



HOUSE OF COMMONS

## Foreign Affairs Committee

### Oral evidence: Government policy on Afghanistan, HC 685

Wednesday 1 September 2021

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 1 September 2021.

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Members present: Tom Tugendhat (Chair); Chris Bryant; Neil Coyle; Alicia Kearns; Stewart Malcolm McDonald; Bob Seely; Royston Smith; Graham Stringer; Claudia Webbe.

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Witness

I: Rt Hon Dominic Raab MP, Secretary of State of Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs.



## Examination of witness

Witness: Rt Hon Dominic Raab MP.

Q1 **Chair:** Welcome to this afternoon's session of the Foreign Affairs Committee. This extraordinary session is during the recess of Parliament following the events in Afghanistan in the last few weeks. We are very lucky to have the Foreign Secretary, the Rt Hon Dominic Raab, with us this afternoon.

For the avoidance of doubt, the Committee sits as a Select Committee of Parliament and asks questions on behalf of the people of the United Kingdom. I know this is being broadcast rather more widely than many sessions are, so it is worth remembering that these are not personal questions. These are questions to the Government from the people of the United Kingdom and Parliament.

Thank you very much, Foreign Secretary, for coming in. May I start by asking how many of your Ministers are overseas at the moment?

**Dominic Raab:** I do not have that precise detail, but we have a rota system in place which means that we are always ready, able and willing to cover. So there is always ability to have that cover.

Q2 **Chair:** Do you have any in either Afghanistan or the region around Afghanistan at the moment?

**Dominic Raab:** We are always very careful about signalling travel movements because of the security implications, but I can tell you that I am leaving after this Committee to go to the region. Other Ministers will, of course, be engaged in similar diplomatic endeavours, whether it is by phone or indeed by travel.

Q3 **Chair:** Since just before the fall of Kabul on 15 August, how many contacts did you have with people like al-Muhajir, Meredov or indeed Kamelov in the region?

**Dominic Raab:** Just to give you a sense, as I think I have already been clear, throughout August I have spoken with Foreign Minister Qureshi, for example. The Prime Minister spoke to Prime Minister Khan. Lord Ahmad was in Pakistan during June with opportunities for all of those conversations, and we obviously stay in regular touch via ambassadors.

It is probably also worth explaining some context in terms of Pakistan and Afghanistan. From early 2019 we have been facilitating a private, high-level channel between Afghanistan and Pakistan. It was led by the Chief of the Defence Staff. It was bolstered by senior officials in my Department. One of the reasons why we set that up—and I wanted to continue it and, indeed, have it report directly to me—was to make sure we had more granular advice on the developments on the ground and the greater ability to influence it. I oversaw that directly. CDS reported to



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me; FCO officials did as well. Obviously, it is a supplementary means, but quite an important one, to the normal channels. I am very happy to give you the outline of it here, but clearly we are quite careful about what we say more generally. I think it does provide some context in 2020 and 2021 of the engagement.

Could I just take this opportunity, Chair, to point out that from the period mid-March to 30 August I had over 40 meetings or telephone calls where Afghanistan was on the agenda? That is broadly one at least every four days. That will vary from the NATO Foreign Ministers' meetings, the G7 Foreign Ministers' meeting, where I put Afghanistan on the agenda, through to the bilateral contacts with the likes of Turkey and through to UN special envoy Jean Arnault.

I appreciate there is a lot of scrutiny about things like calls, but please bear in mind that this is taking place along with a range of other simmering issues which may or may not bubble up to crisis. Iraq: the situation there was very delicate. Iran: the JCPA negotiations. There is the dual National situation; the tax on shipping; Yemen; Tigris; Somalia; Hong Kong; Belarus; and the Ukraine, coupled with Covid. I just make the point very gently, if I may, that having a delegation and a division of labour between Ministers—particularly my senior Ministers of State—is an essential part of the work we do.

Q4 **Chair:** Foreign Secretary, I agree with you absolutely. Therefore, may I ask very briefly, when was the last time a Foreign Minister went to Uzbekistan?

**Dominic Raab:** Went to Uzbekistan?

**Chair:** Yes.

**Dominic Raab:** I am not sure. I would have to check, but we have obviously been—

Q5 **Chair:** Let us just run through a few countries. When was the last time a Foreign Minister went to Tajikistan?

**Dominic Raab:** Again, I do not have the visit list, but I am very happy if you give me your list to provide it. For example, on Uzbekistan, given the need to ensure safe passage to third countries, Lord Ahmad has been in touch with the Uzbek Foreign Minister. I was supposed to speak to them today, but it is a national holiday so I will speak to them tomorrow. Obviously, we remain engaged. If you would like to know the visits, we are very happy to come back to you.

Q6 **Chair:** I would be very grateful. It seems particularly relevant because Heiko Maas was recently in Uzbekistan arranging the evacuation of German people through Tashkent. It seemed to be a route that worked extremely effectively for Germany.

**Dominic Raab:** Although they have just closed the border.



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Q7 **Chair:** Indeed they have now, but the Germans got their people out first. May I just ask on the—

**Dominic Raab:** I can speak to what we are doing on third country—

Q8 **Chair:** I am just about to come to that exact question. You will also have had contact with our missions in these countries before 15 August in order to prepare for a likely fall of Kabul or, indeed, a collapse of the regime. I would be very grateful to know whether you can remember speaking to people like Matthew Lawson or Hugh Philpott, for example.

**Dominic Raab:** All of our ambassadors would feed in their advice through the centre, particularly by the time we set up the FCDO emergency response team. It would depend on the issue. Obviously, I have been in regular contact with Sir Laurie Bristow. I have had discussions with various different ambassadors who have joined meetings.

The way that it works is that the ambassadors feed through their advice. We obviously see it; it is triaged up. We get it together—it is triaged up and brought together, so I get a full picture. For example, during the time when we had the emergency response team operating the evacuation, and indeed before, that was done through my director for Afghanistan, Nigel Casey, and also Tom Drew, my director general.

Q9 **Chair:** The reason I ask these questions is because in your media round yesterday you said that the errors in intelligence that have led us to this position were not the responsibility of the Foreign Office. Clearly, the Prime Minister is responsible for the Joint Intelligence Committee and the assessment it makes. Is that where the responsibility lies—with the Prime Minister?

**Dominic Raab:** You will recall that, after the Chilcott inquiry and the second Iraq war, the JIC was there to give an independent assessment of intelligence precisely to avoid politicisation. Ultimately, you have the JIC giving its assessment, and you then have the military and the diplomatic assessment layered on top of that.

Q10 **Chair:** So it was a collective assessment through the JIC that you were referring to. It was not a particularly military assessment. Is that correct?

**Dominic Raab:** The JIC is there to provide the information, if you like—the raw intelligence. It is distilled down, and then that is backed up by the military assessment—for example, on things like intent—although frankly it is a cross-cutting issue.

My point is this. The central assessment that we were operating to—and it was certainly backed up by both the JIC and the military—is that the most likely and central proposition was that, given the troop withdrawal by the end of August, you would see a steady deterioration from that point and it was unlikely that Kabul would fall this year. That was the central assessment—of course with all the usual caveats that you will be



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familiar with. That does not mean we did not do contingency planning, or game out or test the other propositions. Just to be clear, that view was something that was widely shared among NATO allies.

Q11 **Chair:** I will come straight to that. You are clearly responsible for overseeing two of our intelligence agencies. Did their intelligence differ, without revealing what it was of course, from that assessment?

**Dominic Raab:** I am certainly not going to go into the details of raw intelligence. The whole point of the JIC is to distil and provide an objective, rounded assessment. I think that is quite right, and I think they did their job very professionally.

Q12 **Chair:** Your principal risk report on Afghanistan of 22 July 2021 read: "Peace talks have stalled, and US NATO withdrawal is resulting in rapid Taliban advances. This could lead to fall of cities, collapse of security forces, Taliban return to power, mass displacement and significant humanitarian need. The embassy may need to close if security deteriorates."

That was on 22 July. How did your actions change after that report?

**Dominic Raab:** I am sorry, what is the source of that?

Q13 **Chair:** It is your principal risk report.

**Dominic Raab:** As I said, we are very mindful of that. If you look at high-risk embassies, from the point of view of the embassy safety as opposed to the evacuation—it is important to distinguish those two things—we have a standard evacuation process for high-risk embassies like Kabul. Obviously, that is reviewed and has to evolve and adapt with the conditions, which is why what you said is timely, and of course we keep it under review.

As I said, the central assessment remained until late that the deterioration would be incremental. The planning for military withdrawal obviously began in April, but the contingency planning was also there for a more rapid deterioration. You can see that in the run-up to the G7 summit in June. One of my focuses, as we anticipated the potential shift from the embassy in the green zone to the airport in the Taipan area, was making sure that the so-called enablers—things like evacuation capacity, medical capacity and security at the airport—were in place. We did all of that to make sure that we could shift from the green zone, as we did, to the airport on the 13th and 14th.

It is also why, just to give you a sense, we speeded up the relocation of former Afghan staff under the ARAP programme. We did that from April onwards. That is why we changed our travel advice in April. It is why the number of UK staff at the Kabul embassy was drawn down from 115 to 75 in May.

While the central assessment was the one I described, it does not mean that we were not doing contingency planning or stopped all assessments.



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Q14 **Chair:** Very specifically, on the contingency planning, when did you last update the NEO for Afghanistan?

**Dominic Raab:** When did we last update the—

Q15 **Chair:** The non-combatant evacuation operation order for Afghanistan.

**Dominic Raab:** I would have to check that, but I can tell you that we started planning in June for the contingency of an evacuation and therefore a full drawdown of the embassy, notwithstanding that the central assessment still remained. Of course, the timing on all of this was very much synchronised with what our fellow NATO allies were doing. As well as the domestic process, we were document checking and sense checking with our NATO allies about how they saw things running.

Q16 **Chair:** Presumably, as part of that, you knew roughly how many British citizens or entitled people were going to be requiring your services.

**Dominic Raab:** I am not sure that is true because of the combination, particularly in Afghanistan, of not just documented passported nationals who may have been there travelling, seeing friends, backpacking or whatever it may be, but also—and this was one of the great challenges—the incidence of large families, some of whom were documented mono-nationals, dual nationals perhaps, but none the less documented, and others who had a less clear status either because of their eligibility or because of a lack of documentation. That is one of the reasons why it has been difficult to give a definitive account of the number.

Q17 **Chair:** I understand that. In that case, I will ask this. Your assessment of the number of people requiring evacuation went from about 5,000 to about 15,000 who were evacuated. Why are you confident of your numbers of those remaining in Afghanistan now?

