am just conscious of time. I think I have one more question here. The MoD published the number of ARAP applicants, which is obviously incredibly helpful from a scrutiny and transparency perspective. Will you commit to doing the same for ACRS?

Lord Ahmad: When you say applicants, you mean individually? If you could elaborate—

Chair: The numbers.

Lord Ahmad: As I said, what we have shared thus far is the number of people who have come, and we have had to work to a cap. What I can share is on ACRS—we have processed and have got 1,500 people. That was a cap that we had to work to. Even on the 11,400-odd that I mentioned earlier, not all of those would qualify under the eligibility criteria, but of course we will now be able to work with those who did and make sure that they are processed. But currently we have worked to the cap that we had to work to, which was 1,500.