**Dominic Raab:** We are not confident with any precision at all, for two reasons.

Q18 **Chair:** There could be thousands.

**Dominic Raab:** No; we do not think that. In terms of nationals, we think we are into possibly the low to mid-hundreds. Again, it depends on eligibility, which is one of the things that has been a challenge. Let me check the numbers so that I give you exactly the right figure. We got something like—and this is an estimate—500 out between April and 15 August. In terms of British nationals, there were roughly a further 7,000 out during the period between 15 and 29 August.

**Chair:** Alicia, do you want to come in?

Q19 **Alicia Kearns:** I have a quick question about coalition building—a coalition to prevent this outcome and to see the UK remain with our allies. What went so horribly wrong that only Turkey was willing to stand by the UK? What could we have done to have built a better coalition to work with partners to build a coalition without the US?



**Dominic Raab:** This is one of the really important things to nail. I have said all along that I was very keen that the Foreign Office had a reality check about some of the optimism bias, including the optimism bias, for example, that the Americans would change their mind.

If you look at the February 2020 decision by the previous Administration, and then you follow what was happening in the presidential election campaign, and then you follow what the signs were and indeed the decision by the incoming Biden Administration, one of the things I would say is that there was some wishful thinking in some quarters internationally that the Biden Administration would change or dramatically alter. I always thought—I think this is correct and accurate, and I discussed this with Karen Pierce—that the election campaign had baked in a broad, though not exact, consensus about some finality to this.

Q20 **Alicia Kearns:** Forgive me, I think with Biden there was no question that he was going to leave. He has wanted to do that for 20 years. He was always pushing Obama to leave. Biden's sole purpose of foreign policy has been to get out of Afghanistan. Why could we not convince Germany, France, Norway or any other allies to, essentially, form a new coalition on the ground, making up the numbers that the Americans were going to take out?

**Dominic Raab:** If you look at the military capacity proportionately that the US put in, and therefore the shortfall, I do not think there was any will or appetite. Don't get me wrong, Alicia—you're right: we checked it and the Defence Secretary has talked about this—but, again, it was very clear, come the NATO summit that I attended in the Foreign Ministers' meetings, that partners would stick to the maxim that NATO went in together, they would adapt the mission together as they did in 2014 and they would exit together.

If I am honest with you, Alicia, I do not think there was any viable alternative coalition once the US decision had been taken. Again, I think there needs to be some reality about that in the public discourse. It was clear to me that there was not going to be anyone that could backfill for the capacity that the US provided. The US was unlikely to shift the parameters beyond a few months, and that is exactly what happened.

Q21 **Chair:** Given that is the case, and given that you foresaw this, why is it that the French evacuated everybody they had who was dependent on them and we were scrabbling around with a huge press of crowds at the airport and, sadly, have left a lot of people behind?

**Dominic Raab:** I am afraid that I don't think the analogy runs. I do not think you are comparing like with like. We got out more than 15,000 in the last two weeks of August. If you look back to April when we started to advise—we gave the travel advice that people should leave—we set up and expedited the ARAP programme. Between those two periods, broadly 2,500 left, including ARAP and British nationals. Given the scale of



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numbers that we have and the nature of our population—not just the size of it—the reality was that there were lots of people who were taken by surprise by the scale and the pace of the Taliban advance. Therefore, they only came relatively late on.

We were doing everything we could. We got 2,500 out, but the lion's share, as you will know, came with the surge for the door once it was evident that Kabul was likely to fall.

**Q22 Bob Seely:** For clarity's sake, you have said in the past couple of days that everyone was caught by surprise and that the intelligence was clearly wrong. In simple terms, why was that? Is it because we were being led by an over-optimistic assessment from the US? Is that a collective failure on the part of the UK? Was the information different from the military as opposed to the diplomatic channels? Why did we get it so badly wrong?

**Dominic Raab:** I think there is a whole range of assumptions. One, there was an optimism bias about what the US might or might not do. Two, around the intent of the Taliban, I always cautioned that I thought the Taliban were unlikely, once the US decision to withdraw was clear, to engage in particular, meaningful dialogue around a more inclusive government and seize the opportunity to take control. That relates to intent. There was the much bigger question of whether they had the capacity to back up that intent. I think in fairness, and collectively across allies, clearly the assessment that they would not be able to advance at that speed was not correct. We will need to look and assess why that was the case.

**Q23 Bob Seely:** Can you go any further today as to why and where you think that failure came from? This is about learning for the future and not just about finding scapegoats. You have talked about optimism bias. Were there other factors that you think are relevant?

**Dominic Raab:** I want to be respectful. I have tested the assessments and the evidence. As I said, it is partly because of the history of the Foreign Office being accused itself of having an optimism bias that I wanted us to do the opposite. But, ultimately, we have a very rigorous process, and we will have to look at how the assessment was got wrong.

I would offer one reflection, and it is no more than that. I think when you have been in a country like Afghanistan for 20 years, with all the blood, sweat, tears and toil, and all the sacrifice—there will be people on this Committee who know exactly what that means—there is a sense, a desire and an absolute determination to make it work, to make things better and to believe that you can complete the task.

This goes back to 2001 and right the way through. This is not an attempt to take responsibility off the last period in which this Government have been in, but there is a question as to at what point we have clearly identified the military objectives, the means to achieve them and a clear





and coherent exit strategy. In fairness, that is something that was much debated at the time and in 2014 at the end of combat operations. I think there does need to be a consideration of how difficult, when you are in a conflict for 20 years, emotionally if nothing else, it is to extract yourself.

**Q24 Bob Seely:** Because of that, despite the fact that you had plans, you were still caught slightly on the hop because of the intelligence failure—despite the best-laid plans. Is that fair?

**Dominic Raab:** We always try as politicians, and certainly as Ministers and I am sure across Whitehall, to aim out for these things. Look, you have asked me for reflection. I think we have a very professional way of approaching these things, but when they are wrong—and we have seen economic forecasts that are wrong, but this is obviously a different order of things—you need to look at how you correct that.

**Q25 Chair:** As you have made a comment about exit plans, what is the United States' exit plan from South Korea?

**Dominic Raab:** I don't know. In fairness, I don't think that is a commensurable commitment, albeit it is a very important one. Having been up to the demilitarised zone, spoken to the commanders and looked across the border, I don't think we see them in harm's way, certainly for many years, in the way that they have actively been in harm's way in Afghanistan.

**Chair:** The reason I ask is because 20 years after the end of the Korean war the United States still has thousands of troops in what was then a vicious military dictatorship, with an economy smaller than Afghanistan's and a broken state. Despite that, they endured and pushed through, but maybe that is another question.

**Q26 Chris Bryant:** As I understand it—and I am sure you will correct me if I am wrong—there was a majority intelligence view, which was that the Afghan forces would manage to hold on indefinitely or certainly for some period. Then there was a minority view for which you prepared a contingency plan that you started in June. Most of your eggs were in the majority view basket, and you had a few eggs in the minority view basket, which was that you might have to have a contingency. Is that right?

**Dominic Raab:** I would not put it quite like that. It is not a question of a minority report. You have a central assessment and you have worst-case scenarios which you contingency-plan for as well. I think that is quite right.

**Q27 Chris Bryant:** The Prime Minister in the House of Commons on 18 August said: "What is not true is to say that the UK Government were unprepared or did not foresee this"—i.e. the collapse of Kabul and Afghan forces—"because it was certainly part of our planning."

I suppose the charge is that you just did not put enough effort into the contingency planning, is it not?



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**Dominic Raab:** No. I think he has rightly identified that we had planned. Let me again—

Q28 **Chris Bryant:** This was your plan. This is what you planned.

**Dominic Raab:** It is why we focused, in the run-up to the June G7 summit, on the potential shift from the green zone to the airport. It is why we speeded up the relocation of former Afghan staff under the ARAP programme from April onwards, relocating nearly 2,000 during that period. It is why we changed our travel advice in April.

Q29 **Chris Bryant:** Let me just come to that—

**Dominic Raab:** Sorry, just to complete the picture, it is why we reduced the number of UK staff at the Kabul embassy in May from 115 to 75. That is the nature of catering with a risk-based assessment. You have a central proposition, but you are also mindful of dealing with the worst-case scenario, even if it is not regarded as likely.

Q30 **Chris Bryant:** Let me just take you through some dates. The US had left the two main airbases in Kandahar and Bagram by 2 July. On 8 July several MPs in the House of Commons told the Prime Minister that the Taliban were likely to take large parts of the country. On 14 July the Taliban had seized all the major border crossings into Tajikistan, Iran and Pakistan. On 21 July the US said that the Taliban had seized half the country. But you only changed the travel advice for British nationals going to Afghanistan on 6 August.

**Dominic Raab:** No; that is not quite true. In April, we changed our travel advice to advise British nationals to consider leaving Afghanistan. We changed it again to make it even more stringent in August. We started in June, notwithstanding the central assessment, the contingency plans for a military-led evacuation, which is the big shift. It is worth just saying that commercial flights were still running up until 14 August, even after we had changed the travel advice on 6 August that you have cited.

Q31 **Chris Bryant:** On 11 August the US said that the Taliban were likely to seize the whole country and it was just a question of how long it was going to take. Were you already on holiday?

**Dominic Raab:** By the way, that is part of the central assessment that I described. We thought that they would seize—there are basically a variety of scenarios between the Taliban takeover and civil war, but the most likely and the central assessment was that it would be a Taliban consolidation of power but that it would take place in the months following the evacuation and that Kabul would not fall before the end of the year.

Q32 **Chris Bryant:** You did not answer the second half of my question. Were you already on holiday on 11 August?



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**Dominic Raab:** I have given a full statement on my holiday. I have said that I would not have gone away with the benefit of hindsight, which is the luxury of—

Q33 **Chris Bryant:** Could you just give us the facts? When did you go on holiday?

**Dominic Raab:** I am not going to start, Chris, adding to, frankly, the fishing expedition beyond the facts that I have articulated in a fulsome statement and having answered questions continuously about that. I would just make the broader point—

Q34 **Chris Bryant:** No, no, I am sorry, Mr Raab. The problem here is that, of course, it is perfectly legitimate for Ministers to go on holiday. Everybody has that right and I would argue that it is an important part of people being fresh enough to be able to do their job properly. The difficulty for us is that the Prime Minister was on holiday, the Deputy Prime Minister, yourself, was on holiday, and, as I understand it, the permanent under-secretary was on holiday—all three at the same time—when British nationals were at risk, thousands of people, by your own estimation, who stood by us in a difficult time in Afghanistan were in peril of their lives, and there was still not a proper crisis centre up in place. Do you not see that it is important for British people to understand why you thought it was right to go on holiday?

**Dominic Raab:** No, sorry, I am afraid I don't agree with that analysis. Of course, I have been clear with the benefit of hindsight that I would not have gone away at all. I think the charge in relation to officials is particularly unwarranted because we always make sure that we have the right cover in place. The permanent secretary did an excellent job and it was quite right, given all of the IR, the SR, the merger, that he should take some leave.

In terms of my own situation, I would just say this. I am travelling today. A modern Foreign Secretary has to have the ability, given that wide range of issues that will constantly bubble up, possibly to crisis point, to be able to deal, act and work from abroad. I engaged in all of the Cobra meetings. I engaged and directed the emergency response team directly. I was engaged with international partners. The truth is, Chris, judge us by the results because—

**Chris Bryant:** We will come on to those.

**Dominic Raab:** Hold on. Between 15 August and the end of August we delivered over 15,000 people out of the country, which I think is certainly the most challenging evacuation of its kind in living memory.

Q35 **Chris Bryant:** On results, can you tell us how many people you think there are, both UK nationals and their families, then the people who might qualify because they worked for UK forces, and, thirdly, the extremely vulnerable? What is your best estimate of those numbers? I fully accept that you are not going to be able to give—



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**Dominic Raab:** You are right that there are three categories. In terms of nationals, we got through the overwhelming majority of nationals where we could verify eligibility.

Q36 **Chair:** But you are not confident of the numbers.

**Dominic Raab:** Sorry, I have given you the number that we—

Q37 **Chair:** But you also answered a question saying you were not confident of the numbers. I am just wondering—

**Dominic Raab:** I am not confident of the numbers remaining, but we think they will be in the low hundreds.

Q38 **Chris Bryant:** What do you mean by “the low hundreds”? Do you mean the 110 sort of area, or do you mean 200, 300 or 400?

**Dominic Raab:** They will be in the low hundreds, but I am very reticent about giving a firm figure precisely because we don’t know. One of the reasons—

Q39 **Chris Bryant:** “Low hundreds” sounds like it could be 400, or it could be 105, 110 or 115.

**Dominic Raab:** If I could give you any more precision, Chris, I would. Let me explain—

Q40 **Chris Bryant:** So somewhere between 100 and 500—

**Dominic Raab:** Let me explain—

Q41 **Chris Bryant:** —UK nationals.

**Dominic Raab:** Let me explain why it is difficult. We got most, if not all, of the mono-nationals who were documented and who wanted to leave out. We are left with, it has to be said, a significant proportion applying who could not establish their nationality. There is also a category of more complex cases, particularly with significantly wider families, where one or other may have documented nationality or can demonstrate it but others and the concentric circles of immediacy of their dependants could not. That is why it is difficult.

In relation to ARAP, the MOD and the Defence Secretary have put an assessment out.

You asked about the third category, which is the more vulnerable—

Q42 **Chris Bryant:** I think the number they are giving is between 150 and 250.

**Dominic Raab:** The MOD?

**Chris Bryant:** Yes.

**Dominic Raab:** I defer to the Defence Secretary on the outcome—



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**Q43 Chris Bryant:** It seems to me that this is a major problem about the whole way the Government have approached this. You have had three separate channels. Every MP—every MP—has had individuals coming to their constituency surgeries, ringing them up or emailing them, desperate about family members in Afghanistan. Some of them are UK nationals; some of them might qualify under ARAP; some of them might qualify under the special cases very vulnerable people system. But nobody knows. Why is there no triage system? Why have three different Departments where you can't even speak on behalf of the MOD as to how many people under ARAP are still outstanding?

**Dominic Raab:** There are two different things. The ARAP programme was set up by the MOD and the Home Office. It is right that they confirm those figures. You are right to refer to three different categories of case. One of the reasons the FCDO was criticised on the emergency centre was precisely because we were seeking to triage the three types of case.

The reason there are three types of case is because there are three grounds of eligibility to come to this country. One is that you are a British national. That requires evidence of something—were you shaking—

**Q44 Chris Bryant:** No, I agree—

**Dominic Raab:** Can I finish the—

**Q45 Chris Bryant:** —and, for that matter, lots of families might have somebody in all three categories, which is why a single system would surely be far more effective.

**Dominic Raab:** No, because the criteria, the threshold and the evidence for what counts as nationality are very different from the ARAP scheme and the criteria that we work through, which is a risk-based set of criteria for those who have worked and shown loyalty to us. The third category is essentially based on international law and is, again, a vulnerability or an asylum-related set of criteria. Those are all three different thresholds.

**Q46 Chris Bryant:** Do you not see why that might seem, to the people who are experiencing it, like the left hand not knowing what the right hand is doing and departmentalitis writ large—

**Dominic Raab:** Can I just push back on that?

**Q47 Chris Bryant:** —and people being treated as numbers rather than as humans?

**Dominic Raab:** I think we would be remiss if we were not prioritising. This is a form of prioritising according to the three categories that matter most. Of course, we must do everything for British nationals and their dependants. Secondly, there are those who worked for us, and we need to have a definition of that. Thirdly, we have announced that we will take 5,000 this year under the resettlement scheme, leading up to a total of 20,000.



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Those will be based on objective, independent international or related criteria for those at a risk of persecution. It is precisely because we need to demonstrate the huge compassion in what we as a country are doing, but also to have criteria to make sure that those whom we want to come can come, rather than just opening the door and saying, "Actually, we are going to have an unstructured approach to this," which, if I took what you are saying to its logical conclusion, would undermine public confidence in the system.

I think that we are doing everything we can. The proof is in the 17,000 we have secured safe passage for back to the UK since April. I am very happy to talk through those numbers, those cases—the Chevening scholars, the female judges and the journalists—that we have taken to safety.

**Q48 Chris Bryant:** We know obviously that there is a significant number of people who have not got out. I think you are accepting that. Yes? It is in the several thousands.

**Dominic Raab:** Any number that we have not got out because of the evacuation and the situation is too many.

**Q49 Chris Bryant:** I understand the point you are making, but basically there is a significant number. Have you put a number on how many people you think we have left behind?

**Dominic Raab:** You are asking the same question in a different way. I just said that I cannot give you a definitive figure. By the way, the other thing is that not all of them—

**Q50 Chris Bryant:** It is just that the Prime Minister said that the overwhelming majority of the people who stood by us—in other words, people who worked for us—are out. If you are not confident of the numbers, how can the Prime Minister possibly know whether the overwhelming majority are out or not?

**Dominic Raab:** I am not confident with precision to be able to give you a set number, but I am confident that the Prime Minister is right that we have got the overwhelming number out.

**Chris Bryant:** Okay.

**Dominic Raab:** Our focus now is on how, given the facts on the ground, we get as many people to safety in a structured way and in a way that does not put them at risk.

**Q51 Chris Bryant:** Okay. One of the reasons why lots of MPs are troubled by this is because we had Nigel Adams before us last year, when we had to evacuate an awful lot of people because of Covid from all sorts of different places around the world. It just feels as if the Foreign Office has not learnt anything from that.



**Dominic Raab:** I will address that square on. I looked very carefully, and I take this Committee very seriously, at your July 2020 report on the repatriation effort on Covid. We took that very seriously. By the way, the consular team did an incredible job during the Covid crisis getting people back home. We worked night and day. We learned a lot on things like the call centre. We learned a lot on the scalability.

Your Committee, Chris, and, Chair, made a number of points about the ability to scale up quickly, for example. As a result, we established a contingency planning team within the crisis management department. We established the crisis response to the Afghanistan situation on 11 August. It doubled in size and scale of civilian staff from 70 on day one to 146 on day three; again to 358 on day six; 510 on day nine; and it hit a peak of 581 on day 11. You also talked about—

Q52 **Chris Bryant:** That is all in the UK. Yes?

**Dominic Raab:** Say that again.

Q53 **Chris Bryant:** Your staff were all in the UK.

**Dominic Raab:** Yes. That is the crisis response team. You also talked, Tom, about shifting the communication pattern. You felt it was too passive and was not active enough, particularly on social media. As a result of that we put in place the structures to provide more proactive advice, including outsourcing to a call handling provider for immediate support for our contact centre. We had a team of 45 consular staff from around the FCDO network deployed to take calls alongside our contact centre. We had an extra 35 staff from HMRC.

The other one that I thought was important was when you said there was an over-reliance on commercial flights. By the way, I personally think you are wrong about that in relation to Covid. I think it was right to try to get the huge number we did back on commercial flights to free up the space on the charters. In any event, even if I disagreed, I looked at your recommendations very carefully. As a result, we now have a contract with CTM and are using it—or did use it—for our charter flights. That allowed us to get planes arranged quickly and departing within two days at the beginning of operations. Feel free to criticise, but first of all we did learn the lessons from the point at which you spoke to Nigel and we did take the recommendations of this Committee very seriously.

Q54 **Chris Bryant:** I just have one more question. I texted you with more details of another case today—a British national who is in Afghanistan. I am not going to go into the individual issues. I know he has spoken very passionately on television about the desperate situation he is in, and every MP will have had cases like this.

We have all been running around, trying to find different means of getting people out, including lots of people on this Committee. We are grateful to you personally and to everybody in the Foreign Office who has been involved in all of this.



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What we are now really anxious about are the people who are left. The Prime Minister said that he was going to move heaven and earth to get them out. What advice would you be giving to people now: for instance, to members of the Hazara community, who are effectively facing a genocide, self-declared by the Taliban in Afghanistan; to individuals who work for us who are still stuck there; and British nationals who are still stuck there? What is the advice? Go to the border?

**Dominic Raab:** I will walk you through where we are with the third-country planning because it is more than just to give X or Y advice. By the way, I will also say that in terms of the so-called special cases we did get out 58 Chevening scholars and their dependants; 287 journalists; 65 women's rights activists; 11 members of government; 42 law enforcement officials; 37 extremely vulnerable individuals; nine judges; and others besides.

In terms of third-country planning, there are a number of stages. First, we need to be able to secure safe passage out of Afghanistan, at least until that point at which Kabul airport is up and running, and in which case things will change materially. We have sought, and secured, direct assurances that we can do that for our nationals and, indeed, the people who worked for us. You will have noticed that we led the way with France and the US to secure a UN Security Council resolution requirement. Of course, that broadens the international community's leverage on the Taliban to try to exercise pressure. That is the first thing.

Secondly, we have identified the countries most likely to be the port of call or destination for those leaving. There is a whole range of them. Between myself and Lord Ahmad, we have spoken to all of the Foreign Ministers to be clear that they will be, in the right circumstances, allowed through.

Thirdly, we have focused on the documents required to allow people to cross that border into a third country, whether it is a note of avowal or some other means of our ambassador or high commissioner informing the border authorities, "We will take this individual."

I have just sent out—and they will arrive in the next 36 hours—a rapid deployment team of 15 people who will service those areas where we expect people will head for. That will include Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and others.

Fifthly, we obviously have to look very carefully at the security checks in relation to that. I am working that through the Home Secretary and the Home Office in real time. We have spoken last night and this morning as well on it.

I am going to the regime tonight to test the accessibility of these arrangements. As you mentioned, Heiko Maas has been to Uzbekistan, but we have to keep those borders open. Part of that is giving those third





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countries arrangements that they can feel confident in and perhaps support as well.

Finally, on Monday at the G7, Turkey, Qatar and the NATO Secretary-General had a meeting, which I joined, about the importance of keeping airports open for third countries and this issue of safe passage. Both in terms of the granular arrangements we are making and international concerted action, that is in place.

To answer your question, what we will get to you through travel advice and otherwise is a signposting so that you can give that advice. It will be directly there for individuals from all of those different countries, including the one you mentioned.

Q55 **Chair:** I know you are going to go to the region. Clearly this is not the time to be making best friends. It would have been great to have them earlier. Is this your first trip to Pakistan?

**Dominic Raab:** I have been to Pakistan before.

Q56 **Chair:** As Foreign Secretary.

**Dominic Raab:** No, not as Foreign Secretary. The truth is that I was hoping to go, but Covid has inhibited travel for quite a while, as you will understand.

**Chair:** Indeed.

**Dominic Raab:** As I mentioned, Lord Ahmad was there in June and saw Prime Minister Khan and Foreign Minister Qureshi.

Q57 **Alicia Kearns:** Foreign Secretary, you mentioned that there were 510 Foreign Office staffers in the UK. How many were on the ground? The issue was not planes but processing. The Baron Hotel was an extremely vulnerable point before the terror attack. I had families outside for 36 hours and 48 hours. There was an unconscious baby for two hours who only got into the Baron Hotel because friends helped me get the military outside the compound to drag that family in and get that girl on a saline drip. How many staff do we have on the ground, and why was processing not quicker, because that was the hold-up?

**Dominic Raab:** I am sorry, Alicia, I want to answer your question really fully. I am not clear when you are talking about. Now, we clearly do not—

Q58 **Alicia Kearns:** At the time of the processing in the last two weeks that we have all spent desperately trying to get people out, how many Foreign Office staff were on the ground processing in the Baron Hotel?

**Dominic Raab:** We peaked at 20. Just to be clear, you absolutely need the front-facing staff, but the decision making was via the FCDO crisis response team, because you could get the decision makers at a senior level there and you could integrate them in terms of the FCDO consular people, the Border Force people, the UK visa people, and also the military planners.



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I am very happy to take you through the scalability of what we did, given the Taliban advance on Kabul. I am happy to answer questions on what we did in relation to the explosion. We peaked at 20, plus there were 13 Border Force staff.

The principal issue at all material times, I would say, between the 14th, the 15th and the end of August has been the issue of stability and security around the airport so that we could bolster that capacity. I do think that some of the nonsense I have read in the papers, if I may say, and the suggestion that we should have been putting people in when the airport was not secure—when the Paras and the American forces had not secured that airport, when we had just had an ISIS-K attack literally a stone's throw from the Baron Hotel processing centre—is rather irresponsible. We have an incredibly courageous bunch of MOD, Home Office and FCDO civilian staff and I feel, I hope you don't mind me saying, quite protective about some of the nonsense that has been said. They put themselves under conditions of incredible pressure and a measure of risk to themselves that many of their critics, I am afraid, have not.

Q59 **Chair:** I can speak for the whole Committee and say that the gratitude that we have for the civilians and soldiers who served our country with enormous dignity and courage in Afghanistan is not something that this Committee would run away from. On the contrary, we are hugely proud of them and extremely grateful for their service.

**Dominic Raab:** I was also talking, Tom, about the civilian staff.

Q60 **Chair:** I said civilian staff as well.

**Dominic Raab:** Forgive me, I did not hear that.

Q61 **Alicia Kearns:** On that point, I was a member of the rapid deployment team at the Foreign Office. You are trained specifically to do any area. You are trained to be in the most vulnerable and collapsing crisis. My question is that we did not send out RDT teams until 17 August. Is that correct?

**Dominic Raab:** Let me walk you through the details of that. The decision to withdraw FCDO staff was on 13 August. Of course, the Ambassador remained. By the way—

Q62 **Alicia Kearns:** Was he instructed to remain, or did he choose to remain?

**Dominic Raab:** No, no, there was no question of telling him to do something that he was not able to do. Of course, I talked it through with him in a professional way. No one has been more courageous, with the exception of the forces on the ground, than Laurie Bristow in terms of the civilian presence.

By the way, the decision was based on a military assessment of risk. Let's be absolutely clear about this. The decision to take the lion's share, frankly, of our crisis response team on the ground—the civilian element—



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to Dubai was based on a military assessment of risk. Indeed, civilian personnel from the MOD left on the same flight. The ambassador remained. The FCDO staff were only taken to Dubai so we could get back, as they did on 17 August.

Just to be clear—and I am not pointing fingers—the Border Force staff did not arrive until later that week, but that is because we were all operating to the same assessment of military risk on the ground. As Tom will know, I think it is right when there is a risk to life or limb to defer to that.

**Q63 Alicia Kearns:** But if the RDT teams were deployed on 17 August, why was it not considered safe for them to go before that point? You constantly have a full RDT team on deployment, ready to go, within an hour's notice at all times—

**Dominic Raab:** We got them back in on 17 August, so there was a four-day period. The truth is, Alicia, that the Paras and the US forces had not arrived in full and secured that airport until then. We got them back in on the ground on 17 August. They were bolstered again to a peak of 20, plus 13 Border Force staff. In addition, we had a further RDT of seven in Dubai. As we have already gone through, there were over 200 staff at the FCDO crisis centre working 24/7 to co-ordinate the response.

If the question, Alicia, is, were they somehow reticent to—

**Q64 Alicia Kearns:** No; there is no question that they were reticent at all.

**Dominic Raab:** The only logistical issue—well, not the only logistical issue; there were lots of logistical issues. The principal logistical issue was the safety of that airport for them to be able to do the job. Indeed, as you know, in the processing centre you are asking people to come forward. The processing centre, as you will have seen from the footage around the terrorist attack, was outside the airport. On top of securing the airport, we also needed to know that the processing centre at the Baron Hotel was safe. I cannot put people into harm's way or at risk of losing their life. We do it with soldiers and their heroism is rightly lauded, but with civilian staff we have to take the assessment of military risk on the ground. That is what, quite professionally, we did.

**Q65 Alicia Kearns:** I think that is the crux of the question. We all agree that it was vulnerable. The whole point is therefore getting Afghans and British nationals into the Baron Hotel at speed, which is what was not happening. That was the issue. That is where the risk—

**Dominic Raab:** But it was not safe. It was not secure.

**Chair:** I am going to move on because Neil Coyle wants to come in.

**Q66 Neil Coyle:** On process and safety, there were 18 months to prepare for evacuation. You have just said today that in the last six months you had 40 meetings about evacuating in a high-risk situation, and yet we ended up in the position where three different Government Departments ran three different helplines and hotlines, which were not being answered,



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and your Department had an Afghan special cases email address that was not even being opened in life and death cases. Who is responsible for that chaos on the ground?

**Dominic Raab:** I do not accept that categorisation. I am happy to go over any of those issues in terms of the emails or anything else.

Q67 **Neil Coyle:** Please do.

**Dominic Raab:** I can address the email issue. First of all, the reality is that we secured over 15,000 people out of—

Q68 **Neil Coyle:** You have said that, and you want to be applauded for those who got out, but there are 9,000 estimated left behind. Who is taking responsibility for helplines and the email address in your Department not even being opened?

**Dominic Raab:** The issue, as you had a surge for the door, is that you had a surge of emails, including late emails and requests like that. Let me just explain the situation for you, purely for transparency. We have the three types of cases. Melding them all in together, frankly—

Q69 **Neil Coyle:** Countries that did not use three different cases—

**Dominic Raab:** Can I answer your question, Neil?

Q70 **Neil Coyle:** You are not answering the question. You are going back to the question from Chris Bryant.

**Dominic Raab:** I really wasn't.

Q71 **Neil Coyle:** Other countries that used one process—South Korea, France and other examples—got people out.

**Dominic Raab:** They did not.

Q72 **Neil Coyle:** Other examples used —

**Dominic Raab:** Sorry, Neil, what you are saying is wrong. All countries were focused in one way or another on evacuating based on nationality, people who worked for them and other vulnerable cases, particularly those with an affinity towards them. They all faced that challenge. I don't believe that any other countries with the types of cases, particularly family cases but there were others, fared better. I think those comparisons—

Q73 **Neil Coyle:** They are reporting that they did, and you cannot even tell us today how many people are left behind, abandoned by the UK Government after 20 years of service. Can you tell us today whether the Afghan guards from the British embassy in Kabul have been evacuated or not? They were held up due to paperwork. Are they here?

**Dominic Raab:** We wanted to get some of those embassy guards through—



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Q74 **Neil Coyle:** Are they here?

**Dominic Raab:** —but the buses arranged to collect them to take them to the airport were not given permission to enter. That is, I am afraid, a reflection of the conditions on the ground. We will, of course, which comes back to the third-country arrangements—

Q75 **Neil Coyle:** They were held up due to paperwork—

**Dominic Raab:** That's not true.

Q76 **Neil Coyle:** Let us stick with the same issue because it sounds like you cannot say whether they are here or not.

**Dominic Raab:** Neil—

Q77 **Neil Coyle:** You are not answering the question, so allow me to move on.

**Dominic Raab:** Neil, Neil—

Q78 **Neil Coyle:** The Defence Secretary, who I think is credited by most as having worked his socks off through this crisis—

**Dominic Raab:** Neil, you can browbeat me all you like—

Q79 **Neil Coyle:** You are not answering the question, Foreign Secretary, so let us move on. The Defence Secretary said it was not good enough to leave details of UK-linked Afghans in the British embassy, as was reported in *The Times*. Do you agree with that assessment? Who is taking responsibility for that security and safety risk for those nationals?

**Dominic Raab:** Let me talk you through the documentation. The first thing to say in relation to the situation is, of course, that it is regrettable. It reflects, I think it is fair to say, the pressure on the ground. We had a five-day scheduled approach for closure of the embassy, and it got brought forward because of the situation on the ground. I had none the less asked for a full review as to what happened to make sure that we could learn lessons.

Just to be clear, it was *The Times* that broke this story or revealed this story. They shared the names with us. We moved rapidly to evacuate the three families from Kabul within 24 hours. All of those whose names *The Times* passed to us and who worked for us are now in the UK.

Q80 **Neil Coyle:** That is good, but they should never have been at risk. General Lord Dannatt has said, as former Chief of Staff, that you were asleep at the helm. Do you owe those Afghan nationals and those British troops who were flown into a more dangerous situation late an apology for the circumstances that they have faced?

**Dominic Raab:** I think we owe them every effort to get those out that we did—the 17,000 since April—and now to focus on the new reality in Afghanistan with the arrangements that we are working on at speed, which is why I am going to the region shortly, with our international



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partners, which is what I have been doing all week, to get those who remain out as swiftly, as safely and as responsibly as possible.

Q81 **Neil Coyle:** No apology has been heard. Do you owe the Prime Minister an apology, because I believe you promised that the portrait of Her Majesty would not be left in the British embassy? What went so badly wrong? Is our Queen and our country less safe as a result of the Taliban takeover?

**Dominic Raab:** It is the first, I have to say, that I have heard reported that the portrait of the Queen was left in the embassy. My understanding is that it was destroyed. Are you saying that it wasn't?

Q82 **Chair:** There is a photograph in *The Times* with the portrait of the Queen.

**Dominic Raab:** I talked through with the team the policy for destroying not just documents but anything relating to HMG. It is not clear to me whether that came from outside or inside the embassy. Clearly, we were conscious of the attempted propaganda coup around the Taliban taking over embassies and what have you. The reality is that we have not seen a terrorist attack from Afghanistan on the west in 20 years. What we now have to focus on, which our Security Council resolution with the UK at the forefront driving forward focuses on, is making sure that we continue to exercise the maximum leverage on the Taliban that we possibly can.

It is worth also saying that the ISIS-K attack on Abbey Gate appears to have been targeted at the Taliban as well as the US and others.

**Chair:** Very briefly, Alicia.

Q83 **Alicia Kearns:** Under what circumstances will the UK recognise the Taliban? What sort of recognition do you foresee? As part of that, what is your assessment of the relationship between the Taliban—the faction we are dealing with—and al-Qaeda?

**Dominic Raab:** First of all, we do not recognise Governments generally. I think it is also important not to confer any legitimacy on the Taliban. At the same time, we do need to be able to send clear and direct signals. We have done that for some time via their political commission, which has been based in Doha. We now have Simon Gass, the Prime Minister's special envoy in the region, to ensure that we can do that. We want to have as much continuity in our diplomatic presence as possible. We want to be in the position, when safety and security allows, to have a continuity of diplomatic presence in Afghanistan. Clearly, that is not possible right now.

What was your last question?

Q84 **Alicia Kearns:** Al-Qaeda and their relationship with the faction of Taliban who seem to be in negotiations with international parties.

**Dominic Raab:** Look, I think there are all sorts of tensions within the Taliban, and even more acute factionalism between them and the groups.



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As I mentioned before, ISIS-K appears to have been targeting the Taliban as well as others at the Abbey Gate. I think, first of all, the Taliban has been clear. It has made these assurances publicly. It will not give succour or haven to terrorist groups. The UN Security Council resolution backed that up. It is important because, although it was only acquiesced in by China and Russia, it is the beginning of the contours of a new set of parameters that will exercise greater pressure and, hopefully, maximum moderating leverage on the Taliban. But, look, these are early days and we need to set credible and realistic tests for the Taliban, and engage with them on the basis of whether or not they follow through.

**Chair:** Even as the UN is debating that, we have had credible reports of biometric data left behind in Afghanistan being used to target and murder former NDS staff. Forgive me if I am doubtful as to the level of leverage that we may end up being able to achieve. I know you share doubts as well, so I will not go any further.

Q85 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Thank you for your time this afternoon, Foreign Secretary. Have you been to Afghanistan as Foreign Secretary previously?

**Dominic Raab:** No.

Q86 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Your own actions and leadership have come under intense scrutiny. I do not want to go into all the holiday stuff, but I do want to understand how your own actions correspond with the advance of the Taliban across the country, who you spoke to and when you spoke to them.

If we could go back to 6 August when Zaranj, capital of the Nimruz Province, fell, who did you speak to then?

**Dominic Raab:** Look, I am very happy—I have a whole call sheet here. The reality was, to give you the clear approach I was taking, that at all of these points the most critical thing was to be engaged with our allies—NATO, G7, regional allies—to try to assess and influence what was going on on the ground, and to plan accordingly.

Q87 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** As that happened on the ground, who did you talk to that day?

**Dominic Raab:** I would have to get back to you on the specific dates.

**Chair:** You can write.

**Dominic Raab:** Yes; we will do a mop-up in the usual way.

Q88 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** If I was to go through, right now, all of the various days where more and more of the country has fallen to Taliban rule, you would not be able to tell me who you talked to on what dates. Your own actions have come under intense scrutiny up to the point of calls for resignation and accusations of being missing in action. I think it is really important that we understand, as the situation got worse and worse, what the Foreign Secretary was doing and who he was talking to—



and I don't doubt you were talking to people—beyond vague lines such as talking to G7 partners, NATO partners and all the rest of it.

You have a very specific allegation laid to you: that even after the fall of Kabul you had not even talked to the UK ambassadors in the surrounding countries for five days. Is that correct?

**Dominic Raab:** So, first of all—

Q89 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** When did you talk to the British ambassadors?

**Dominic Raab:** You are making a bunch of assertions. As I said before, the advice from the ambassadors—and they will often attend the calls or the meetings we have internally with the Foreign Office crisis centre—is distilled down so that we have a single, complete, holistic view. I was engaged with the FCDO crisis response team, including the director and the director general, on the Cobra meetings, including with Laurie. Frankly, on your point about the NATO FMs, the NATO meetings and the G7 meetings, these were critical—

Q90 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** I am going to come back to that. When did you talk to the UK ambassador to Pakistan?

**Dominic Raab:** Sorry, because—

Q91 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** What date did you talk to the UK ambassador to Pakistan?

**Dominic Raab:** The idea that I would ring up every ambassador rather than taking a—

Q92 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** You said you take the Committee seriously. You must have known this question was coming.

**Dominic Raab:** I would not presume to guess what questions you may want to ask. We get telegrams in updating us on events, as everyone who has worked at the Foreign Office and Chris will know. We assess them very carefully. I do not need to pick up the phone to get an assessment from the ground. What I do need to do is get a holistic picture from the team who are getting all the different advice, get the options and assess what we do next.

Q93 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** On 10 August a new border crossing opens up for the Taliban to Iran. Had you talked to the British ambassador to Iran at that point?

**Dominic Raab:** By the way, of course I was updated on all of the military developments on the ground, but principally—

Q94 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** I am guessing you didn't. There is the accusation that you had not spoken to ambassadors who serve under you as Foreign Secretary for a long time, as the situation got worse and worse and worse. You had not spoken to Her Majesty's Government





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representatives in those neighbouring capitals.

**Dominic Raab:** No, that is nonsense because I—

Q95 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** So tell me when you talked to them.

**Dominic Raab:** What you are saying is not correct because we constantly had the feedback and the advice coming through the central response team. Ambassadors will join those meetings as is relevant. For example, if there is a particular issue, then we need to hear directly from them. It is the same in the Cobra meetings. The lion's share of my effort was working with not just critical regional partners like Turkey and Qatar, but also what the allied position is in response to this. Those discussions were happening within NATO, within the G7 and within the other areas.

Q96 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** I want to understand. I have listened carefully to what you have said in media interviews and what else about the various calls you were engaged in as you were on holiday. Much like Mr Bryant, I think it is important that people do take holidays, but it is also important to know when to cut them short.

Again, for the sake of transparency of your own actions, when did you go on holiday? What date did you go on holiday? I am not interested in what you did there, but what date did you go?

**Dominic Raab:** Look, I made a full statement—

Q97 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** What date did you go on holiday, Foreign Secretary?

**Dominic Raab:** I have made a full statement—

Q98 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** I think your own personal transparency is important. What date did you go on holiday?

**Dominic Raab:** I made a full statement on it. I was also clear that I should have come back—

Q99 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Did the statement include the date that you left the country?

**Dominic Raab:** At all material times—

Q100 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Why can't you just answer this question? This is absurd.

**Dominic Raab:** Look, to be honest with you, I think it is a pretty partisan, political attack.

Q101 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** I just want to know when you went on holiday.

**Dominic Raab:** As I made it clear—

Q102 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** I think it is important that we can map this out. As Mr Bryant correctly said earlier, we have UK personnel and



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UK civilians in harm's way. I think it is important for us to know what you were doing and where you were doing it from. When did you go on holiday?

**Dominic Raab:** At all material times—

Q103 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** I am not looking to browbeat you over this. I just want to know when you went. When did you go on holiday?

**Dominic Raab:** It seems—

**Chair:** I think—

**Dominic Raab:** What I have said to you is that—

Q104 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** I am getting nowhere on this. In terms of NATO discussions, the Defence Secretary has said that, as the US was leaving, he had tried to speak to other NATO members to see if there was some kind of arrangement that could be created to supplement the absence of the US. What has not been clear is when you or the Prime Minister spoke to the NATO Secretary-General about that possibility.

**Dominic Raab:** Again, I can come back to you with the specific dates, but at the NATO Foreign Ministers' meetings and in constant bilateral and other NATO calls, including with the Secretary-General, and indeed from well before, even under the previous Trump Administration, we were having these conversations. I think the Defence Secretary was absolutely right to check this in the way I described to Alicia, but there was no credible alternative alliance—there just wasn't. Any suggestions to the contrary, I am afraid, are not borne out. It was right—

Q105 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** So you are saying that was fully explored.

**Dominic Raab:** Yes, of course it was. The reason was—and the Secretary-General and NATO allies said it consistently—that NATO went into Afghanistan together; they adapted the mission together from 2014; and they would withdraw together. There were very few meaningful departures from that view.

Q106 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Why did it take so long to convene the G7?

**Dominic Raab:** I do not accept that it did.

Q107 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** The fall of Kabul happens on the 15th and the G7 meets on the 24th.

**Dominic Raab:** Everyone was dealing with the immediate situation on the ground. I think you are referring to the leaders' meeting. Is that correct?

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Yes.

**Dominic Raab:** There was a G7 Foreign Ministers' meeting before that.



Q108 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Are you happy and content with the outcome of the leaders' meeting?

**Dominic Raab:** We circulated a paper—and that has received very widespread support—for setting out a range of priorities for safe passage. We all have a similar problem. There is no country, certainly in the conversations that I have had, that does not want to ensure that we can make sure we can get any remaining UK citizens, plus Afghans who work for us and other vulnerables, out. The issue of counter-terrorism is clearly important: how do you exercise maximum leverage over the Taliban so as not to give succour or safe haven to any terrorist groups?

There is the whole question around regional stability and the humanitarian lifeline. There is an issue here. Will the Taliban, as many say, wish to reach out to try and get access to international financial institutions and to aid, in which case they will have to pass certain tests? One of them will obviously be a safe working environment within Afghanistan for UN and humanitarian groups to operate. There is no way that we will give money to the Taliban.

Q109 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** It sounds like you are content with the outcome.

**Dominic Raab:** It is a first step, as was the UN Security Council resolution. We have to face—

Q110 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** That is pretty weak as well, is it not, in terms of the ambition laid out?

**Dominic Raab:** No. It is pretty remarkable in these conditions and these circumstances, with all the tensions that are well known among Security Council members, to get a Security Council resolution which at least has been acquiesced by Russia and China. India is on the council as well. The key thing is going to be broadening that out so that you have not just a P5 in the Security Council set of buy-in, but you also have some of the regional players and the big donors that we will need, given the humanitarian system.

The one point I was going to make is that the Taliban has a choice here. People on its behalf are professing that they want to pave a different way. They will not want to see the gains of the economic and social structure, such as it is, totally collapse. Therefore, there is an opportunity to test how seriously they want to continue to have lines and ties out to the international community. If they want aid, we will have to see a safe operating environment within Afghanistan. We would not give it to the Taliban. There is a whole range of other asks around human rights, particularly protecting women.

Q111 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** I suspect we will come to all of that, but I am conscious of time and I know that other colleagues want to come in. I just have one very last question, Chair. In terms of your own leadership and your own actions up until this point, did you ever at any point



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consider or offer to resign?

**Dominic Raab:** No. I considered getting on with the job of what has been a Herculean task of getting 17,000 people out. Now I am focusing on getting out the remaining people that we want to see out via third countries and helping to forge internationally—which the Prime Minister is leading on, I believe, and confident—on all of those priorities that I have mentioned.

Q112 **Graham Stringer:** We are in different political parties, Foreign Secretary, but I have no doubt that you want to do the best for the people who need to get out of Afghanistan. I have no doubt about that at all.

On the surface, this looks like a failure of planning on a grand scale. People are at risk. There are some people who have died, who we probably do not know about yet. All I have heard you say is that you wish you had come back from holiday earlier.

Are there any other regrets that you have? Is there anything that you wish, in policy terms or views, you would have done differently to be more effective in rescuing and saving people?

**Dominic Raab:** First of all, that is not all I said. I have said that with the benefit of hindsight I would have come back, but I have also talked through what we achieved, not just for British nationals or the Afghans who worked for us but for the judges, the women's rights defenders and the journalists. I have also talked through the next phase and how we need to reinforce all those efforts to get people out via third countries while Kabul airport is not operational.

We will always continue to learn. I have read through three examples where, post the Covid repatriation effort, you and your Committee made a series of recommendations. We embraced them. I came to this Committee readily when the Chair suggested that it wanted to hold the meeting today. It was originally scheduled for an hour and I need to leave, but I would suggest, given the questions, that we go on for another half an hour. I hope that demonstrates to the Committee how I take the scrutiny very seriously. Also, I think it is a part of ensuring that my Department and I can be as on our game as possible.

I would just say that there has been a little bit of breezing over some of the operational challenges, given the rapid fall beyond expectation of Kabul and what that really meant on the ground for Afghans, whether they were willing to get to the airport; whether we could get our nationals to the airport. It is not just because of the logistical obstacles but because of fear and anxiety. We are dealing with all of that. I would still stand by the fact that not just the military but the civilian MOD, Home Office and FCDO staff have pulled off a quite remarkable evacuation of people. It is greater in challenge and scale than certainly anything in living memory, but we will continue to learn all of those lessons.



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**Graham Stringer:** I would not deny—and I do not think any member of the Committee would deny—that everybody involved in the operations on the ground was at risk and it was extremely operationally difficult. What I was trying to ascertain for the future, and to understand what has happened, was whether you believe you or the Foreign Office could have done anything better. For instance, it has been reported in the press that the Department thwarted efforts to set up overland escape routes to the surrounding countries of Afghanistan over quite a long period in the run-up to August. That has been reported. You can tell us if it is true or not.

I am interested because, in the privacy of the Foreign Office, you must have thought, “We could have done that better. We should have done that, with all the difficulties.” I think this Committee would be interested in your views of the experience.

**Dominic Raab:** Of course, Graham, and it is a fair challenge. On the first point, it is absolute nonsense to say that the FCDO thwarted attempts to create lines out of the country. The reality is that a lot of those third countries are very apprehensive. What they need to know is that we are going to support them by having a workable system to get our nationals out; otherwise you will see what happened with Uzbekistan, which is that the border goes up.

In terms of my own position, in fairness I have not had a lot of time to sit back and muse and mull. I am always open to learning lessons for the future. I think we need to get beyond the stage of the crisis that we are at with the evacuation, draw in all of that experience and look at it with a calm and sober reflection. Of course I will do that. I think any responsible Minister and, frankly, anyone in any other walk of life will do that.

Q113 **Chair:** We will look at various things in the round. Are you content that the shift patterns, the rotas and the effort that was put in in the UK—not just in Afghanistan but in the crisis centre in the UK—matched the requirement of the operation?

**Dominic Raab:** Yes. We and I looked at it on a number of occasions, and I spoke to the director general and the permanent secretary to ask, “Do we need extra resource?” I can look at the various points at which I did that and come back to you. I was constantly thinking, “Is there more we can do?” The real challenge in a narrow window was the safety and security of Kabul airport. If we had had an extra week—

Q114 **Chair:** Sorry, forgive me. I accept all of the Kabul points. I do not wish to go over it. We are going to have to look at the crisis centre question again, as you know. I am sure you will as well. I am just asking right now, are you content that you were doing the 24/7 shifts, seven days a week, in London that were being done in Kabul? Are there any areas of the rota that you would say needed to be augmented with people working weekends? I am sure you will already be thinking about it.



**Dominic Raab:** We were running a three-shift, 24/7 operation since 15 August. We had partners across Government embedded into the structure, including seven from the Home Office and the Border Force and six from HM Passport Office. We had 100 from MOD. Of course, I want to glean the lessons and will readily embrace the opportunities to make sure that we are in an even better position next time round, God forbid anything like this happens again. We do that, and the evidence for that, Tom, is how we responded after what I also think was a very impressive repatriation effort on Covid. We still looked at ourselves in the mirror, asked ourselves all of those difficult questions and got better. You can see it—

**Chair:** Foreign Secretary, I appreciate your points and I get the lessons learnt. I am going to come to two very quick questions from Bob.

Q115 **Bob Seely:** You said that once the US pulled out a major operation without the US was a non-starter. Was that due to a lack of political will by other NATO countries, a lack of funding or desire to fund, or are we talking about technical capacity and capability? That seems to be an important question for the future. Are we always going to be dependent on the US for a deployment, or can you do forward deployment without the US? What was the answer for this one?

**Dominic Raab:** You are talking about all of the NATO allies. They might give variations on a theme, but all of those factors will be relevant. There is probably a psychological confidence as well without the US. I think you are right to say that we need to look at our own capabilities and to do so in concert with our partners. If you look at the integrated review, one of the things we talked about is the importance and the ability to operate in a more agile way with clusters of like-minded countries. This is already part of the strategic analysis, notwithstanding that the US will remain our closest ally.

Q116 **Chair:** One of your predecessors in your office once said in a meeting when I was still in uniform that, if we do not have the capability, we do not have the responsibility. Would you agree with that?

**Dominic Raab:** Absolutely. Since international relations theory, there has always been the crucial question of how you reconcile your ends and your means. That is clearly the question from 2001 right the way through the 20 years. The last two years is on our watch. We take responsibility for it. That is why I am here.

I do think there are questions about what the mission was, how it adapted, have we at every stage reconciled our means with our ends and what the exit looked like in a realistic and credible way. That is a much more strategic and, I suspect, historic question as well as all of the lessons we are learning now.

Q117 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Foreign Secretary, can I take you back to the point you made about the cover and the rotas you mentioned? My understanding is that all military leave was cancelled on 23 July. Did you



initiate a similar process for the Foreign Office?

**Dominic Raab:** No. What I did was to make sure that we had cover and a decent rota system because we did not know for how long this would endure. Of course, we were pressing for an extension of the window, in which case you need to make sure in an emergency response team, and indeed your team in theatre, that you are able to resource those properly but also make sure you can retain them, otherwise you have a much greater risk of mistakes happening.

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** I think many would think that, if all military leave was cancelled on 23 July, it was a bad idea for yourself, the Prime Minister and several other officials in the FCDO, the Home Office and the MOD to take breaks at that time. I will leave it at that.

**Chair:** We will move on.

Q118 **Royston Smith:** We have spoken to NGOs and others who have been on the ground in Afghanistan looking after communities for a longer period of time than we have been deployed. Of course, they will be worried about what comes next.

Foreign Secretary, you have said that you would use sanctions, aid and access to the international monetary financial system in order to put pressure on the Taliban. How do you propose to do that? Do you think that will have an impact on the Afghan people?

**Dominic Raab:** Clearly, we have to try and be discerning between the pressure we seek to rightly apply and levers we have at our disposal on the Taliban while not exacerbating the situation for ordinary Afghans.

For example, we want to get humanitarian aid to those who need it most. I think there is going to be an interesting question about what kind of support we can provide for the neighbouring countries. We have a track record of doing that. For example, with the Rohingya refugees who went into other countries, what aid is there to support that? I think we do need to talk seriously with the Taliban. It is one of the early tests. Will they allow a permissive environment for UN and humanitarian agencies to act? If so, we have doubled our aid to £286 million for Afghanistan for this year. We have allocated £30 million for regional partners. We want to make sure that the aid gets to those who need it most.

I also think there is a strategic piece—again, we talk about this in the integrated review—about the regional stability we need, which will be dependent on the fragility of the situation, not in Afghanistan and not ending up with wholesale collapse. What we need to do is set some early tests for the Taliban. I am realistic, as others have said, about the Taliban, but they did at least show in the context of the evacuation from the airport that they could communicate a message and undertake it. Broadly, with some exceptions on the ground at roadblocks, they followed through on it.



It is important to set further tests and judge them by their ability to behave in a reasonable and constructive way. That will be critical for the humanitarian lifeline.

**Q119 Royston Smith:** There was a military coalition of several countries. Will this be a coalition of how we use aid and how we allow the Taliban access to the World Bank and the rest, or is it going to be something that the UK will do unilaterally? If necessary, will we and do we have the capacity to do that?

**Dominic Raab:** We believe in playing a leading role. That is why we announced the resettlement scheme. It is why we have done what we have done to double ODA to £286 million this year. Crucially, Britain cannot deal with the humanitarian situation, and certainly not the refugee crisis, alone. What you hope to do is lead by example and then galvanise others. That is why the G7 has been important. That is why the G7 with the Qataris, Turkey and the NATO Secretary-General are important. That is why we circulated the G7 paper which is articulating these things because we do need a security-minded response but also a humanitarian response.

I think—it will be stepping-stones towards this—that because of the tensions between many of the regional partners we need an international contact group. There have been contact groups before. There have been contacts with Yugoslavia and other countries. What you need is to get the membership there: the key regional western players that are influential with the Taliban but also the Gulf countries, which will provide support but will not want to see Afghanistan disintegrate. That is the way, again as I say, to deal with the problem but also to exercise that maximum, moderating influence on the Taliban.

In answer to your question of whether the group of countries required to fix the situation now will be different in its constellation from the NATO alliance before, almost undoubtedly we will need to bring in a wider group of actors.

**Q120 Royston Smith:** Looking at the US, pulling out in the way that it did—and we can talk all day long about whether we thought that was the right thing to do—do you see those as being instrumental in whatever we decide going forward by way of using these levers to get the Taliban to behave in the way that we would like? In the event that they do not, do we see any external others, like Russia or China, making that more difficult for us? We can all be throwing our aid around, but who is going to get the best bang for the buck? I do not mean looking after people; that is a given. It is whether or not we invest in a Government, which is what the Taliban are, that we disagree with and do not do things in the way we want them to.

**Dominic Raab:** We will not recognise the Taliban. I believe the US and most of the right-minded G7 countries have all said the same. What we will do is test them and judge them by how they respond. As I said, I





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think we will need a much broader caucus of countries involved in trying to resolve this.

The United States is going to remain engaged and responsible for what happens next. Of course, we want to work very closely with them.

Q121 **Neil Coyle:** You described the US as our closest ally, but it did not talk to you about closing Bagram airport, and it refused the British requests for an extension in Kabul. In March, the Government were talking about an alternative alliance to extend time, if needed, for the evacuation and said that 9,000 were left behind because no alliance was formed.

Why is global Britain so isolated compared to the Great Britain under Margaret Thatcher or Tony Blair?

**Dominic Raab:** Neil, I do not think we were alone in trying to see what flexibility there was to extend the window—

Q122 **Neil Coyle:** And it did not happen.

**Dominic Raab:** —with the United States. No, but the UK was not alone in pressing those issues. For all the sort of hyperbole you are deploying, what we have to do is face the new reality. As I said, I thought there was too much wishful thinking about the consensus in US politics across the aisles about what it was actually going to do. I thought the debate around forever wars was quite clear on where it was going to end up and how much was going to change under a new Administration. We need to be mindful of that because the consensus in the US has shifted on that. That reflects a broad political and, I guess, underpinning that, public view of those conflicts.

That is a reflection, frankly, on the politics in the US. We still believe in being an open and outward-looking internationalist country. I know that the US does as well. I think there is a much bigger question around effectively nation building in such inhospitable climates. I am not saying that we should not want and promote liberal democracy and values around the world. We should, but again it comes back, Tom, to the point about reconciling ends with means. Certainly, if we look back at the 20-year period of Afghanistan—2001 to 2021—that will be an important question for us to ask ourselves.

Q123 **Claudia Webbe:** The cost to the UK was £40 billion; \$2.25 trillion was the cost to the US; hundreds of thousands of lives lost; 18.4 million people, including 10 million children, requiring humanitarian aid. We had 18 months to prepare for our exit. It just does not seem credible. I have listened carefully in terms of the chaos that there was on the ground. It just does not seem credible that you were missing in action.

Are you the person to take us forward? Will you now again consider your position?

**Dominic Raab:** I understand why you would want to use this Committee to engage in the politics of this. We are very clear about the plan forward.



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I have talked it through in some detail. It involves dealing with safe passage for those who have been left behind in Afghanistan. It involves the international strategy around counter-terrorism, humanitarian relief and the regional stability that we need. I think there are lots of lessons to be learned from how we were caught out by the speed and the scale of the fall of Kabul.

Claudia, the UK and US through to NATO allies, and indeed the Taliban and many ordinary Afghans themselves, were surprised by the pace of events. Of course we need to learn the lessons of that, but I do not think it is right or accurate to suggest that the UK was alone in thinking that it would take longer and would be more incremental in the deterioration of the situation and the consolidation of control by the Taliban.

Q124 **Claudia Webbe:** You know that France started its evacuation way back in May.

**Dominic Raab:** Claudia, this is just nonsense. You are just not comparing like for like.

Q125 **Claudia Webbe:** We have had 40 years of western intervention and occupation in Afghanistan, destabilising Afghanistan and the entire region. In effect, it has been paving the way, if you like, for civil wars. What is your understanding of civil wars in Afghanistan and what would be your approach?

**Dominic Raab:** I am not sure that 40 years was all western. I think the Russians were in there before, Claudia. Clearly, there are lessons to be learnt about the ability and the way in which a campaign primarily focused on counter-terrorism morphed into something more akin to nation building. We do not want to give up our ideals, our ambition or our attachment to liberal democracy and open societies. What we do need, as Tom has mentioned and as I think I have picked up on a couple of times now, is to reconcile our ends with our means to deliver them, particularly in a wider global context where power has become more widely dispersed with the rise of the east.

Q126 **Bob Seely:** Two final questions. First, in the 18 months when the Trump Administration talked to the Taliban behind the backs of the Afghan Government and indeed was not really talking to us and being very clear to us, was there more that we could have been doing to show them the perceptions and understanding in the US? As the Chair said, South Korea is not seen as a forever war. The Cyprus deployment is not seen as a forever war. These are enduring commitments. Why was Afghanistan not seen as an enduring commitment in that 18 months? Could we have reclaimed that debate?

Linked to that, can we still actually trust the US as a global partner?

**Dominic Raab:** I talked through the back channel that we had. We were monitoring this very carefully and assiduously. We talked about all of the conversations, the calls and the various contacts that I have had since



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the Biden Administration. We were doing exactly the same with President Trump, with my opposite number Mike Pompeo previously.

I think we have to recognise that the support domestically in the US for those kinds of interventions is clearly falling away. I am not sure I agree, Bob—but I respect you and Tom for saying that—with the analogies of, effectively, some of those longer-standing peacekeeping operations compared to what has been happening in Afghanistan.

There is a question of what our polities—our public—will be willing to support. I have absolutely no doubt that for all the criticism of the US over this, and indeed the UK, that the US will bounce back. It is indispensable and we work with it closely, not just on the evacuation where co-ordination was very strong on the ground. I spoke to Tony Blinken right the way through regularly, bilaterally as well as on the NATO and the G7 calls. We will learn the lessons together, but, as we have set out in the IR, America is our closest ally, but we are also looking, as we have been for some time, at the agile clusters of countries that we can operate with, whether it is diplomatically or in other contexts. It is probably not for today, but I can give you examples of that.

**Q127 Chair:** I am sure we will come to it in due course. It is, however, quite striking that this major decision happened without as much warning as I know many of us would have wished.

There are a few clear-up points. I am going to come to a very specific point. There are those who applied for protection under the FCO scheme, leave of entry outside the rules—the one that the FCO managed. Forgive me, this is entirely personal, but, as you know, I do have a very personal interest here. Over the four years that I served in Afghanistan I employed at various points many different interpreters. One of them who worked for me applied under that scheme. He had to apply via me on the 13th, the 14th, the 15th, the 16th, the 21st, the 22nd, the 23rd and the 24th, until he was finally called forward on the 25th. When he finally did not get through into Kabul airport, he managed to make it to a border. You will forgive me for not identifying where at this point. He has been struggling to have that permit, as it were—that agreement—ratified for his onward travel into the next country.

Could you just confirm that anybody who applied and was accepted under leave of entry outside the rules will have their permissions guaranteed?

**Dominic Raab:** First of all, as you know I am very familiar with your case.

**Q128 Chair:** I know you are, and I am grateful to your team for everything you have done.

**Dominic Raab:** We are doing everything we can. The challenge for all of these cases is this. Any third country that is willing to process—certainly the ones I have spoken to—is going to want to know that there is an



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absolute undertaking to take the individuals. They will take them, we identify them and then we will process them and bring them home.

There is a very real question beyond the question of strict UK nationals, although we are duty-bound to take them home. There is a question of the security checks and how we will operate that. Forgive me while we work through the details. I have been talking to the Home Secretary and the Defence Secretary about this. We will work through the details. We have to come up with a workable situation so that—

**Chair:** I accept this, Foreign Secretary.

**Dominic Raab:** Let me finish and then you can come back. We want to come up with a workable situation where we can give effect to all the undertakings that we have made, but at the same time, rightly, we must be very careful that we do not end up allowing people back to the UK who might pose a threat to us.

Q129 **Chair:** I understand all of that, Foreign Secretary. It is just that had he managed to get on to the airhead on 25 August—it is nobody's fault, and certainly not yours, that he did not make it through the press of crowds—he would probably have been in the UK by 26 August. As it is, because he did not, he finds himself on a border and unable to pass through a week later. It seems slightly incongruous that he could have got a direct flight but he cannot get an indirect one because the terms of the deal seem to have changed in the past five days. I am sure that is a bureaucratic issue rather than a policy change. I was just wondering if you could clarify that.

**Dominic Raab:** Again, forgive me for not delving into the individual case for the reasons you have given.

**Chair:** Indeed.

**Dominic Raab:** I do not think it is just a bureaucratic issue. The question is how we can make sure that we have proper assurances around security checks—

Q130 **Chair:** Well, you must have had them before you gave permission on 25 August, surely.

**Dominic Raab:** These are the issues that we are working through. We want to be able to do this in a workable and secure way. I think people would look at all the pressures that you rightly press. We will keep a very close eye on what we can do in this individual case and others. We would be facing a whole different range of questions, Tom, if we did not make sure that we were not careful around the security checks for those coming in.

Q131 **Chair:** I completely accept that, Foreign Secretary. I am sure people would be concerned if they felt that we had been cavalier on 25 August but were stricter on 1 September, for example. I am sure that would raise concerns as well. I would just be grateful if you can clarify that.



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It was reported that many people who wrote on the Afghan special cases email to the FCDO may or may not have been opened. For anybody who has filed an application under leave of entry outside the rules, will the Foreign Office accept that entry or must they resubmit?

**Dominic Raab:** I have gone through that. We are triaging the emails to the various different schemes. We will get back and my commitment is to make sure that we send a reply to all MPs' emails—certainly the ones that were received by 30 August, because new ones are coming in all the time—by close of play on Monday 6 September. We will have read and assessed all the other emails received by 30 August by close of play on Monday 6 September. Then we will be in a position to signpost to the best advice that we can give them in terms of the new phase and access out via third countries.

Q132 **Chair:** And there will still be three categories. There will be, as it were, the Home Office category for British nationals. There will be the leave of entry outside the rules under the Foreign Office and ARAP under the Ministry of Defence. Is that correct?

**Dominic Raab:** The leave outside the rules will transition into the broader resettlement criteria, which will obviously be based on objective criteria around asylum. Of course, we are looking very carefully at those cases, and particularly the cases that were called forward.

Q133 **Chair:** So anybody who was called forward may or may not still have an extant permission to come to the UK, depending on the change in the rules.

**Dominic Raab:** We want to make sure that all of those who were called forward—

Q134 **Chair:** Sorry, forgive me. I accept that you want to make sure, but are they currently still able to travel or has that now expired?

**Dominic Raab:** In terms of "able to travel", that will depend—

Q135 **Chair:** If they make it to Pakistan or Uzbekistan—

**Dominic Raab:** The issue we have to reconcile in relation to non-UK nationals is the security checks before individuals get to a third country where they will automatically be expected to come home. I think it is right we make sure we work through that.

Q136 **Chair:** You mentioned emails to Members of Parliament. There are many others, as you know, who are submitting emails on behalf of people, including aid agencies. Will you make that commitment as well for them? Will you respond to aid agencies in the same way as you said you were going to respond to MPs by 6 September?

**Dominic Raab:** Let me look at what we can do on that. We want to get back to everyone. The reality is this, by the way. The reason the backlog built up is not just the search for the door in the narrowing window. Lots of MPs, quite rightly, and others are looking for multiple updates.



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I want to be honest about this. We made a conscious decision to say, "Okay, we can answer every email that we get or we can focus resource on getting as many eligible people through Kabul on to air flights, filling capacity back home." I think that was still the right choice and I think the numbers bear that out. Of course, I am very conscious of the need to give people updates and then a sense of signposting as to where to go next with the advice. We are committed to fulfilling the undertakings we have already made, but it is more difficult now, of course.

**Q137 Chris Bryant:** I thought that Michael Gove was chairing a group that was looking at the criteria, but you seem to be announcing now that the criteria for the Afghan resettlement scheme will be asylum.

**Dominic Raab:** No, that is not the case. They are going to be a different set of cases from the ARAP workers and the nationals. The truth is that I am working that through with the Home Secretary. Of course, we all want to work very closely with the UN and other organisations because it is wider than just the question of the individuals who are currently, if you like, on the emails, the special cases or the current LOTR list.

**Q138 Chris Bryant:** Not just because it is the Hazara community. What is your assessment—

**Dominic Raab:** And indeed others. People have raised the LGBT community. We do need to look at this in the round.

**Q139 Chris Bryant:** I know, but I just want you to answer the point about the Hazara community. I know you won't want to use the word "genocide"; we have been round that battle many times. The Taliban have referred themselves to genocide against the Hazara people. Is there a deliberate attempt by the Taliban to kill Hazara?

**Dominic Raab:** We are very anxious for their vulnerability. I am not sure the evidence hits the tripwire for that yet, but, as you know, I think that becomes a bit of a distraction from the point of view of trying to provide protection for vulnerable people. Of course, we want to look at them and all the other ethnic minority groups—Sikhs and others—who are vulnerable at this point in time.

**Q140 Chris Bryant:** It is just that all the cases that I have sent through come from that community, and I know that applies to quite a lot of MPs.

**Dominic Raab:** I understand. We want to look at that very carefully, Chris. That is all the more reason, because there will be different people with different communities, to look at this in the round, which is what we are doing.

**Q141 Chris Bryant:** May I challenge you on the question about phone numbers that have not worked? As to the number that MPs were given, you rang it, it rang for ages and ages, and nobody answered it. Eventually it said, "Please send an email to the following." When you sent an email to that email address, it bounced back with a message saying, "Please ring this



telephone number.”

**Dominic Raab:** Can I just challenge that? I knew that this would be asked, and I went and got the data. I can tell you what the data is. Between 16 August and 26 August the average waiting time to pick up a call on the MP hotline was under a minute. For the same period for the public lines it was a range of between 40 seconds and three minutes 49 seconds. If someone had a bad experience—

Q142 **Chris Bryant:** You said that in the Chamber; I know; and I would ask you just to push back to officials on that. Every MP I know has had the same experience of not being able to get a telephone—

**Dominic Raab:** That is why I checked the data, Chris. I came equipped to give you the answer to your question and to do it very transparently.

Q143 **Chris Bryant:** I think you will have seen the “Newsnight” report about embassy staff telling people to go to the Abbey Gate on the very day of the ISIS-K attack, when the military advice was not to go.

**Dominic Raab:** Look, we changed our travel advice for Afghanistan just after 10 pm on Wednesday, 25 August. That was the night before the attack. At the same time we stopped asking British and Afghan nationals, whether they were ARAP or LOTR, to come to the airport. The military worked very hard to secure the area. We also shifted the civilian team from the Baron Hotel processing centre through to the airport to protect them. We took all of those mitigating measures, obviously in close consultation with the US.

I saw that report from “Newsnight” about the email saying, “Go to Abbey Gate.” I need to investigate it. The general advice, as opposed to individual advice, and if there is a lag we need to look at that—

Q144 **Chris Bryant:** But you will investigate and you will come back to us on that.

**Dominic Raab:** Absolutely.

Q145 **Chris Bryant:** I understand that in chaotic circumstances it can be very difficult. Let me put one final thing to you. You referred to what it is like working and how ambassadors report back, and it all gets melded into one advice. Can I just suggest to you that sometimes there is a danger in the Foreign Office of groupthink? I know you are aware of this because you have often referred to it yourself. I just wonder whether sometimes you would not have been better advised over the last few months to pick up the phone to the person on the ground more often.

**Dominic Raab:** Let me answer that. First of all, we do not just mould it into some homogenous product. We have ambassadors on those meetings virtually testing it. I do it all the time. I have done it over the last 48 hours. Equally, we have to have an effective use of time and resource. I come back to the point I made earlier. Afghanistan is the issue that has clearly caught us unawares in terms of the pace and the



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scale of the Taliban's imposition of control. There is a whole range of other issues that we are dealing with—

Q146 **Chris Bryant:** I know, but if you do not learn from this situation about how to challenge and get better intelligence and information back we will do it again, and we will capitulate again.

**Dominic Raab:** I agree.

Q147 **Chris Bryant:** We will drag the British [*Inaudible.*] through the mud again.

**Dominic Raab:** There are two things, Chris. First, no one in the FCDO thinks I do not challenge official advice rigorously: I do. If anything, I get accused of being over-inquisitorial. I do think it is important, and indeed the Foreign Office as an institution was testing it, and we did it across Government. That is not to say that there are not lessons to be learnt.

The caricature of critique against me is that I am either lazy and delegating too much or a control freak. The truth is that you need to exercise grip but you also need to be willing to delegate. If you do not do that, you will never take decisions. You will also never engage with the international interlocutors whom we need to influence.

Q148 **Claudia Webbe:** On the issue of aid charities and humanitarian aid, what humanitarian aid and charity organisations are you or your officers aware of on the ground, in terms of engaging with them?

**Dominic Raab:** I spoke to Jean Arnault, who is the UN Secretary-General special envoy for Afghanistan. Clearly, the situation for most is very precarious indeed, if they can still operate at all. We are worried about that.

Q149 **Claudia Webbe:** The question is, which ones have your office or you been engaged with on the ground? If you do not have that list, can you provide that?

**Dominic Raab:** If you want that list, I would be very happy to provide it for you.

Q150 **Claudia Webbe:** Okay. Very quickly, on the issues of inclusivity and minorities, what work is being done with the UN to create safe zones within Afghanistan for religious minorities, for lesbian, gay and bisexuals, plus other communities? What is being done to keep people safe? We already know that inclusivity, as far as the Taliban Government are concerned, will not include those groups.

**Dominic Raab:** I totally share your concerns, Claudia, but if you are talking about safe zones or no-fly zones, that would require military enforcement. Clearly, that is not something that is being proposed right now. It is very difficult to see what you are, quite understandably, proposing would be workable in the absence of political commitment. I do not see that there is support for it at the moment.





Q151 **Alicia Kearns:** I think that the entire Committee wants to give their heartfelt gratitude to all the Foreign Office staff, RDT desk posts, neighbouring posts and crisis centre. Can you give us reassurances that sufficient mental health and trauma recovery services have been provided to them and that when their military colleagues are recognised we will also recognise those civilians who did so much to save lives?

**Dominic Raab:** It is a really important point, Alicia. It is not just those who worked in Kabul. I am sure the Committee will agree that Sir Laurie Bristow did an incredible job under the most extraordinary pressure. There are also the people who manned the crisis centre. That was gruelling. Making some of those decisions was very difficult, but you have to make the decisions to get the maximum people on to the capacity we had. Your broader point is very well made and we are already doing everything we can, both on the welfare side but also on the recognition.

**Chair:** Thank you very much indeed, Foreign Secretary. We are very grateful that you overstayed and helped us so much with our inquiry. This is clearly going to be an ongoing and challenging question for all of us. We would be very grateful if you would come back to us very soon for a follow-up hearing because this is going to be the single biggest challenge that I suspect the UK deals with in terms of redefining our foreign policy.

I stand by the view that this is the single biggest foreign policy disaster that the UK has faced since Suez in the sense that it has exposed a weakness in our alliances and in our stance. I would be very interested in hearing, when you have time to process it and not just firefight, your own views on how this will change how we do foreign policy.

**Dominic Raab:** I am very happy to come back to the Committee. Thank you for the rigorous engagement. It is very important, and also to get a factual account. I am afraid I struggle with the Suez analogy, but I understand that what you are really searching for is to learn the lessons and, even more importantly, find a path forward for Afghanistan more generally.

**Chair:** Thank you very much.